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## FAITH BEHIND THE FENCE: RELIGIOUS TRENDS IN U.S. PRISONS

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According to a May 2004 report by the U.S. Department of Justice, by midyear 2003 there were more than 1.3 million persons in custody in state and federal prisons in America. This number increases by an average of 3.7 percent per year, creating concerns over prisons becoming recruitment grounds for cults, alternative spiritual practices, and dangerous religious groups. Precise statistics on the religious demographics of U.S. prisons can be difficult to obtain because of differing procedures followed in each state. California, for example, has not done a valid study of inmate religious preferences in more than a decade. New York and Michigan lump several religions into an "other" category. Colorado does not recognize the Nation of Islam and does not have a statistical category for it. Such information as is readily available, however, does allow for certain definitive conclusions.

**Islamic Incursion?** In light of heightened terrorism concerns, greater scrutiny has been turned upon Islam and its offshoots, particularly the Nation of Islam. Anecdotal and statistical evidence indicates that the vast majority of inmates, ranging from nearly two-thirds of inmates in states such as Illinois, to nearly nine-tenths in South Carolina, declare for some denomination of Christianity. An increasing number, however, have converted to Islam or one of its variants, and according to a Canadian Broadcasting Company documentary, "Islam Behind Bars," Islam is "the fastest-growing religion in Western jails."

Statistics on conversions to Islam vary widely according to locale. Alex Taylor, chaplaincy services administrator for the Florida Department of Corrections, stated that Muslims account for approximately 4 percent of the prison population in his state, with the Nation of Islam accounting for a quarter of that number. New York's Islamic prison population is around 14 percent, with an additional 4 percent of the population declaring for the Nation of Islam. In Illinois, 6.5 percent of inmates are Muslim, and only an additional .75 percent are Nation of Islam. In Michigan, mainstream Islam (4 percent) and the Nation of Islam (4.5 percent) are individually outnumbered by another Islamic offshoot, the Moorish Science Temple (6.5 percent).

On the other hand, Krista Obbits, director of public relations for Prison Fellowship, says that based on the experience of Prison Fellowship volunteers and workers, Muslims associated with the Nation of Islam account for some 70 percent of Muslims in prisons. The apparent paradox in these statistics is "not surprising," says Philip Jenkins, professor of History and Religious Studies at Penn State University, and author of a paper on Islam in prisons, written for the Foreign Policy Research Institute. The difficulty in assessment lies in the fact that incarcerated Muslims will "float between groups," or declare for mainstream Islam even though they are ideologically aligned with the Nation of Islam. Some inmates may believe that aligning with the Nation of Islam will cause them to be more closely scrutinized by prison staff. Others may appear to be aligned with the Nation of Islam because they express admiration for Nation of Islam leaders, or espouse views of the racial oppression of African Americans similar to those offered by the Nation of Islam. Such inmates, however, may also reject the radical teachings of the Nation of Islam (e.g., the inferiority of the Caucasian race) and thus reject formal membership with the sect. Assessing just how many Islamic inmates are truly associated with the Nation of Islam, therefore, becomes a problematic exercise.

The Nation of Islam has historically been aggressive in their recruitment activities in prisons. Malcolm X, a prominent figure in the Nation of Islam during the 1960s, was converted while in prison; ironically, he later converted to orthodox Islam after a trip to Arabia convinced him that Islam was not amenable to

segregationist thinking. Both the Nation of Islam and mainstream Islam find appeal among African-American inmates, who may regard Christianity as a “white man’s” religion that has failed to serve their needs, and find Islam’s moral system attractive. “Islam Behind Bars” featured the testimony of such inmates as Kevin Culmer, a bank robber who received an 18-year sentence in a Kingston, Ontario, institution. Awed by the humility and sense of peace of the Islamic inmates he met, Culmer became a convert to Islam. The documentary also featured the testimony of “shoe bomber” Richard Reid, who converted to Islam while in a British prison.

Reid’s testimony and those of others have become showcases for those concerned that U.S. prisons may become breeding grounds for terrorists. In a June 2002 op-ed piece for the *Wall Street Journal*, Chuck Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship, cited the example of Abdullah al-Muhajir, better known as Jose Padilla, a former prison inmate who became an al-Qaeda operative. Al-Muhajir was captured in Chicago and was alleged to have been recruited to perform terrorist acts in America. Colson says that he has “seen hundreds of potential Abdullahs up close” and noted that the radical form of Islam “feeds on resentment and anger all too prevalent in our prisons,” especially among nonwhite inmates who “feel oppressed by the white power structure and sentencing disparities, which too often fall most harshly on minorities.” According to Colson, “Al-Qaeda training manuals specifically identify America’s prisoners as candidates for conversion because they may be ‘disenchanted with their country’s policies,’” and there is a special danger of these recruits being able to “blend easily into American culture.” The same factors ironically also force al-Qaeda to hold such recruits “at arm’s length,” according to Tony Karon, a staff writer for *Time* magazine: aside from the fact that as criminals they are “inherently unreliable,” they would also be “prime candidates for recruitment by Western intelligence agencies.”

In response to Colson, David Shwartz, former religious services administrator for the Federal Bureau of Prisons, declared in an address to the Islamic Society of North America that the claim that American prisons were becoming recruitment centers for terrorists was “total garbage.” He asserted, “There is no group that has been tapped. Islam does not support terrorism.” In an address to the United States Senate in October 2003, Paul Rogers, president of the American Correction Chaplains Association, claimed that “reports of prisons being infiltrated by terrorists or terrorist organizations via prison religious programs...have been blown way out of proportion.” He acknowledged, however, “terrorist recruitment in prisons and jails is indeed a potentially serious concern” and that some “relatively minor situations have been identified but they were stopped before escalating to dangerous levels.” One such example noted by Jenkins was that of Warith Din Omar, a senior chaplain of the New York prison system. Omar engendered controversy and became the subject of a critical investigation when he described “the 9/11 attackers as martyrs and the attacks as something that America had brought on itself.” In the final analysis, the accounts of Colson and Jenkins, placed in contrast with the admonitions of Shwartz and Rogers, reflect the same tension found between those who say that Islam is a “religion of peace,” and the radical followers of Islam, such as Reid and Padilla, who seem to resist universalizing that conclusion.

**Cults Incarcerated.** Other than the Nation of Islam, no cult or sect appears to have any special influence in U.S. prisons. In Florida, groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses (1 percent), Mormons (.13 percent), and Santeria (.09 percent) are virtually invisible. Florida’s statistics mirror findings in other states consulted for this report, with certain regional variations (e.g., Native American religions are more prominent in Colorado than elsewhere). Obbits expressed no disagreement with this assessment, based on Prison Fellowship encounters; likewise, representatives of the prison ministry Champions for Life, and Kairos Prison Ministry, report observing no unusual inroads by cults.

Cults may have the illusion of being more prominent in prison than they really are, because, as Rogers observed, prisons are “isolated and closed communities” in which a minority faith group may stand out more than it would otherwise. Actual growth of marginal groups in a prison setting is unlikely under current conditions. Cults have no organizations operating with the same purpose or scale as Kairos or Prison Fellowship. There is also no hard data to explain why prison outreach programs by cults are limited, although Kairos Executive Director John Thompson suggested that cults simply lack interest in evangelizing prisoners; the shame of having converts from among the criminal class — apart from any

related social defiance of the sort associated with the Nation of Islam — makes prison ministry undesirable. Thompson further noted that even within mainstream Christianity, ministries like Kairos and Prison Fellowship were rare, and local church bodies seldom offered any ministry to the incarcerated. The adversarial nature of the environment also means that association with a smaller cult group is more risky for inmates. “My sense is that these would not be ideological groups. It’s more inmates getting together for self-protection,” Thompson said. Joining a cult, or any group perceived as a novelty, while in prison means risking disassociation from other groups from which an inmate can draw support and find protection from other inmates. Those prisoners who are cult members, therefore, are usually already cult members prior to incarceration and would have a social reason *not* to evangelize.

When a cult draws attention to itself in a prison, it is usually because of some specific controversy. The Church of Scientology has been notably aggressive in sending unsolicited literature into prisons. Much of this literature is simply thrown away by prison staff, who do not have space to store it. Lawmakers and prison officials have been specifically resistant to Scientology participating in prison programs. According to a February 2003 report by Eric Neff of the *Las Vegas Sun*, a proposed trip by Nevada lawmakers to Ensenada, Mexico, to study Narconon, a prison program with ties to Scientology, attracted little interest. Narconon programs have also been rejected in other states, including Arizona and Michigan.

Controversy may also be engendered by perceived violations of inmate religious rights. Taylor related an example of a Jehovah’s Witness inmate group in Texas that normally drew 6 to 10 members from a population of over 2,200. When the group was perceived as unfairly sanctioned against by prison staff, attendance temporarily tripled as non-Witness inmates came to show support for their fellow inmates. When the sanctions were lifted, the attendance returned to its prior level. Another notable example occurred in Florida, where an inmate named Willie Marshall, who converted to Satanism, filed a lawsuit against the state, demanding that he be provided with tarot cards and dove’s blood, objects normally forbidden by prison regulations.

**Eastern Influx.** Eastern religions are attempting to make inroads into prisons under the guise of practices such as Transcendental Meditation (TM) and yoga. These allegedly nonreligious practices are not prominently featured in most prisons and are not tracked statistically by any state surveyed. Teachers of TM and yoga often find the prison environment too distracting to be conducive to meditation, and discover that inmates are more interested in other diversions. Those dedicated enough to endure the awkward conditions, however, promote the principles of TM and yoga as a way to reduce stress in a difficult environment. A study done at Folsom State Prison in California by A. I. Abrams and L. M. Siegel is often cited in this regard. It claims that recidivism (i.e., returning to criminal habits) is reduced among inmates who take part in TM programs.

Corrections officials seem to be unaware that TM and yoga are connected to Eastern religions, perhaps because they are presented as nonreligious practices. In a report in the December 1991 issue of *Corrections Today*, a prison trade magazine, TM was described as a technique that could become “a powerful cure for crowding and high recidivism in U.S. prisons.” The article, however, showed no awareness of TM’s origins in Hinduism. The advances of TM and yoga into the prison system are sporadic and as yet insignificant when viewed in the context of the larger prison population. The Prison Project, started in 1979 as an effort of the SYDA Foundation, employs over 150 “trained program coordinators” to teach siddha yoga to prisoners and offers a free “home study” course to inmates; but its Web site reports that only “approximately 6,000 inmates are enrolled in the course in about 800 prisons in North America, Europe, and Australia.”

The conservative fiscal and moral outlook of most state and federal prison programs makes it unlikely that we will see information on inmate religious preferences systematized any time soon. Little statistical analysis is necessary, however, to see the effect of religion on people such as Richard Reid while they were incarcerated. Given the great number of inmates that return to the outside world, the faith of those behind the fence will continue to have an effect outside the fence as well.

— James Patrick Holding