

The Spirituality of Carceral Citizenship: “Making Your Test Your Testimony”

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Through participant observation of the redemption-focused identity work of formerly incarcerated citizens affiliated with an urban faith-based nonprofit organization run by ex-offenders, this paper examines religiously motivated desistance among eighteen male respondents who attribute lasting desistance to intense religiosity. Recent research portrays the “identity work” of criminal justice-involved citizens as “narrative labor” fraught with capricious experiences of social rejection and “uncanny” patterns of discrimination and exclusion. Drawing from eight years of participant observation and adopting methodologies of “lived religion” and “appreciative inquiry,” life-history interviews reveal three “frames” of “performative speech” through which religious narrative labor helps signal a “disavowal and recasting” of criminal identities: “coming out of the desert” {learning not to hide}, “bringing it to the altar” {help-seeking through religiosity}, and “making your test your testimony” {using testimonial storytelling for status elevation}. Prolific integration of Christian scripture into personal narratives mirrors the Identity Theory of Desistance. The paper deepens understanding of how religious narrative labor is performed by ex-offenders enduring carceral citizenship, arguing for more direct exploration of religiosity by criminologists.

Keywords: identity work, religious narrative labor, phenomenology, desistance

INTRODUCTION

A large number of studies document intense religiosity as generative of prosocial coping inside prisons, but a small and growing body of research explores “lived religion” after prison — that is, religion as it is used by ex-offenders and what it means (Deuchar et al. 2016; Lecaros 2020; Mossière 2020; Sandberg and Colvin 2020; Sremac and Jindra 2020; Stansfield et al. 2019; van Willigenberg 2020; Walker et al. 2020; Williams 2020). Interest on the part of criminologists regarding the

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relationship between religion and offender desistance has increased sharply in recent years, while recent attention to “narrative criminology” has bolstered new work exploring “religiously motivated desistance” (DiPietro and Dickinsson 2021; Ellis 2020, 2021; Guzman 2020; Hallett and Stephen McCoy 2015; Liem and Richardson 2014; Maruna and Liem 2021; Morag and Teman 2018; Presser 2010; Sandberg 2022; Warr 2020). Identity transformation, achieved through the production of revised, autobiographical self-narratives, has been recognized by criminologists as an essential part of the desistance process and the eventual cessation of offending (Bachman et al. 2016; Maruna 2001). Religion has been highlighted as offering a valuable “blueprint” for such revisions (Giordano et al. 2002:1055). Yet study of the specific workings and processes of religious, narrative labor among prisoners and ex-offenders is only beginning. This paper explores the religious narrative labor of eighteen successful desisters who self-attributed intense religiosity as a key resource for their success.

While recent studies have cast religious “identity work” as partially coerced performances of offender responsabilization, particularly for female offenders, this paper documents how male ex-offenders of diverse ages and races undertake religious narrative labor “*on-purpose and in public*” for reasserting human dignity and cultivating religious social capital, highlighting dramatic similarities in narratives across racial groups (Amitay and Ronel 2023; Ellis 2020, 2021; Guzman 2020; Hopkins 2011; Maselko et al. 2011; Quinn and Goodman 2022; Smidt 2003). This paper foregrounds Erving Goffman’s assertion that “strong religious convictions serve to insulate the true believer against the assaults of the total institution,” but extends this analysis to explore how ex-offenders may continue to rely upon intense religiosity for negotiating a hostile social world after release (Goffman 1961:91). As Marius Linge puts it, regarding religion and identity transformation among successful Muslim ex-offenders: “*Conversion narratives are not stories that converts merely tell; they are also significant means of identity reconstruction*” (Linge 2023:3; see also Rambo and Farhadian 2014).

Drawing from a larger convenience snowball sample of thirty-nine life-history interviews of successful long-term desisters I conducted between 2013 and 2020, I examine here desistance narratives from eighteen male respondents who made direct and unsolicited attributions of intense religiosity as the primary source of their desistance. Calling upon religious imaginaries and incorporating scripture directly into their “re-biographies” (Maruna 2001:37), all eighteen respondents made one or more direct references to three “frames” of “performative speech”: “coming out of the desert” {*learning not to hide*}, “bringing it to the altar” {*help seeking through religiosity*}, and “making your test your testimony” {*using testimonial storytelling for status elevation*}. Eleven respondents were white and seven were black, with an average age of thirty-nine. All eighteen had felony convictions, completing an average of 8.75 years of incarceration.

This paper employs Giordano et al’s strategy of verification of claims of desistance: “[W]e focus particular attention on those airtight stories that were

fully corroborated by low self-reported deviance and the absence of recent arrests” (Giordano et al. 2002:1031). All eighteen respondents have at least five years no arrests post-release, verified with permission of all participants through Florida’s broad public records laws. While criminologists frequently highlight ritual and ceremony in their accounting of the desistance process, specifically religious rituals and ceremonies remain curiously unexplored (Braithwaite 2000; Maruna 2011). Religiosity in nonprofit organizations serving justice-involved citizens has been particularly neglected (Kaufman 2019). Too often in criminological research, religious faith is reduced to its associated impact on recidivism with little exploration of its meanings, mechanisms, and subjectivities for desisters. Lost in these accounts are fuller renderings of the deep spiritual “identity work” frequently undertaken by ex-offenders and how this work figures into their daily lives. As Daniel Mears puts it: “A conspicuous gap in the literature concerns changes in faith – namely, do increases in religiosity contribute to decreases in offending? This gap is especially notable given that faith-based reentry programs assume, at least in part, that such changes should give rise to reduced offending. (Mears 2007:31).

Finally, while some view spirituality and religion as separate phenomena (e.g., Fetzer 2003), criminologists exploring addiction and recovery have not treated these as mutually exclusive (Adorjan and Chui 2012; Farrall and Bowling 1999; Galanter 2007; Galanter et al. 2011; Giordano et al. 2002, 2008; King et al. 2009; Maruna and Remsden 2004; Maruna et al. 2006; Ronel et al. 2013; Schroeder and Frana 2009). For the purposes of this study, Giordano et al.’s (2008) conceptualization of religiosity as inclusive of both corporate religious worship and private spirituality – *as two expressions of religiosity* – applies. While this paper explores Christian practice among ex-offenders, recent research also documents ex-offenders’ cultivation of religious narratives associated with Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam (Amitay and Ronel 2023; Bell et al. 2018; Robinson-Edwards and Pinkney 2018; Williams 2018).

RELIGIOUS NARRATIVE LABOR AND DESISTANCE

Released former prisoners endure relentless shaming and “uncanny” social marginalization amid exclusionary legal restrictions that constrain their ability to participate fully in civic life (Fredriksson and Gålnander 2020). Ex-offenders occupy a caste-like status enduring what Reuben Miller coins “carceral citizenship” (Miller and Stuart 2017). Criminologists increasingly point to spirituality and religion as among the few resources available to ex-offenders for reconstituting prosocial self-identities (Ronel and Ben Yair 2018; Salas-Wright et al. 2013). Trapped in precarious states of legal jeopardy while enduring surveillance by justice officials, employers, and even friends and neighbors, many ex-offenders turn to religious practice for resources of self-reinvention (Giordano et al. 2008; Hallett and Stephen McCoy 2015). Religiosity and religious programming are also commonplace

resources to which correctional administrators and ex-offenders turn, because they are often widely available and gratis (Johnson et al. 2021).

In order “to desist from crime,” Shadd Maruna states, “*ex-offenders must create a coherent prosocial identity in story form*” (Maruna 2001:85). In his book “*Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*,” Maruna presents extensive life-history interviews exploring the “phenomenology of desistance,” exploring the self-narratives of successful versus unsuccessful desisters (2001:85). In landmark findings, Maruna documents how successful desisters offer narratives about their lives after prison featuring transformed personal circumstances that highlight improved social relations in realms of family, employment, education, and personal enrichment (i.e., music, painting, or religion). Put succinctly, successful desisters “find something new” and offer “redemption scripts” about their lives featuring a “new me” (2001:89). Alternatively, offenders who do not succeed after prison offer “condemnation scripts,” featuring stories expressing “ubiquitous feelings of helplessness” and being trapped by circumstance (Maruna 2001:76). Self-narratives of offenders’ lives are immensely important objects of study, both for what they suggest about criminal justice practice — and for what they reveal about the struggles ex-offenders face (Maruna 2001).

Narrative strategies for reconstituting life history usefully divide autobiographies into component segments of past, present, and future — facilitating narrative “clean breaks” with the past (Maruna and Roy 2007; Paternoster and Bushway 2009). Stigmatized identities invite what Maruna terms “re-biographing,” a process of “re-authoring” problematic identities through “narrative labor” (2001:37; Sandberg 2022). Religion offers a “spiritual toolkit” through which compromised social identities may be renegotiated (Giordano et al. 2008:116; Stone 2016). Religious practice can be useful for ex-offenders through providing audiences that may deliver positive reflected appraisals — signaling that one’s revised social performance is both worthy and acceptable (Stone 2019). As Daniel McAdams explains: “As we move from our teenage years into our twenties, we begin to need and seek out a *story* for our lives. Let us call that story a person’s *narrative identity*. If the first part of narrative identity is a reconstructed past, the second part is an imagined future” (*emphasis in original*, McAdams 2011:156, 160). In short, when delivered properly to receptive audiences, narrative re-biographies help accomplish the work of identity change and enhance the well-being of narrators (Bauer et al. 2008; Stone 2016). As Sarah Anderson explains: “As a desistance narrative is told or performed — and critically, as that performance is accepted by the audience — the person is no longer an object of control but made an active subject of their own story. In the performance, desistance may actually be coming into being” (Anderson 2016:419).

“One common way to do narrative analysis,” writes Sveinung Sandberg, “is to try to identify the narrative work that stories do. This means interpreting what possible consequences stories might have for the storyteller and the environments where they are told” (Sandberg 2022:12). Religious self-narratives provide insight into the

motives, dispositions, and aspirations of narrators (Blagden et al. 2020). As scholar of “Lived Religion” Nancy Ammerman puts it: “Religious practices of storytelling provide a window on how that narrative trajectory shapes identity and agency” (Ammerman 2020:25).

At the heart of desistance research are examinations of offenders’ “self-projects” — “explorations of the self-image they are hoping to uphold, the ends they aim to project, and their strategies for creating meaning in their lives” (Maier and Ricciardelli 2022; Marsh 2011; Maruna 2001:33; Presser and Sandberg 2014; Stone 2016). In the context of desistance, identity work involves “narrative labor” designed to reassert control over stigmatized identities and generate positive reflected appraisals from respected audiences (Goffman 1961; Mead 1934; Stone 2019). “Successful identity work hinges upon presentations of self that are received as both favorable and authentic” and that “are congruent with both internal self-identity and an idealized and external social identity” (King et al. 2009:141; also Mossière 2020:158; Taylor 1989). Using the basic axiom of Symbolic Interactionism or — as Goffman put it — that “*the simplest sociological view of the individual and his self is that he is to himself what his place in an organization defines him to be,*” identity work involves performative efforts made by individuals to receive favorable judgment from others (Goffman 1961:319).

Without examining religious narratives per se, Maruna et al. devised a narrative framework for understanding “why God is often found behind bars,” concluding that attributions of religiosity provide incarcerated citizens autobiographical resources for “shame management” (Maruna et al. 2006). Religiosity provides a generative cognitive blueprint for producing revised presentations of self that help renegotiate a prolonged “crisis of self-narrative” (174). Noting the lack of sufficient opportunities for conducting narrative identity work among the criminally stigmatized and without examining religious narratives per se, Maruna et al. (2006:171) conclude that religious “re-biographies” facilitate:

- Adopting a new social identity to replace the label of criminal with that of a prosocial agent on a new spiritual mission
- Imbuing the experience of imprisonment with new purpose and meaning
- Empowering the largely powerless prisoner by turning him into a renewed agent of God
- Providing the prisoner with a language and framework for forgiveness
- Allowing a sense of control over an unknown future, offering instead a “true calling” while removing the sense of desperation over release from prison.

Using a phenomenological lens to explore religious narrative labor that facilitates spiritual re-biographing, this paper extends the work of Maruna and others by incorporating recent theories of desistance and “identity work” into an analysis of religious narrative labor conducted by ex-offenders.

DESISTANCE — WHAT IS IT? EXPLORING THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF OFFENDING

Definitional ambiguity regarding the precise meaning of offender desistance complicates methodological efforts to explore it (Shapland and Bottoms 2019). While most offenders eventually do desist, research demonstrates the subjectivities associated with their desistance vary greatly (Calverley 2012). Few criminologists studying desistance today believe it to be a dichotomous variable — one characterized by simply “flipping a switch” from offending to non-offending. Instead, the lived experience of desisters shows that cessation from offending is achieved in fits and starts, not all at once (Linge 2023). “There is no agreed upon definition of desistance,” explain Shapland and Bottoms (2019:745).

There is a common understanding that it means stopping committing crime, but beyond that definition becomes difficult. For example, to be classed a “desister,” does a person have to have entirely stopped offending of all kinds, or just to be appreciably slowing up in the rate of commission of offenses? If complete stopping is the criterion, for how long should the desister have stopped—a month, a year, or 10 years? These questions are particularly important when considering desistance by persistent offenders, because we know that most such offenders desist gradually rather than suddenly. (Shapland and Bottoms 2019:745)

Understood in this way, desistance is best defined as a process rather than an event, meaning *the cognitive processes of desistance may begin well prior to any outward sign of it* (Maruna 2001; Weaver and Weaver 2013, Western 2018). Transformation in the meaning of offending for the offender, therefore, becomes an important object of study.

In order to more fully understand desistance as a process, researchers have turned to qualitative research strategies to explore subjective framings of desistance for desisters. Desistance, in short, is a phenomenological rather than dichotomous process, necessitating a “phenomenological criminology” (Maruna 2001:38): “Phenomenological criminology is an attempt to understand criminal decision making through an examination of the offender’s *self-project*—the self-image they are hoping to uphold, the ends they aim to achieve, as well as their strategies for creating meaning in their lives” (Maruna 2001:38).

Finally, perhaps the most important insight gleaned from research on desistance contradicts the prevailing ethos of criminal justice: that when offenders do desist from offending it has little to do with their fear of future punishment (Johnson, Hallett, Jang 2021; Wilkinson 2009). Despite deterrence theory’s insistence that threats of punishment work for dissuading offenders from reoffending, recidivism remains consistently high even among offenders who have been punished repeatedly. Successful desisters, instead, point to positive changes in life realms such as improved interpersonal relationships, welcoming employment, and improved family relations (see Maruna 2001:113).

EXPLORING “LIVED RELIGION” IN CORRECTIONAL SETTINGS

Religion, as used in everyday life, is broadly overlooked by criminologists, especially those seeking empirical data. How social scientists study religion — often by measuring doctrinal affiliation and disaffiliation or church membership rates versus worship attendance — engenders a lack of focus on what arguably makes religion most salient: how religion is used, rejected, lived, and received. The religious lives of laypeople, practitioners, and those who lack social status or formal church affiliation, in particular, are often ignored (Ammerman 2020:25). “Lived religion is about how regular people practice, think about, and experience religion and spirituality as they go about their daily lives” (Walker et al. 2020:70).

Lived religion research is particularly interested in how religiosity exists outside of formal religious institutions, even as formal religious settings remain important. Rather than evaluating the truth claims of religious practitioners, lived religion focuses instead upon what religion *accomplishes* for its practitioners and how it is used (Ammerman 2020). Lived religion approaches have also been particularly useful for studying recovery from addiction, since 12-step programs emphasize the importance of personal growth amid changes in subjectivity that are not easily observed (Rouse 1996; Walker and Fitzgerald 2022; Walker et al. 2020:71). Lived religion approaches facilitate more backstage observations than do formal interviews, without negating the value of the latter (Ammerman 2012:118; Liebling 2015 for a remarkably similar assessment in the context of prisons).

Finally, while Garfinkel (1956) identified “status degradation rituals” as commonplace in correctional settings, sociologist Timothy P. Rouse identified the methods of 12-step recovery programs as “correctional” but incorporating “rituals of status elevation” (1996). “Status elevation ceremonies are the mirrored parallel processes of Garfinkel’s status degradation ceremonies, applied to the acquisition of a higher status or preferred identity, resulting from elaborate mythological rituals” (Rouse 1996:21). In this paper, narrative labor of religiously motivated desisters shows how Christian respondents use scripture and Biblical references to reframe past criminality in ways that facilitate status elevation and increased social capital.

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Prisons are notoriously closed institutions, where codes of secrecy dominate the cultural norms of staff. Prisons are institutions wherein “bad things” happen even on good days, leaving staff and leadership open to easy criticism. Because things often go wrong in correctional environments, practitioners may feel ambivalent about research (Liebling 2015). Highlighting only “what’s wrong with prisons” makes practitioners’ job more difficult; capturing any positive aspects of their work, however, helps level the playing field.

Appreciative inquiry is a research strategy increasingly utilized for research in correctional settings, due to the fact that prison staff often express reluctance to

participate in research conducted by outsiders. As Liebling notes, because employees' professional livelihood is involved, organizational deficiencies cannot "have the last existential word," (Elliott 1999:288, cited by Liebling 2015). As a result, there is often little incentive for corrections officials to cooperate with researchers. Gaining trust and access sufficient for observing everyday religion in correctional settings can, therefore, be enhanced through immersive research strategies that unfortunately necessitate time and resources (Liebling 2015; Liebling et al. 1999).

Immersive strategies of participant observation, wherein researchers spend extended time immersed in research settings in order to gain a measure of familiarity and trust, provide opportunities for observations that are less filtered and more authentic. Observation of chance encounters, throw-away remarks, and unplanned interactions offer particularly valuable insights that are less available in formal research contexts and that can be captured in field notes (Hallett et al. 2017; Liebling 2015; Liebling et al. 1999). To overcome staff reluctance, appreciative inquiry is a research strategy that explores what stakeholders like best about the setting and taking care to highlight institutional successes. While not ignoring institutional shortcomings, intentional effort is also put into identification of what is "working well." Liebling and colleagues note the value of querying staff about their "best days on the job" and specific instances where staff felt good about their work (Liebling et al. 2001:166). Like any strategy for social science research, Appreciative Inquiry offers only a partial depiction of institutional life, but one that strives for balance and a research stance of neutrality (Liebling et al. 1999). While no social science research strategy is ever free of potential bias, appreciative inquiry helps structure research efforts with intentional work that documents the worldviews of stakeholders.

CONTEXT: BONDSERVANTS OF CHRIST

Bondservants of Christ (BOC) is an urban, faith-based, nonprofit organization serving released convicted felons through providing transitional housing, substance abuse treatment, 12-step programming, food subsidies, clothing, provisional medical supplies, bus passes, and employment assistance. Founded in 1990 by released former prisoners who converted to Christianity in prison but who experienced rejection from their churches after release, BOC is a self-described "*convict-owned and operated*" nonprofit organization that has served over one thousand formerly incarcerated citizens over three decades. Key leadership positions of BOC are staffed by former prisoners. While BOC describes itself as an "absolutely Christ-driven ministry," no religious affiliation nor participation of any kind is required for its services. As BOC's president, a retired corrections leader with 30 years of experience in prison ministry, stated:

We're a Christ-driven fellowship founded by men who came to faith in prison but who experienced rejection by their churches once they got home. We call

ourselves a “street ministry” and not a church because of that. We don’t track church membership. We could care less. Jesus died for every person in their full humanity — church or no. Our basic work is to use the Gospels to help men leave the prisons they still carry with them once they get out: emotional hurts, addictions, shame, and lots of family issues. That’s all one big knot, usually.

BOC has an unpaid volunteer board of directors with diverse religious and professional backgrounds (Catholic, Nondenominational Christian, Pentecostal, Methodist, Baptist). Religious affiliation is neither required nor recorded for board membership. No particular Christian religious affiliation, doctrine, nor denomination is officially supported by BOC.

With a full-time staff of seven and a large network of current and former volunteers, BOC employs multiple ex-offenders in leadership roles. At the time of this writing, BOC also has served approximately 175 residential client graduates, most referred by state and local justice agencies directly to BOC. The vast majority of BOC clients are not members of its residential community. BOC residential clients stay anywhere from six months to one year and participate in intensive community programming. BOC frequently concludes each fiscal year in deficit, soliciting operational funds by hosting an annual fund-raising breakfast and through private donations. BOC volunteers also frequently give food, bus tickets, minor medical assistance, clothing, petty cash, and transportation on an ad hoc basis.

Most BOC clients have weak functional literacy and have never produced a written resume. Like the vast majority of US inmates, many BOC clients have pronounced histories of substance abuse and drug addiction and are familiar with 12-step programs when they arrive. Familial dissociation is the norm and many residential clients choose BOC because it is, in fact, far from home. Most residential clients report they would be homeless without the services provided and all enrollment is voluntary. Reliant upon support from a large network of private citizens and former clients, BOC hosts weekly community meetings, including lay worship services featuring “a religious message and personal testimony” offered by guests and successful graduates, held in a dedicated chapel located on BOC’s property, a onetime funeral home.

Employing a determined focus on serving longtime former prisoners by providing transitional housing, BOC residential clients have incarceration histories of five years or longer. Some residential clients suffer from pronounced effects of post-traumatic stress and institutionalization, possessing a demeanor that is notoriously guarded and often confrontational. BOC’s residential clients often experience social disorientation and express frustration at the challenges of adapting to demands such as shopping, using cell phones or computers, and producing a resume. BOC prioritizes welcoming new residential clients at the bus station directly upon their release from prison, lest they be distracted by “opportunists” who recognize their blue prison-issue bag and who know releasees have \$50 cash provided by the department of corrections. Most BOC residential clients do not attend its Friday lay-worship service; however, a small number of “regulars” and visitors do consistently participate.

Many BOC clients also attend outside churches but not BOC's worship service, but no records are kept of church participation. Residential clients are, however, required to attend BOC community meetings, 12-step, mentoring, and other program options, often depending on personal needs and legal requirements. Steeped in 12-step theology and the nomenclature of addiction recovery, BOC's programming features personal mentoring, Bible study, and "testimonial sharing" as core practices (Stromberg 2008, 2014).

DATA AND METHODS

For eight years (2013–2020), I served on BOC's volunteer board of directors, as a lay worship leader, program volunteer, and also attended other meetings as a participant observer. Data were collected via life-history interviews and unobtrusive participant observation. All interviews were conducted during two separate research periods using an IRB-approved, semi-structured, interview protocol administered to thirty-nine successful BOC desisters, eighteen of whom explicitly attributed religious faith as their primary resource for desistance. Appreciative inquiry was used to structure research questions, such as "What program did you like best at BOC," while themes of "lived religion" as "everyday religion" informed our sensibility about documenting life at BOC. Multiple years of participant observation facilitated access to valuable "backstage" daily interactions and unselfconscious religious expressions, captured in field-notes and recollections as well as in formal interviews (Ammerman 2012; Liebling et al. 1999).

A convenience sampling method was utilized to access a sufficient population of successful, long-term desisters (defined as 5 years of no arrest) for interviews. Narratives were transcribed and analyzed separately by the author and a co-researcher (now deceased) for inter-coder reliability, continuing the methodology of a previous study (Hallett and Stephen McCoy 2015). Employing the concept of "frame analysis" developed by Goffman (1974), three overwhelmingly persistent religious "identity performances" emerged: "learning not to hide" from criminal pasts, narratives extolling "help-seeking through religion," and narratives employing Christian testimony for the production of "redemption scripts" (Scott 2015:76). Participants often spoke about these frames through the use of religious imaginaries, such as: "bringing my troubles to the altar" (help-seeking), "making your test your testimony" (using testimonial storytelling for status elevation), and "coming out of the desert" (learning not to hide). As symbolic interaction scholar Susie Scott puts it, "frames act as a blueprint for social conduct, by providing a set of shared meanings about what is going on, as well as understandings of the rules, roles, and rituals to be followed" (2015:76). Consistent with Goffman's thesis that situational frames are "negotiated" in a "joint enterprise" communication process, the religious identity performances of respondents are co-produced in interaction with organizational participants and norms (more below) (Scott 2015:76).

In the present study, all respondents referenced passages or stories from the Bible they claimed were influential in facilitating their revised self-narratives regarding their “old selves.” Criminologists Ray Paternoster and Shawn Bushway have proposed an Identity Theory of Desistance based on revised self-narratives and the distinction between ... “one’s current or working identity and ... the kind of person that one wishes to be or not be [a “feared self”], as compared to one’s “possible self,” achieved through agentic transformation (Paternoster and Bushway 2009:1155). In the nomenclature of Identity Theory, then, one’s “working identity” as a criminal offender survives only as long as a criminal identity is perceived to be more beneficial than harmful (Paternoster and Bushway 2009:1156). Mirroring the book of Ephesians (Eph4:22–24), which invites readers to “rid yourselves of the old self ... and put on a new self,” respondent narratives foregrounded scripture and Biblical storytelling as evidence of self-transformation. In short, the express cognitive linking of Biblical stories and scripture directly inside the revised self-narratives of successful desisters, provide examples of religious narrative labor.

While space limitations prevent a full rendering of applicable narratives, each of those offered below typify three framings of religious narrative labor offered by respondents: “coming out of the desert” {*learning not to hide*}, “bringing it to the altar” {*help seeking through religiosity*}, and “making your test your testimony” {*using testimonial storytelling for status elevation*}.

THREE FRAMES OF RELIGIOUS NARRATIVE LABOR

Learning Not to Hide: “Coming Out of the Desert”

The first framing of religious narrative labor offered by successful desisters was that of “*learning not to hide*.” Respondents repeatedly used scripture and Biblical stories to describe their personal experience, to distance themselves from criminal pasts, and to describe current struggles. Narratives stressed the importance and value of openly confronting one’s criminal past for moving beyond it, while explicitly using religious narratives and descriptions of self-identity.

Narrative 1. “Well, BOC was the first place I started to get some breathing room in my life after prison. And I unburdened myself on these guys man. I said: ‘*You know what I really need? A drink!!*’ But they didn’t flinch, you know. I wanted sympathy. They brought me to the book of Jonah. Like in the book of Jonah, my sea was rough. Where God commanded Jonah to visit Nineveh but Jonah did NOT want to go? That was me. Jonah *knew* Nineveh was the place of reckoning his own demons. His own fears. God commanded him to confront his demons, but he ran away. So, God puked him right back out on the shore of Nineveh! That whale? That was God. And Jonah? That was me. There ain’t no hiding.”

Other narratives addressing “learning not to hide” stressed how newfound religious identities helped respondents face challenges as well as deeply internalized

personal shame. Narratives stressed how embrace of religion facilitated creation of a new sense of self:

Narrative 2. “One thing prison does to you is changes your sense of time. You feel like you’re dying because you know you’re dead to the world. You get lost. But Jesus in prison puts you on God’s eternal clock and says forget the worldly clock. Jesus frees you from that worldly clock. God’s eternal clock is slower than the worldly clock, see? The eternal clock is the big picture clock. Isaiah prophesied Jesus coming soon, but it was still four hundred years away. Isaiah was on the eternal clock. I dealt and used hard drugs solid my whole time in prison and out. But when you live for God see, you’re free of that worldly clock and you can just be yourself. You become a new person, see, who you were meant to be. God says, ‘OK you’re in prison. *But what’s your assignment?*’ Prison is only part of your journey. Do you love anybody but yourself? God wants an answer. When I answered these questions, I was a new person because I had *received* something. I wasn’t in the desert no more. I didn’t need to hide. I’m not the same person today. At all. I live different now.”

Finally, respondents employing the frame “learning not to hide” frequently offered narratives addressing how their religious faith helped them face challenges with *addiction* and learning not to deny it or hide from it:

Narrative 3. “Then at Lawtey (prison) chapel, I heard the parable of the man at the pool of Bethesda. John 5:6–9. On that day my life changed. Bethesda is like a spa that’s supposed to heal people — this paralyzed dude laid at that pool for *38 years* waiting for someone to dip him into the healing waters. *38 years*. I’m like, you could have freakin’ rolled into the pool yourself in all that time! But the guy lays there whining for 38 years. That’s the parable. But here’s the thing: In the scripture Jesus confronts the dude, right up in his face. Jesus says: “*Do you wish to be made well? Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.*” And guess what? The dude literally gets up and walks. After 38 years laying there and he just gets up and walks! Oh, amen. I knew immediately. That parable is about addiction. *That guy was me*. Addiction is a story you tell yourself so you don’t have to face hurt. And when I learned that? I surrendered to Him.”

Help-Seeking: “Bringing it to the Altar”

Next, a second theme of religious narrative labor offered by successful desisters was that of “*help seeking through religion*.” Here, respondents stressed the value of religious faith for not shouldering the challenges of carceral citizenship alone — and how, in point of fact, religion helps them survive:

Narrative 1. Jesus says, ‘Put it on my shoulders. All this stuff you’re carrying right now? Put it on me.’ I used to think sharing my testimony was all about helping others, but, you know, it helps me. It really does. (laughs) It gives me joy to tell someone else what God has done for me. I’m *on-purpose and in public about it*, because helping others helps me. How did God change my life? Well church is my life now. The good part of my life anyway. I got struggles, like everyone. But I think about Psalm 51 when David said ‘create in me a clean heart.’ David was a King

but he died in struggle. But he carried through. God did a complete heart surgery on me. Broke that old man down. Build me into a new man with new friends, new goals. And I thank God every day for that new man too because I look in the mirror now and I have hope. I'm not mad at myself. You know why? Galatians 5:14! "For all the law is fulfilled in one word — love your neighbor as yourself!" That's the key. Love others & you will love yourself. See, as a convict in the world I'm a leper. But we at BOC? We all the new lepers today. But not with Jesus. He healed the lepers and he healed me too. I see lots of prisoners walking around out here, not just in prison.

Next, respondents expressing the "help seeking" frame stressed appreciation for how their newfound religious identity was uniquely their own and how "being religious" positively served their lives:

Narrative 2. I came to Christ in prison. The setting matters for me now that I'm out. I go back inside and preach when I can. People find Jesus every day in this world and I'm happy about that. But finding Jesus Christ in prison is different — it's somehow pure, I mean. Several books of the Bible were written in prison and I think that matters: no matter where you are, God is here . . . : But my new church family is my real family now. I was worried I would not find a safe church to attend, as a convict. But I did, right away actually. It's a small church. It's a little bit of a biker church, amen? Haha. And I just love it. Because it's a fellowship. There's no posturing. And you know what it is? I finally found something to say 'yes' to in my life and people who say 'yes' to me. That's the Gospel."

Finally, literally every respondent told a story of their "help seeking" from religion after experiencing an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and despair:

Narrative 3. I came to faith in a jail cell right after my arrest still before trial. I was in fights every day. Beat up. I knew I was catching a serious charge this time. I knew I had blown up my life and I was dying inside. But two years into my sentence I remember watching this certain fella who also worked in the chapel at Lawtey (prison). He had a 99-year sentence. But he was the happiest man I'd ever seen. And I was wondering what the heck? I said, 'How can you be so happy?' He said: 'Because of my relationship with Jesus.' And I was just like, yeah whatever. I kept watching him like a hawk, under circumstances that would test anyone. *And he stayed calm.* And I decided I need me some of that. I want God's grace and power in my life. I learned Philippians 4:7 "*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*" He took me to that scripture and then he took me to church. He told me to bring it all to the altar. And I never left.

Storytelling Identity Work: "Making Your Test Your Testimony"

Lastly, perhaps the most intriguing frame of reference offered by these religiously motivated desisters involved describing the value of religious story-telling itself. The act of "*offering testimony*" accomplished for respondents the demarcation of old versus new selves, while also vigorously reconnecting them to audience members offering them positive reflected appraisals and various forms of social capital:

Narrative 1. “Well, in my old life, like I said a few times, I lived through pain and misery. My demon was that dope, crack especially. And I *could not* stop. I didn’t know how. But after all this time I went to AA and people taught me how to have a relationship with God. You know like it says in AA, I got a spiritual advisor. I have a guy and we ride motorcycles together. I mean he knows how to explain the Bible and everything. He’s the one who taught me, you know, to read every day. And that’s what I do. But he also taught me how to talk. He said: “Make your mess your message.” I turned it into “*make my test my testimony*,” because I’m tested every single day. I pick up my cross. I talk to people. I spread God’s word. Some people think you don’t need to go to church — you know, that you can just be spiritual on your own. But I think you do need to go to church. That’s just my personal opinion. It’s like going to the gym. Sure you can work out at home. Or you can go to the gym. Guess what? I’m stronger in the gym, because I go there to *work*. People say, well, that church don’t do nothing for me. And I say — no? Well, you’re not doing it right. You got to find a trustworthy church that feeds you. Where you can share your truth and do your work. Is there *fellowship*? Size of the church don’t matter. It’s about the work you’re doing. People who won’t judge you. Share your story. Then you’re not alone.”

Indeed, perhaps the most powerful dynamic of religiously motivated desistance expressed by respondents involved recommitting oneself to *testimonial* religious storytelling itself:

Narrative 2. {MH: “You said you felt bad about ‘not doing your part.’ What do you mean?”} Respondent: “Doing my part is I have to tell others who have lived my life and who think there is no hope, that there is hope. But I was too broken for that. Hearing others’ testimony opened my own heart. That’s how it really happened. I’m not going to lie, I was too selfish about it. I thought it was my own business. But today I’m not going to deny my testimony to someone else, if they need it. I been there. I’m going to give back, like I was given to. I’m going to tell whoever listens and show him how I live today. Maybe God can work through me and maybe one of them could have a chance. In church or anywhere you ask. Here in this coffee shop, right now. I’m not running. It was all about fearing being judged. But I tell them straight from Romans “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” (Romans 3:23-24). There’s not a perfect man that’s ever lived. I’m getting blessed just sitting here. Thanks so much for letting me talk.”

Finally, respondents stressed the value of BOC itself for providing the venue for the offering their testimonies and the personal growth doing so provided:

Narrative 3. {MH: “What are the best programs at BOC from your perspective?”} “Oh, the community meetings for sure. That’s where we pray and offer testimonies. That’s where I woke up and found God. It’s in the meetings that God heals us through fellowship. Hearing those testimonies bonds us as brothers, because, Mike, what some people have gone through will make you weep. We give testimonials every week. You know, sharing our struggles and challenges — well, victories too. But in the sharing with others, our faith walk is strengthened. I see that I’m not alone in my struggle and I try to be there for my peers. You know I learned I’ve actually had it easy. Many I’ve met have suffered so much more than me. Loved

ones dying right in front of them and stuff. Children. That was kind of a wake-up call. And we just pray for one another, man. Our rule is “free speech” — our goal is to leave with our hearts clean. ‘To leave it all on the field,’ as they say. We say whatever’s on our hearts and we walk away lighter. That’s our real groundwork right there.”

CONCLUSION: RELIGIOUS IDENTITY WORK AND CARCERAL CITIZENSHIP

In order “to desist from crime,” Maruna states, “*ex-offenders must create a coherent prosocial identity in story form*” (Maruna 2001:85). As Maruna states, “the framework of Christianity provides a master story that allows individuals to “read” the world again” (2001:167). But what is it about the “framework” of Christianity that criminal justice-involved citizens find useful? Is it the Christian ethic of forgiveness that is a main resource for desistance or is it the threat of hellfire and damnation (Hirschi and Stark 1969)? What permutations of Christian religiosity are most salient for desistance? While criminologists frequently reference the Bible and Christianity as a useful tool for self-reinvention among desisters, they rarely explore the salience of religion itself or how it “works in practice.” How exactly do ex-offenders engage with the Bible and what do they feel about it? What elements of religiosity are used by ex-offenders to achieve status elevation? Religiosity remains an important but poorly understood aspect of social penalty. This paper demonstrated how revised self-narratives offered by eighteen successful long-term desisters featured extensive use of religious narrative labor and highlighted three frames of religious storytelling: learning not to hide, help-seeking through religion, and the value of testimonial storytelling for status elevation.

While previous research notes ex-offenders are “more likely to report religion held some significance for them following their incarceration compared to before,” little research has explored how ex-offenders actually use religion (Santos and Lane 2014:130). As shown here, use of scripture and religious imaginaries provide key resources for the narrative identity work of ex-offenders that have been largely ignored by criminologists. More importantly, while criminologists frequently identify religion as a rehabilitative resource, the specific ways in which criminal justice-involved citizens access, utilize, and deploy religion remains opaque. As an example of what Maruna calls “re-biographing as policy,” this paper explores how a faith-based nonprofit organization structures opportunities for ritualistic status elevation through deliberate cultivation of religious narrative labor, while providing ready audiences for delivery of positive reflected appraisals (see Maruna 2001:164, 158–164; Mead 1934/2015; Wright 2020).

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Religious narrative labor comprises a widely cited resource for identity reconstruction by ex-offenders, yet criminological research exploring the dramaturgy

surrounding performances of religious narrative labor by ex-offenders is only just beginning (Ellis 2020; Guzman 2020; Hallett and Stephen McCoy 2015; Maruna and Liem 2021). As shown above, prisoners and ex-offenders are often surprised by the narrative realism of scripture, finding relatability in Biblical characters who made grievous mistakes but who also displayed fortitude and courage in facing up to them (Bounds 2022; Jobe 2019). Importantly, while the narratives offered here qualify as “redemption scripts” in that they constitute “re-biography” and exemplify identity work, they also importantly differ from those highlighted previously by Maruna in being an “amputation” of old identities rather than what Maruna terms “self-reconstruction” (Maruna 2001:87). That is, for these current respondents, religious narrative labor involved an explicit rejection of past selves rather than a reaffirmation of “old selves” as “basically good” but the result of bad circumstances (2001:87). These respondents highlight past selves in starkly negative terms, while narratively making a “clean break” from “old selves” (see Maruna and Roy 2007).

Finally, this exploratory, descriptive study provides evidence of spirituality and religious practice as a pivotal resource for identity reconstruction and desistance among long-term offenders. Operating in the context of a faith-based nonprofit organization working to help ex-offenders, BOC provides structured opportunities for former prisoners enduring carceral citizenship to reconstruct biographies that help them achieve status elevation and social inclusion (Rouse 1996). That said, the narratives examined here offer only exploratory and non-generalizable accounts of how religion is used by respondents. Consistent with Goffman’s suggestion that situational frames are always “negotiated” within organizational contexts, moreover, the narratives examined here do not necessarily reflect the full emancipation of former prisoners from oppressive social relations. These narratives are indeed *performances* for audiences located within definite power relationships. Religious communities can themselves, of course, become oppressive, exclusionary, judgmental, and powerful. “Goffman argued that actors do not have complete freedom to negotiate afresh in each situation, as we are constrained by ‘frames’ among the ‘principles of organization’ that structure social events” (Scott 2015:76). In addition, many ex-offenders served by BOC do in fact fail and are rearrested — while many who do succeed attribute jobs, families, and education as the keys to their success. Clearly, many ex-offenders can and do succeed without the resources of religious communities and practice.

Biblical references incorporated into the re-biographies of ex-offenders help structure and provide the “motive talk” and shared “vocabularies of motive” that “align themselves with the norms and values of the audience” provided by this faith-based organization (Miller and Stuart 2017; Scott 2015:67). Performances of religious narrative labor, moreover, help secure fiscal, emotional, and social resources for citizens surviving the rigors of carceral citizenship (Miller and Stuart 2017; Vanhooren et al. 2020).

Finally, while the religious narrative labor of ex-offenders is only beginning to be explored, researchers must stay mindful of the fact that, given the general defunding

of secular rehabilitation programs, the growing prominence of faith-based programs reflects a growing neoliberalism in justice programming overall. Put simply, as charitable groups become more central to the delivery of services for ex-offenders, legislators have become increasingly willing to cut budgets for secular programs (Hackworth 2012; Hallett 2019; Hallett et al. 2017, 2019). Additional research is needed to document how increasing reliance upon volunteer-funded, faith-based programming may be contributing to a pattern of less (secular) resources available for rehabilitative spending.

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