

## A Peek Over the Prison Wall

I thought I would begin with a few observations and facts and figures to put the topic into context before I reflect on whether or not Prison Chaplaincy as I have experienced it has anything to teach us practitioners of inter-faith dialogue – notwithstanding the fact that chaplaincy now takes place in a multi-faith environment, rather than against a dual faith background.

The Ministry of Justice, which is responsible for the Prison Service of England & Wales, takes religion seriously, requiring that ‘the right of prisoners to register and practise their faith is ‘respected and recognised’<sup>1</sup>. A prison must employ a chaplaincy team which reflects the religious preferences of its population, and, subject to the usual provisos of security and discipline and health and safety, chaplains are responsible for providing for a number of religious needs for every prisoner including a minimum one hour of corporate worship or meditation per week in an accessible, suitably decorated location, away from noise, near ablution facilities, with storage and a shoe rack. Chaplains are further expected to make provision for religious education, visits by ‘home’ clergy, and a range of food, dress and artefact requirements to enable prisoners to express their faith.

On entry to prison an inmate must be offered the opportunity to register a faith preference but may say ‘Nil’ or decline and be registered as ‘Non Specified, should expect to be seen by a chaplain within 48 hours of arrival, and may change religion, subject to certain requirements.<sup>2</sup>

To achieve these objectives Her Majesty’s Prison Service for England & Wales employs over 350 chaplains, of whom 134 are Anglicans, 92 are Muslims, 77 are Roman Catholics, 50 are Free Church, two Sikhs and two Hindus. These employed –full or part time- chaplains are supported by some 700 remunerated or voluntary ‘sessional’ chaplains and an estimated 7000 or so volunteers.<sup>3</sup>

Services are provided to adherents of 18 religious cultures: Bahais, Buddhists, Christians, Christian Scientists, Mormons, Hindus, Humanists, Muslims, Jains,

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<sup>1</sup> Faith and Pastoral Care for Prisoners: issued by the National Offender Monitoring Service of the Ministry of Justice on 18 November 2013

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Todd, Andrew and Lee Tipton: The Role and Contribution of a Multi Faith Prison Chaplaincy to the Contemporary Prison Service: Published by The Cardiff Centre for Chaplaincy Studies of the University of Cardiff in June 2011

Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Pagans, Quakers, Rastafarians, Seven Day Adventists, Sikhs, Spiritualists and Zoroastrians.<sup>4</sup>

It is said that the Prison Service does not routinely keep figures on prisoners by religion<sup>5</sup> although when I was more active in prison chaplaincy there was a day, usually in April, when Governors were asked to make a statistical return by religion. The latest I have been able to obtain is that of June 2012 and percentage comparisons with the 2011 general census and are as follows<sup>6</sup>:

Religion	Numbers	% of Inmates	% 15+	DR Notes
Christianity	43,176	50.2%	61.3%	
Muslim	11,248	13.1%	4.0%	Challenge
Hindu	456	0.5%	1.5%	Consistent
Sikh	777	0.9%	0.7%	
Buddhist	1,756	2.0%	0.5%	
Jewish	252	0.3%	0.5%	Consistent
Other	1,077	1.3%	0.5%	
No Religion	25,269	29.4%	24.1%	Expected
Not Recorded	2,037	2.4%	7.0%	Interesting
Total	86,067	100.1%	100.1%	

We do not have the time this morning to discuss who these more than 80,000 incarcerated persons are but the Home Office does produce an annual set of statistics by age, gender, length of sentence, type of offence and ethnicity, for example<sup>7</sup>. Further, you are, no doubt, familiar with the generalisations: many are barely literate; many have mental health challenges; the majority are young men; too many have emerged from the state 'care' system or have been the victims of early trauma including domestic violence, bullying in and/ or absenteeism from the school system or poverty.

Can we, however, say anything about those who choose to utilise the services of chaplaincy? A report by Andrew Todd and Lee Tipton of the University of Cardiff identified five major types of chaplaincy user: 'the devout who arrives in prison with a clear faith tradition which they continue to practice; the convert who finds

<sup>4</sup> Faith and Pastoral Care for Prisoners: Issued by the National Offender Monitoring Service of the Ministry of Justice on 18 November 2013

<sup>5</sup> Berman, Gavin and Aliyah Dar: Prison Population Statistics for the House of Commons Library in July 2013

<sup>6</sup> Offender Management Caseload Statistics annual tables: Issued by the Ministry of Justice

<sup>7</sup> Offender Management Statistical Quarterly Bulletin: Issued by the Ministry of Justice

a faith while in prison; the returner who begins to reconnect with an earlier faith tradition from childhood, largely as a result of being in prison; the professional seeker loosely classifiable as agnostic who do not ascribe to a particular faith, but attend a wide range of services and most chaplaincy classes and events; and the opportunist who openly claims not to be interested in faith or religion but value chaplaincy as a safe space, an escape from the wings.<sup>8</sup>

In my limited experience at some half a dozen or so establishments I have never met a 'professional seeker' although I have met a small number of devout Jews, a number of whom would not accept my authority outside of the prison walls. The majority of those whom I have encountered who have sought conversion to Judaism have been black males of Afro Caribbean origin who lead a Biblical life as they understand it and who do, or believe they do, have Jewish origins of one sort or another. I have, however, been privileged to chair Batai Din, conversion boards, in two prisons and one Special Hospital.

The majority of Jews whom I see in prison are what our Cardiff authors call 'opportunists' or 'returners' and in the Jewish world perhaps most have a little of each. Prison life can be challenging in all sorts ways and a visiting rabbi not only certifies a prisoner as eligible for one –and occasionally- two kosher meals per day but does provide an intellectual opportunity, a means of communicating with family, and a safe space to talk about low level anti-Semitism which exists in prisons. Above all of this most of the Jews are perhaps 'returners' and a spell in prison gives them an opportunity to reconnect with their ancestral faith in a frequently romantic and nostalgic but proud sense of belonging.

I have a different way of characterising the majority of prisoners I meet. They frequently fall into one of two categories. There are those who seek to use both their Judaism and their life story as an excuse for poor behaviour. They are the victim in a perverse sort of way and their inability to see beyond their own pain makes genuine dialogue difficult to achieve. The others use their Judaism and their own life story as a means of wielding soft power and their desire to be triumphant often makes remorse difficult to achieve.

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