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## **A Narrative Analysis of the Relationships Between the Religious Perceptions of Serious Violent Offenders and Their Perception of Their Punishment**

*Narativna analiza odnosa med verskimi prepričanji izrazito nasilnih kaznjencev in njihovim dojetanjem kazni*

*Abstract:* This study investigates the characteristics of religiosity among serious violent offenders who actively participate in religious activities in prison and the way that affects their perception of the crime and their sentence. In particular, we examine whether they are remorseful for their actions and desire forgiveness as a part of religious experience. sixteen prisoners in three penitentiaries who had committed serious violent crimes and actively participated in religious events, were interviewed. Analysis of the answers showed a positive correlation between a deep, substantive faith experience and acceptance of responsibility. Likewise, faith influences the development of regret for the crime. Those who admit their crime and repent it are motivated by a desire for forgiveness. The religiously sceptical prisoners admit to having committed the crime but do not show remorse. All this suggests that a deep, substantive experience of faith can have a positive impact on the achievement of punishment goals.

*Keywords:* experiencing religiosity; experiencing punishment; repentance; seriously violent offenders, religious education of prisoners

*Povzetek:* Študija proučuje značilnosti religioznosti med izrazito nasilnimi storilci kaznivih dejanj, ki aktivno sodelujejo v verskih dejavnostih v zaporu, in način, kako to vpliva na njihovo dojetanje kaznivega dejanja in kazni. Proučujemo zlasti, ali svoja dejanja obžalujejo in si želijo odpuščanja kot del verske izkušnje. Intervjuvali smo šestnajst zapornikov v treh zaporih, ki so storili izrazito nasilna kazniva dejanja, v zaporu pa aktivno sodelovali pri verskih dejavnostih. Analiza odgovorov je pokazala pozitivno korelacijo med globoko, vsebinsko versko izkušnjo in sprejemanjem odgovornosti. Podobno vera vpliva na razvoj obžalovanja za kaznivo dejanje. Tiste, ki svoje kaznivo dejanje priznavajo in obžaluje-

jo, motivira želja po odpuščanju. Versko skeptični zaporniki priznavajo, da kaznivo dejanje so storili, vendar ne kažejo obžalovanja. Vse to kaže, da lahko poglobljena, vsebinska verska izkušnja pozitivno vpliva na doseganje ciljev kaznovanja.

*Ključne besede:* izkušnja religioznosti, izkušnja kazni, kesanje, izrazito nasilni storilci kaznivih dejanj, versko izobraževanje zapornikov

## 1. Introduction

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This study examines the possible effects of religious education among prisoners serving long prison terms for serious violent offenses. Two circumstances are of particular relevance to our topic. Firstly, they were imprisoned as people posing a high risk to society who have deliberately used serious violence against others. However, the long duration of their sentences reduces any hope that the prisoner will ever be released. All but one of the interviewees had been convicted of manslaughter. Several had received life or very long prison sentences. At the same time, all of them regularly and actively participate in various religious programs and events in prison, such as religious education. One aim of the study is to establish the relationship between the different ways in which they experience religiousness, and how they judge the sentence imposed on them. Regret cannot be identified through confession. Confession lacks moral content. There may be a purely rational decision behind a confession. The prosecutor may offer a more lenient plea for a confession.

By comparison, remorse expresses moral connection with the act. Repentance of the act is a moral rejection of it. More specifically, it means that the individual condemns the act they previously committed, which in turn implies that the perpetrator recognizes the difference between good and bad, desirable and despicable behavior. We examine which content or formal approach to religiosity connects to the development of repentance as a moral rejection of the crime committed. This moral approach will serve as the basis for further investigation of the conjunctions between religiosity and perceptions of the sentence received.

We conducted the research in Hungary, where the presence of Christian churches is significant, as indicated in the 2021 census data (Népszámlálás 2022). The Prison Chaplaincy Service, which provides religious practice in prisons, involves only the Catholic, Reformed, Evangelical, and Jewish churches (Wolters Kluwer 2021). Smaller Christian churches and various missionary organizations may also be involved in prisoners' religious education with the prison service's permission. Consequently, religion and religiousness in this study is conceptualized and discussed alongside its Christian interpretation, and aims to investigate how severely violent prisoners serving long-term sentences experience their religiosity when actively participating in religious education programs, and how this relates to their judgment of the sentence they are serving.

Two research questions have been formulated. RQ1: Does religiosity during punishment lead to repentance and a desire for forgiveness? RQ2: Does religion contribute to the recognition of a crime, acceptance of punishment received, and perception of its justness?

## 2. Theoretical Background

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The theoretical framework of our work is provided by the Risk-Need-Responsivity model (RNR model) for the treatment of prisoners. More specifically, the relationship between this model and religious practice in prisons. Duwe and Johnson's (2023) study showed that religiosity was positively related to childhood trauma, prosocial identity, and perceived social support while relating negatively to criminal thinking and employment needs. The results also revealed that religiosity is associated with less imprisonment and lower risk of recidivism, but only for people with a positive self-identity (Duwe and Johnson 2023).

The study of the relationship between religiosity and crime stretches back barely four decades. In itself, the phenomenon of religion and religiosity is extremely complex. Likewise the relationship between religion and crime, as well as religion and prison reintegration. Some studies emphasize the connection between religion and behavior in prison, leading to various results, some indicating no correlation between religiosity and behavior in prison (Pass 1999; Clear and Sumter 2002), others showing a positive relationship (Kerley et al. 2011; O'Connor and Perreyclear 2002). Others researched the relationship between religious practices and relapse with widely varying results. Some have found no established relationship between participation in religious practices and recidivism (Burnside et al. 2001), while others found no significant correlation between religious practice and relapse despite positive experiences; at most, cautious optimism was expressed (LaVigne et al. 2007). Others have shown distinctly positive outcomes on recidivism (Young et al. 1995, Johnson and Schroeder 2014, Jang et al. 2021). Johnson demonstrated that it is the intensity of participation in religious occasions and not mere attendance that influences the likelihood of reoffending (Johnson 1997, Stansfield et al 2016, Jang and Johnson 2023) following an institutional order. In this research, we investigate the relationship between remorse for the act, acceptance of the verdict, and religiosity. Accordingly, we accept the religious interpretation framework of "repentance". While people are responsible for how they act in the world, they are not necessarily responsible for the cognitive, affective, and behavioral deficits that realistically limit their ability to achieve social goals (Ward and Salmon 2009). The positive effect of religiosity on various factors of mental well-being is widely discussed in the literature (Makridis et al. 2020). The authors of this study hypothesize that remorse is related to the sense of responsibility that the court judged to be lacking. Concurrently, it can influence cognitive and emotional abilities. Jang et al. (2018) used interviews to research the effects of religious education in prisons, concluding that repentance resulting from conversion

includes offenders coming to see how their failures are connected and attributable to their old self, that is, to their guilt (Jang et al. 2018). In this sense, conversion is interpreted as a significant turning point in the lives of prisoners, resulting in a change in the individual's identity (Clear et al. 2000) through which the "old self" and the "new self" face each other (James 2002). Repentance is one way this confrontation is expressed. We chose interviews as our research method because they allow us to grasp what it means in an individual's life and how the aforementioned turning point manifests itself.

Interpretation of the content of religiosity after conversion can show significant differences. There are various ways of interpreting and measuring what religion and being religious means to someone. Such is the methodology used by the European Values Study and the World Values Survey Study (Haerpfer et al. 2022). Here, the question arises as to whether it means merely following rites and norms or whether it gives meaning to life and death. Similarly, the question emerges of how exclusive prisoners view their religion to be. Another interpretation sees religion as a worldview providing a lens through which people understand the events of their existence. Meanwhile, religion is no longer a moral constraint, rather resting on individual free choice. This situation results in religious pluralism (Berger 1967; Scheitle and Finke 2009, Beyers 2021; Pollack and Rosta 2017).

Furthermore, this not only allows free choice but also its rejection (i.e., religiosity without commitment, in which the individual does not bind themselves unconditionally to any denomination or even to any religion). The verbal expression of this is the statement "I believe in my own way," formulated by Miklós Tomka, Hungary's well-known sociologist of religion, in his measurement methods (Tomka 2010). We also have to consider the diminishing role of institutional forms in individual religiosity. The European population is characterized by a lack of church and religious individualization (Casanova 2009). Accordingly, there are countless possibilities for interpretation of what it means to be religious and also many layers, including transcendental faith, rite, traditions, values, and cultural characteristics (Norris and Inglehart 2004, Inglehart and Baker 2000). Some distinguish two main dimensions within religiosity: the vertical dimension, including beliefs focusing individual existence in the afterlife; and the horizontal dimension of this world, essentially related to social existence (Davidson 1972, Williamson and Aneq 2019; Ellis et al. 2025; Krauss and Silver 2021). The latter includes the individual's social activity and social existence (Traunmüller 2011).

As narratives of religiosity, this study considers transcendent faith as the central element of the content of religiosity, traditions as religious forms, and the religious reframing of life events. We supplement these with the religious background of the family of origin and the offender's childhood religious education. Punishment is partly intended to provoke reflection on an act committed in the past, essentially as retribution. Another punishment goal tries to shape the future in a forward-looking way (i.e., tries to trigger effects to make the offender a valuable member of society). Such can be the strengthening of responsibility (Sifferd 2021). Alternatively, even deterrence can be understood as a future-pointing effect (Ellis

2003). Aside from retribution, all punishment goals punish perpetrators in order to protect society.

Part of our research examines whether offenders express repentance. The question is precisely whether they regret what they have done in such a way that repentance is expressed. Regret of an act comes in many forms. An offender may regret their act because the court punished them for it, or because the community has condemned them (Duff 2001), or because they feel the need to be accepted back into the community (Bennett 2008). From the perspective of our topic, it is whether they regret what they did because they have realized that the act was a sin, and see forgiveness and striving to forgive others as a suitable means of expressing that. Repentance may lead to an acceptance of punishment as just, thus the convict's view of the sentence they are serving is one subject of our research. The severity of the punishment and the sense of justice are connected in most cases (Jenness and Calavita 2018). This is particularly interesting in the case of those who are serving long or whole life sentences. Therefore, it is worth examining whether religion has a role in acceptance of punishment and its justness, or whether, more generally, characteristic self-justification techniques work (Adshhead 2011).

In recent decades, the literature has mainly examined the role of religiosity in the evaluation of punishments for criminals (Grasmick and McGill 1994, Applegate et al. 2000, Unnever and Cullen 2006, Baker and Whitehead 2020). These results present how personal faith preferences affect judgment of the punishment of others. Compared to these, one of the main questions in our research concerns how an inmate who found or lives their religion in prison evaluates their punishment. Is there some religious attitude at work in judging their own punishment?

### 3. Method

We chose interviews as our research method since our primary goal in exploring the topic was not to extract numerical data but to get to know the opinions and attitudes of our interviewees. Gorard says of interviews that "stories stick more easily in the human mind, their illustrative character is unquestionable" (Gorard 2004, 7). The interview parts in the "Results" chapter serve to illustrate this. When we talk about the experience of faith and the manifestation of religiosity, we are more interested in these stories. The condition termed "triangulation" by Denzin (1970, 2018) serves to validate qualitative research. The interviews were semi-structured, and the set of questions was compiled so that, by analyzing the narratives, it would be possible to assess the religiosity of these long-term prisoners, the motivational background of the conversion, and the punishment imposed. When compiling the questions, we considered the dialogic nature of prison relationships (see e.g., Kreager and Kruttschnitt 2018), so the inmate interview questions were prepared for this systemic approach. We present the main characteristics of the interviewees in Table 1.

code	sex (M/F)	age	place	date of interview
FT1	M	57	Szeged	14.02.2023
FT2	M	66	Szeged	14.02.2023
FT3	M	51	Szeged	14.02.2023
FT4	M	48	Szeged	14.02.2023
FT5	M	35	Szeged	14.02.2023
FT6	M	43	Szeged	14.02.2023
FT7	M	59	Szeged	14.02.2023
FT8	M	83	Sátoraljaújhely	24.11.2022
FT9	M	51	Sátoraljaújhely	24.11.2022
FT10	M	41	Sátoraljaújhely	24.11.2022
FT11	M	50	Sátoraljaújhely	24.11.2022
FT12	M	51	Sátoraljaújhely	24.11.2022
FT13	M	64	Tiszalök	10.01.2023
FT14	F	52	Tiszalök	10.01.2023
FT15	M	41	Tiszalök	10.01.2023
FT16	F	41	Tiszalök	10.01.2023

**Table 1:** *Descriptive table of the interviewees.*

The subjects are all serving sentences of more than fifteen years. They have all been in prison for over seven years. Both FT13 and FT16, who are about to be released, have spent more than twenty years in prison. All interviewees regularly participate in religious education and religious services. Regularity was an important aspect, and in order to ensure this, we also involved the prison chaplains in the selection of subjects. The interviews were recorded using a tape recorder and then typed accurately into a Word document. The prison staff did not influence the recording. The prison chaplains were not present during the interviews. The researcher recorded the interviews in rooms designated for religious services, except FT1 and FT6. Those two subjects represent a particularly high security risk, so we were able to record the interviews with them in a specially designed room. The time available for interviewing was not limited, and the sessions lasted 30–50 minutes per subject. The personal data of the subjects were only accessible to the researchers, who signed a confidentiality agreement. The researchers summarized the personal data in an encrypted Excel document. We coded the subjects in the same table, from FT1 to FT16. Only the codes are included in the typed interview texts and in further analyses.

In qualitative data analysis, conceptual units are the basis of analysis (Babbie 2001). We took the individual blocks of questions and topics as conceptual units during the analysis. These conceptual units were formed as follows:

- a) Experience of religiosity, perception of religion
- b) Assessment of the punishment, i.e., the justice of the sentence, whether there is any religious interpretation of the execution of the punishment, and whether there is remorse.

Coding and labeling were done manually, enabling a more in-depth analysis of the text, but which relies heavily on the researcher's reflexivity, which is why we kept the expectations of triangulation (Denzin 1970, 2018) in mind while labeling and used two researchers who reflected on each other's codes. Thus the final code categories were established. The inter-coder reliability, using Cohen's Kappa statistic, yielded a coefficient of 0.672, which means that according to the Landis and Koch agreement interpretation scale (Landis and Koch 1977), the coders reached substantial agreement in coding the answers.

While coding, we also collected narratives. In the case of individual conceptual units, we applied labels and collected narratives for them, and the analyses were carried out with these. The narratives are presented in the table 2.

The conceptual units and labels, we collected and analyzed the texts and opinions extracted from the interviews. In the analysis, we compared which interpretation of religion is associated with which experience of punishment. We interpreted the results in four steps:

- a) We assigned inmates to the different narratives and experiences of the religiosity if they typified the given element.
- b) We did the same with different aspects of the interpretation of punishment.
- c) We investigated how many times expressions specific to a given religious and punishment narrative were mentioned.
- d) We created a summary table of the number of inmates belonging to the different narratives and how often these narratives occurred in the interviews.

## 4. Results

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### 4.1 Prisoners' Religious Self-interpretation

The religious reframing of life events appears in the following interviews. We considered it essential to investigate the relationships between judgment, their assessment of it, and faith. How does the prisoner feel about what God can do with their life and judgment? What kind of new life does it offer? Does this carry the possibility of becoming better? Does it cause a behavior change? The power of faith and religion in enduring punishment appears in what the inmates say. At the same time, the possibility of redemption appears in religion. This is how the reframing of the interpretation of sin and punishment appears: "God loves me very much, and that's why I received this punishment," which is also a handhold.

FT8: "And Religion is what not only gives meaning to a person's life but also helps through this difficulty in life."

F13. "/... / If this God exists, because he does, how can I get in touch with him? What does he know, or what does he want to do with my life? I received the judgment, I received a significant judgment /... /"

We did not formulate a question about the motive for forgiveness in advance, but the interviews showed that this is an essential element of religiosity for some. The desire to be forgiven and to forgive others appears in the interviews. Those for whom it does tend see their crime as unforgivable in human terms, so they hope that God can forgive them.

FT5: “/... / If Jesus Christ could forgive those who humiliated him, hated him, spat on him on the cross. Then, I also have to forgive those people, whether a judge, a police officer, an accomplice, or even the person who reported me, for example. Or even to a father who did not raise me. /... / If my relatives, my family, have forgiven me, even though I killed a person.”

FT13: “In the Gospel of Matthew, I learned there is no sin that God does not forgive, either in depth or quantity. And I say, then I also have a chance for God to fix everything I destroyed with all my might.”

The dimension of religion related to personal faith appeared in the narratives. In addition to the assessment of religion, we were curious about the role and experience of faith, and its interpretation by the inmates. The answers that appear here can be grouped distinguishably. For some, faith is the basis of their religiosity. Such inmates say personal faith has become an immanent part of their individuality, determining their relationship to everything else. In those cases, a deep and substantive faith experience is lived through (deepened faith).

FT2: “Well, I think faith means life. I believe that we received life from God, and life means faith so that you can live without faith, but you shouldn’t.”

FT4: “Well, the most important thing is my faith in Jesus and following their path. That’s what Religion means.”

FT5: “I have it in my heart that God’s work must be done with full devotion, either in praises or in readings, continuously.”

FT15: (to the question: What does Religion mean to you?) “A new life. A new life, which set a completely different perspective on life and people. /... / Of course not for my glory, because, thank God, I no longer act for that, but for the glory of God.”

FT7: “What is important is that here I managed to step on the path that leads to Jesus Christ.”

In other cases, prisoners mostly grasp formalities instead of living the faith, trying to give an answer that they thought was formally correct. This can be seen mainly in the short, lesson-like wording of the answers or in the emphasis on actions that the prisoner thought were good and worthy of recognition.

FT11: “I talked to the laundry manager, and there I had all the priest’s church vestments and flags washed, dried, and ironed at my own expense.”

FT12: “Well, religion, faith, God, faith in God, love, hope, love.”

In the case of some prisoners, skepticism towards faith appears:

FT1: "All my life, I believed in nature, science, and aviation. I believe what I see. A man from afar says what he wants. /... / I told him not to pray to God but to me because I gave everyone money."

Another inmate was very controversial. In his interview, the belief in the existence of God and the experience of religion only in externals are mixed in a contradictory way. This inmate is also characterized by skepticism.

FT6: "But in the meantime, I visited the churches and always minded to be in a close relationship with God. /... / My friend was religious; he went to church, but he was a superstar in the underworld, the strongest guy in Vojvodina. /... / he was religious; he had a picture of him with crosses and everything; he even had a gold cross."

For other inmates, personal faith combines multiple motives from multiple religions. It cannot be said that they are characterized by a developed image of God, rather by an aspiration for some broadly interpreted spirituality. These inmates can also be considered religious (spiritual) pathfinders. A personal belief characterizes them. The difference between them and those characterized by a deepened religious life is that they are not closely connected to any church or religion. It contains the elements characteristic of Christianity alongside motifs from other religions.

FT10: "I believe that there is one God. In practice, they can call it something else because I think that, obviously, they couldn't give it the same name in India or other parts of Asia as in Christianity. So, I went to a Buddhist community. I lived with the Krishnas for three months and was interested in these things. /... / But the faith in Jesus is perfect for me, and I can stay in it calmly, and I have never lost my faith."

FT14: "I tried oriental things; I did that during trips. I looked at Buddhism, I looked at the Muslim Religion, I looked at every single Religion. I was looking for what I saw in it."

As mentioned above, rites were one of the subjects investigated, that is the religious acts through which prisoners practice their faith. Here, we omit the interview because all detainees follow the traditions of Western-type Christian churches, read religious documents, pray, go to religious community events, and participate in religious rites according to their denomination. The exceptions to this general statement are those characterized by religious skepticism. In their case, religious acts mean contact with a church person.

## 4.2 Interpretation of Punishment

A group of answers emerges in which the interviewees deny the act that they are accused of. Some deny the crime entirely and consider themselves innocent of everything. Accordingly, they consider the verdict unfair.

FT2: "My judgment is fiction /... /"

FT 11: "I got 35 years for a crime I didn't commit."

Others partially admit their responsibility, claiming that they participated in the commission of the given crime, but deny the specific behavior for which they face the most severe punishment. That is, they partially dispute and reject the sentence imposed on them.

FT8: "Starting with being shot in the stomach and arrested, without any reason, of course. /... / Since my conviction, you can almost say that a wonderful event has happened to me. /... / I asked the Holy Spirit for help /... / The moral victory is mine."

FT10: "/... / because the judge's verdict is not the same as the indictment, and what a person commits is not the same etc. /... / There is an expert opinion according to which the place where"

FT8 sees his action and the judgment he consequently received in a very complex way. He does not deny the series of acts in which he was involved, but considers his role in them to be positive. He denies the specific conduct for which he was convicted and thus sees himself as a kind of victim.

Another category consists of those who admit to having committed the act; some even accept that they deserve punishment for it but show little remorse; at most, they regret their own spoiled life. FT1's response includes the acknowledgment but also tries to share the responsibility with others. They were among the few who discussed the act committed. To preserve anonymity, we only cite responses typical of the attitude to responsibility. Such as:

FT1: "I deserve the punishment but did not commit this act alone. The only thing that would be important is for those who participated in this to look at themselves. /... / That's when the shooting happened. /... / I shot nine times at four people. /... / Before that, there was accountability."

FT1's words reflect the intention of avoiding and reducing responsibility through the term "happened," they speak of their act as if it was not their own doing but something caused by reasons beyond their control. The term "shooting" expresses spontaneity and possibility. Meanwhile, the sentence "before it was a reckoning" expresses the exact opposite, a deliberate intention. So, the admission and the avoidance of responsibility are present in this interview simultaneously. However, he then speaks resignedly about the punishment: "/... / I deserve the punishment."

In this group, FT6 deserves a special mention; he actually sees his act, for which he was convicted, positively:

FT6: "By killing that mobster in Serbia and saving Serbia, not only my friend's life but they would have been further terrorized and destroyed more than ten thousand families, /.../. I was the sane one; I protected the people, and now they claim that I mean danger to society because I killed. /.../ Well, and I say that I always feel that people don't want to understand that you killed, and that's why you got life imprisonment. Still, if we look at the circumstances, I could even get an acquittal because if we consider the circumstances, according to the Penal Code, I can receive an acquittal because of means of last resort; /.../."

The third category includes those who admit to having committed the act and accept that there was a punishment for it but, at most, dispute its extent. At the same time, they repent their action and the harm caused by it; they show remorse.

FT3: "Unfortunately, this was a bad decision, a crime committed on impulse. That's all I can say. /.../ Penalty? Yes, the person deserved it; they committed the crime, couldn't do anything, accepted it, and regretted it. They showed remorse and pleaded guilty, which the court imposed on me, and I accepted."

FT4: "Well, the punishment is very difficult to understand, I think it can never be accepted, so I try to live it as if the Lord is testing us." (He received an end of life sentence punishment.)

In subsequent analyses, we considered them as having regretted their actions because, from the perspective of regret, it is less important that they consider the punishment they received to be excessive.

Finally, there are those interviews in which the detainee firmly accepts the commission of the crime and does not dispute the amount of the punishment, considering it fair. Among these, those who speak of living the punishment as a test bear witness to a particularly intensely lived faith. This motive is based on religion. In this case, personality development through adversity is apparent, the hope that suffering will make them better, and after withstanding the tests, a reward will await: liberation.

FT5: "My old deeds? Well, I would slap myself. With me now. Seriously. With my current self, I ruined not only my life but also others'. Well, now there is one good thing about it. Thank the Lord that I have known Him, and we were able to convert many people, either in my family or here in prison, that now many, even 6–7 people started it all because of us. /.../ The fact that I deserve the place is that I have always said that although I did not kill a person, I did not kill him, I am in prison for murder, but I did not kill him, but if I am not there, he would not even have dared to go in there. So if I did not start that act, he would not have dared to start. /.../

I have always said that I committed that crime and realize I made a mistake. /... / The thing is that since I converted, I have seen many things completely differently, even bad things, and I dare to accept it; I dare to accept it; I dare to confess in front of everyone that I was a sinner. I admit that I was at fault. /... / Moreover, I also asked for an exemption in court, but now I say that the twenty years, as I said before, stand the test of time. Moreover, it should not be 15 or 18, but twenty years; I deserve it."

The interviewee outlines the arc of how he moved from denying the crime to admitting responsibility for the act to others and himself as well. He states that the place of initial denial, evasion, and blaming is replaced by confession, facing the crime, and repentance due to conversion in prison. Thus, the following arc emerges based on the interview: denial – blame/avoidance – conversion – insight – repentance – hope for a new/better life.

FT15: "I received a 15-year sentence for armed robbery, kidnapping, black-mailing, theft—so apart from murder and crimes against children and the elderly, everything played a role in my life. However, I am grateful to the Lord that I managed to convert here and to the jail because this way, I feel the weight of the punishment better, and I think it is justified."

Coming to faith in prison resulted in the prisoner accepting and considering their punishment as just. They had held a very different opinion between being imprisoned and coming to faith. In their case, coming to faith and experiencing punishment have been closely intertwined. The conversion date in prison falls between the first and second-degree verdicts. For this reason, we find that coming to faith and experiencing punishment are closely related.

FT16: "So I've been serving my sentence for 16 years; I'm here for classified murder. Unfortunately, I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. /... / I'm not saying this to make you like it, but this is where I belong. I deserve it, it's been 16 years now. It took me 4–5 years to say this is my place. I deserve it, and yes, accept it!"

They admit to committing the act, but at the beginning of the interview still attributed a more significant role to external circumstances beyond their control than their own actions. A few sentences later, beyond the initial tension, their train of thought changes: According to this changed train of thought, the subject of the interview acknowledges the legitimacy of the punishment, thereby also acknowledging their own responsibility. They had to serve 4–5 years of their sentence for this. In a few sentences about the turn of events, the mental process that moves from complete denial, even to themselves, to recognizing the act, to accepting the legitimacy of the punishment is condensed. Beyond this, the subject of the interview comes to the point that they regret—moreover to repentance—the act they committed, and regret for not only their own ruined life but the lives of those they ruined, and the lives of their victim's family. At the same time, the guilt associated with the punishment does not represent absolution for this per-

Main category / subcategory	Description	Source (all interviews)	Mention (all mentions)
Experience of punishment	How they assesses their own punishment, whether they consider it proportionate to their actions. Insight into responsibility for crime and impact on society. Acceptance of the consequences of their actions.	14	41
Excessive punishment	My punishment is unfair, exaggerated, accompanied by a lot of media attention, and there is also a deflection of responsibility.	2	6
Denial of a crime	Innocent conviction, miscarriage of justice.	3	6
Repent, I deserve my punishment	He/she repents the act, accepting and experiencing punishment, expecting forgiveness from society in the long term.	9	13
Admitting a crime, but avoiding responsibility, no remorse	Accepts the punishment, but either does not accept the crime, or puts them self on a pedestal or distances them self from it, so they have no regret.	2	3
I changed because of it	Change under the influence of religion, or change under the influence of a reference person, religious framing always.	9	13
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Experience of religion, perception of religion	How the prisoner views their religion, what meanings they attribute to it, now or in the future. What does their life of faith, their belief in God, their religion mean to them? How religion can influence and shape the life of the individual.	16	69
Reference person	Mentioning someone who helps shape my faith (pastor, prison staff, fellow inmate).	7	12
Resolution, reframing	The faith allows me, even if I'm guilty in the eyes of society, to be absolved, I don't have to do anything to feel that I'm important somewhere - outwardly.	14	16
Forgiveness	Forgiveness for themselves and for others (even those who have acted against them), for them it's in the religion - inward looking.	5	7
Transcendent faith	At the heart of religiosity is faith in God.	8	15
Religion as tradition	"Learned religiosity." What matters most is the framework.	3	2
The power of rites and community	In prison, rituals and repetitive moments are valued.	11	16

**Table 2:** *Categories of experience of punishment and experience of religion, perception of religion.*

son, who is faced with the fact that they cannot make good the consequences of their actions, which both they and the deceased victim's family continue to bear even after the punishment.

FT14: "Totally okay. [The punishment she received. Author's note] It may sound stupid because I want to be released sooner, honestly. But regardless of it, the sentence is fair."

FT13: "People don't understand why they had to get into this situation. They made a bad decision once, and then society threw them out. /... / I

Inmates' code	Interpretation of religious						Interpretation of punishment			
	Religious-reframing	Forgiveness	Personal-faith (transcendent)	Religion-as-tradition	Skepticism toward religious-belief	Spiritual-pathfind	Deny-the-crime	Admit-without-regret	Admit-and-repent-the-act	Didn't-mention-punishment-or-crime
FT1					X					
FT2			X				X			
FT3			X						X	
FT4									X	
FT5		X	X						X	
FT6	X				X		X			
FT7			X							X
FT8	X					X			X	
FT9				X					X	
FT10		X				X			X	
FT11				X			X			
FT12			X	X			X			
FT13	X	X	X						X	
FT14	X	X	X						X	
FT15	X	X	X						X	
FT16	X								X	

**Table 3:** *The connections between religiosity and interpretations of punishment.*

don't care what our partner thinks because what the court imposed on me because of the crime committed, I will serve my sentence. I stood my ground and served a sentence honorably because I followed the rules."

FT13 acknowledges the legitimacy of the punishment, but the thought expressed in the third person suggests that he is trying to remove this life situation from himself. This changes in the later part of the interview—after the bracketed part in the quote—and the singular speaks of itself in the first person. The motive of guilt appears in the punishment. He believes that he is guilty of what he did. Moreover, in the serving of punishment, the motives of honor and perseverance appear.

In this view of the motives of regret and forgiveness there is no difference between those who dispute the amount of punishment and those who accept it. Instead, it reflects the legal knowledge of the individual (disputing some qualifying circumstance), the knowledge of the differences in judgments arising from different jurisprudence (others received less for the same act), or the differences resulting from their age at the time of sentencing. Therefore, in the following, we attach importance to when inmates admit their guilt and consider the punishment for the crime they committed to be deserved.

Table 3 summarizes the different perceptions of religion and punishment. The prisoners cannot be characterized by a single perception. Of course, forgiveness and personal transcendental faith are not mutually exclusive, but there are, however, mutually exclusive interpretations such as personal faith and skepticism. From the perspective of the research questions, it is noteworthy that of the eight individuals for whom transcendental faith is characteristic, personal regret for the act committed and repentance is characteristic of only one. On the other hand, those who interpret religion only as a framework denied the committed act or did not talk about it. Confession without remorse is characteristic of skeptics. All this suggests that personal transcendental faith is the religious perception that can lead the prisoner to repentance, which is most appropriate for the purposes of punishment.

## 5. Discussion

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We examined what religion meant to the prisoners. What promises do the inmates make for the future? What kind of change will coming to faith bring to their lives and character? The RNR model detects criminogenic needs and formulates recommendations for their treatment. In recent years, it has focused primarily on the relationship between dynamic risk factors and religious education. Jang and Johnson have examined the impact of religion on moral needs (Jang and Johnson 2022). Their findings suggest that intensive religious education contributes positively to the reframing of life events and the development of personality-defining moral values, such as forgiveness. They point out that religion helps inmates realize the meaning and purpose of life within prison walls, helping them to find a positive outlook and purpose despite the apparent difficulties of social isolation, deprivation, and future life (Jang and Johnson 2023). Jang et al. (2022) also point out that religious practice positively correlates with forgiveness, empathy, and self-control. Through this, religion can help in achieving the goals of punishment. The desire for forgiveness and the ability to forgive presupposes recognition of guilt and the need to resolve the resulting conflicts. Religious education can deliver something in positive personality change, which can result in a shift away from the criminal personality (Duwe and Johnson 2023, Maruna et al. 2006).

In line with this, we suggest that, among the many different understandings of religiosity, the experience of personal faith may be the one that is most likely to

trigger a favorable turn. Becoming a believer, that is, becoming a disciple, can lead to religion and its teachings becoming an inherent part of the personality. Personal belief may be able to change personality in such a way and to such an extent that the individual turns against his or her former criminal behavior.

The issue of forgiveness appears in the narratives of prisoners who have come to faith, both from the victim or community towards the perpetrator for their actions, as well as forgiveness from them to those who harmed them. According to Foucault's *Essay on the Technologies of the Self* (1988), Christianity is a confessional religion that holds the individual responsible for discovering who they are and what is going on in the depths of their own soul; they are required to recognize temptations, localize desires, and admit mistakes (Sluhovsky 2017, Xiaoyan 2024).

Several studies have attempted to demonstrate the relationship between substance use, the development of social relationships and behavioral patterns, and religious education in prison with a variety of results (Schaefer et al. 2016, Stansfield et al. 2016, Hallet et al. 2016, O'Connor and Perreyclear 2022). The outcomes of religious education are not always convincing. One possible reason for this may be that the subjects' self-interpretation of religiosity can be very diverse, and personal faith does not always dominate. Also, researchers examining the correlations between respect, order, honor, the pursuit of a better social life, on the negative side, the pursuit of revenge, and religiosity in prison, taking into account the degree of religiosity, suggest the importance of the quality of religiosity (Reiss 2002).

Further findings suggest that participation in religious education promotes moral rejection of the committed act, i.e. the development of repentance (Jang and Johnson 2022, Jang et al. 2023, LaBarbera 2025). This can be a turning point in an individual's life, leading to moral rejection of their previous actions. Our research focuses on which of the possible interpretations of religiosity may be related to the development of repentance. This approach further deepens the scientific discourse because our results suggest that among the various interpretations, personal transcendent faith may be suitable for the development of a sense of guilt. Religiosity as a tradition, framework, and religious path-finding as a non-church faith does not have such a well-articulated effect. Most religious programs aim to promote repentance and moral development (Eytan 2011, Jarrett et al 2024). Most prison programs aim to strengthen responsibility, personality development, and acceptance of social morality. Among these programs, religious education stands out because it seeks to achieve social goals through the means of reaching transcendent faith, thus connecting vertical and horizontal religiosity.

Every believer must reveal their sins either to God or to the members of the community (that is, to have private or public witnesses against them). Faith's commitment to truth and the self are related in this way. Their relationship also means that the soul can only be purified through self-knowledge. Simultaneously and paradoxically, confession of sins erases them, but exposes the sinner. The confession of sins represents a break with former identity: it reveals the truth in a way that shows the sinner and creates the identity of the »sinful man.«

## 6. Conclusion

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Religious reframing mainly means that, in their case, religiosity helps these prisoners to interpret their life events, themselves, and their relationship to the world in a religious way. Personal faith can be lived in many ways. In this research, we distinguished between four types: in-depth, formal, skeptical belief, and religious wayfinding.

Of those we judged to have deepened their faith, two partially admit their crime, another six fully admit their responsibility, only one inmate categorically denies the offense. Those who live their faith more deeply take responsibility in a typical way. Most of them do not even dispute the extent of the punishment. This is especially important given that all interviewees received lengthy prison sentences. Among those who firmly accept responsibility for their actions, only one inmate has faith that falls mainly into the category of way-finding, without religion being an immanent part of their personality. All of this leads to the conclusion that a profound experience of religious faith promotes responsibility. The quality of faith is also essential from the point of view of realizing the goals of punishment. The fact that the two inmates who are skeptical of religiosity admit to committing the act but show no remorse indicates a positive and closer connection between the quality of religious faith and responsibility. It also leads to the conclusion that those characterized more by formal faith either denied the crime or did not talk about it.

For RQ1, our results suggest that a deep, meaningful experience of religion can bring something positive in terms of recognition of the crime and the acceptance of its punishment. Forgiveness appears in relatively few statements. This may be because there was no direct question about it in the interviews. However, it could be telling that those who, despite this, do show forgiveness in their religiosity, to some extent, acknowledge their offense and accept the punishment imposed for it. This correlation allows us to conclude that many who admit their crime long for forgiveness. In the case of those who admit their responsibility, the motive of regret also appears. The interviews show this regret is not secularized but strongly religious. It indicates that those who admit their actions and show remorse are clearly motivated by forgiveness. They desire it and are themselves ready to forgive. Atonement in forgiveness can positively contribute to the achievement of punishment goals. It can, therefore, be assumed that the motives of repentance and forgiveness appearing in religiosity work against reoffending.

In response to RQ2, we suggest that the results point towards a deep and substantive experience of religiosity showing a positive relationship with the acceptance of punishment and its justice. Acknowledgment and repentance of the offense can be the first step towards successful reintegration. It is hard to imagine any reintegration without it. Repentance with a religious content is accompanied by a desire for forgiveness, an essential condition for reconciliation. An often stated objective is to prevent reoffending. It is difficult to achieve this goal with just the retaliation that punishments always carry. The religious practice in prisons

goes far beyond retribution and imbues the punishment with such value and content that it can lead to successful reintegration.

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