

Fact Sheet:

Religious diversity in the prisons of Canada and England & Wales

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Innovation Funding Project, 2011-2012

Project Description and Goals:

The project's main aim was to address questions about the definition and delimitation of religion in the context of Canadian and British prisons. Prisons provide a unique institutional site for exploring religious diversity and its regulation, partly because the level of religious diversity is higher in the prison population than in the general population of many countries and partly because prison policies and practices provide a clear insight into the stance of states towards the management of religious diversity.

Methodology:

- a) A review of public policies, official publications and academic literature on each country's provision of spiritual and religious care to prisoners, with due regard to changes since the 1960s.
- b) Semi-structured telephone interviews with a sample of about 20 serving chaplains in Canada and 20 in England and Wales. The selection of informants was by 'snowball sampling' tempered by an attempt to ensure that the sample matched the proportion of prisoners identified with Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism within each country's prison population and contained chaplains serving in a variety of prisons. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.
- c) An analysis of legal cases concerning religion in Canadian and British prisons since the 1960s to see whether increasing religious diversity is associated with changing patterns of litigation.

Student Involvement:

- Ilona Cairns, University of Aberdeen

Results:

Some interesting findings that arose from the study include:

1. The Canadian (federal) and British prison systems have put in place significantly different mechanisms and structures for recognising and responding to religious and/or spiritual diversity among inmates. Canadian chaplains feel that they are more distant from their institutions than are their British counterparts – and more dependent on 'duty chaplains'. British chaplains feel better integrated into their establishments but more sensitive to the respects in which they still lack parity with mainstream Christian chaplains.
2. Chaplains are also ambivalent towards the tendency of prison systems to induce sharper notions of orthopraxy than are common in the outside world. They see advantages in being able to make inmates aware of their religious obligations but they also see disadvantages in the risk that orthopraxy might thereby become rigid and fundamentalistic. This hints at a wider ambivalence towards the respective merits and attractions of universalism (or generic provision of religious and spiritual care) and particularism (or inducement of strong identification with particular faith traditions and practices).

3. Chaplains cited very few instances in which prison staff tried to limit the practice of religion on the grounds that it might constitute harm to inmates or that it might be seen as a concession to ‘special interests’. They also accepted that security concerns took precedence over inmates’ right to practise their faith and were not often used as an excuse for placing restrictions on religion.

4. Few chaplains alleged that members of prison officers were unfair or unjust in their treatment of inmates from different religions. And they tended to explain the exceptions as the result of ignorance, lack of education, lack of training or lack of experience. But some Muslim chaplains were dissatisfied with the distribution of resources among chaplaincy workers representing different faith groups, attributing this to bias among administrators. In the words of a Canadian Muslim chaplain ‘The higher you go up, the more Christian it gets’.

Dissemination:

- **Beckford, James A.** 2013. "Religious diversity in prisons: chaplaincy and contention." *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* 42(2): 190-205.
- **Beckford, James A.,** and Ilona C.M. Cairns. 2015. "Muslim prison chaplains in Canada and Britain." *The Sociological Review* 63(1): 36-56