

Rough Draft 7.25.2011

A New Point of Fixation:
The Effects of Long-Term Solitary Confinement
on the Religious Impulse
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Abstract

The use of long-term solitary confinement (LTSC) in United States prisons has increased at an exponential rate over the last few decades. The literature is rich with studies detailing the harmful psychological effects of this environment on the human psyche, but thus far no research has been done on the impact of extreme isolation and sensory deprivation on the religious impulse. Combining the AGIL scheme developed by Talcott Parsons with current thinking on meme theory, a hypothesis is developed to explain the fraying of religious beliefs witnessed in one survey.

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Sociology 445

15 September 2011

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Oh, I came in believen', and I still tell my folk I believes. But after thirteen year on death row, I seen ever' kind of evil a man can think up, and then some. After what been done to me and what I seen done to other brothers, I cant see no way to pray to no "god of justice" no more. If god be out there, whatever he be, he sure don't care bout' none of us... no, I didn't leave no god behind; he left me.

[Subject #23, as quoted in Whitaker, 2010, with misspellings intact.]

This statement was made by an inmate on Texas' Death Row (DR) during the course of a research project undertaken in late 2009 and early 2010. He has since been executed by the state. His beliefs about god and religion are by no means atypical for inmates living in long-term solitary confinement, and differ greatly from the notions held by the majority of inmates in the general population (Dammer, 1992). Determining the reasons for this stark contrast will by no means be a simple task, but by collecting and analyzing the extant data on both religious behavioral patterns and the psychological and sociological effects of long-term solitary confinement on inmates, we can begin to make some intelligent guesses and formulate some possible theories for future research. "Spiritual health" (however one defines that

term) is generally held to be important by all human beings, and if this course of research should show that these environments cause long-term damage to the ability of these prisoners to believe in something larger than themselves, then perhaps society will be able to hold a conversation about whether or not it should have this power over those in its care. A person's liberty we may take; even, under certain circumstances we have taken it upon ourselves to rob another of his life. We have never addressed the subject about whether or not we have the right to rob him of his "soul," a very real risk when playing with the fires of extreme social deprivation.

Despite the deep historical ties between prisons and religious organizations, there is surprisingly little academic literature on the subject. With the exception of some sociological studies on the effects of religion on juvenile delinquency, it would appear that science has largely shied away from the confluence of religion and the prison setting. There are some obvious reasons for this break in the chain of academic study, such as the inherent logistical difficulties involved in operating a detailed research project inside of a modern prison compound. Prison bureaucracies are not typically staffed with scientists of any stripe, and the concept of teams of bubbleheaded (and liberal, no doubt) academics traipsing through their backyards can be upsetting to the correctional mind. In addition, many scientists would be hesitant to place themselves in an environment where they might suffer physical violence, a very real possibility in most prisons in the United States. Beyond that, the subject of religion's effect on prisoners simply may not be "sexy" enough for many researchers. As the respected philosopher Nelson Pike once noted:

If you are in a company of people of mixed occupations,

and somebody asks what you do, and you say you are a college professor, a glazed look comes into his eye. If you are in a company of professors from various departments, and somebody asks what is your field, and you say philosophy, a glazed look comes into his eye. If you are at a conference of philosophers, and somebody asks you what you are working on, and you say philosophy of religion...[Quoted in Bambrough, 1980]

For young scientists looking to make their mark on the world of academia, it is apparent that few look to the study of religion or prisoners as the ticket to the fast track. Clearly, the public cares little about the matter, so why should they? Out of sight, out of mind.

This sentiment is clearly true in regards to the issue of long-term solitary confinement. Long-term isolation units are referred to by many titles, such as Security Housing Units (SHU's), control units, "super-max" confinement, or administrative segregation. Some prison systems do not make publicly available data on the numbers of prisoners currently held in long-term solitary confinement (LTSC), but conservative estimates set the extreme low-end figure at above 20,000 inmates (Naday, 2008). High-end figures calculated from analysis of prison construction plans peg the number at well over 100,000 inmates (Kupers, 2001). Whatever the true number, there is general consensus that life in a SHU consists of a near-total evisceration of all social ties. Inmates are allowed no contact with other human beings: they eat, live, shower, and recreate alone. No religious services or programming options are available or permitted, and visits with family members or attorneys are usually held behind glass partitions or by using closed-circuit television monitors; physical contact with loved

ones is thus rendered impossible (Haney, 2003). The world of a prisoner held in LTSC thus consists of a small cell (usually 6X8 feet), and whatever items the prison allows for his use, a list which is usually a far cry from that allowed to inmates held in the general population environment (Arrigo & Bullock, 2007). Some prison systems permit inmates to purchase a small television or radio, though for the purposes of this study, the inmates surveyed had no access to a television at any time. Ultimately, the only physical contact these inmates can ever expect to receive until they are released or executed is when they push their hands out behind them through a small slot in the door for the insertion of handcuffs, which must be worn any time that these prisoners leave their cell areas. Worst of all, despite these systems paying cursory lip-service to the issue of due process, there are generally no means for any of these inmates to be released from this environment into the general population. Sometimes they were placed in these cells for disciplinary violations as minor as owning a book propogating radical philosophies, or because another inmate told an official that they belonged to a gang. Once so confined, these inmates can usually expect to serve out their entire sentence in the SHU.

The psychological effects of these conditions have been studied extensively over the past few decades using case studies, longitudinal surveys, and personal accounts provided by mental health workers. The symptoms produced by these environments are remarkably similar in all studies thus undertaken, and include appetite and sleep disturbances, anxiety, panic, rage, loss of control, paranoia, hallucinations, and self mutilations (Haney, 2003). Direct studies of these prisoners also show that the majority suffer from negative attitudes and affect, insomnia, social withdrawel,

hypersensitivity, ruminations, cognitive disfunction, loss of control, irritability and rage (excessive aggression), hopelessness, depression, a sense of impending emotional breakdown, self-mutilation, and suicidal ideation and behavior (Grassian, 2006). Indeed, a national study of suicides in prison found that a remarkable two out of three occurred with inmates housed in control units (Human Rights Watch, 2003).

Another study showed that the physiological impact on the brain was remarkably similar to that of sufferers from PTSD (Haney, 2003). Indeed, even a few days of solitary confinement will predictably shift the electroencephalogram (EEG) pattern toward an abnormal pattern characteristic of stupor and delirium (Grassian, 2006). Alarming, the author was unable to find a single published study on LTSC in which confinement lasting for longer than ten days failed to result in negative psychological effects.

Beyond the immediate effects of LTSC, it has been noted by many (Haney, 2003; Suto, 2007) that these conditions produce long-term changes in behavior. However these prisoners come to adapt to their environments, these changes tend to be negative and permanent. Haney has termed these changes to be "social pathologies," as they tend to be totally at odds with social norms in general society. To put it simply, LTSC breaks many of these men, and leaves them broken for the rest of their lives. When you consider that many of these men will one day be released into the public, this seems a rather unfortunate gift that the prison systems of the US are bequeathing to the world.

Despite the availability of data on the psychological effects of this new penal ideology, virtually no research has been undertaken on the effects of solitary confinement on the religious impulse. As mentioned previously, some minor research has been undertaken

on the confluence of religion and prisons, but these studies were always conducted in the general population setting. While certainly distinct in important ways from social groups in the "freeworld," the general prison population is still a normal social group, with all of the typical give-and-take associated with sets of human interactors. The central question of this study is to ask: when a human being is removed from this social web, are his religious views and habits affected? If so, in what ways, and to what degree? We hypothesize that religious traditions associated with high levels of dogma and procedure will suffer, while free-floating and nebulous "spirituality" will survive, even flourish. We propose a very simple equation to explain this result, using the premises:

- 1) religion is a meme like any other set of behavioral patterns passed from human to human; and
- 2) in the absence of any support for these memes, humans will ultimately compose an individualistic set of answers to the "big questions" in life, ie, the search for meaning, morality, and contact with the Numinous.

Thus, for the purposes of this experiment, the independent variable (X) will be the placement of an inmate in LTSC, while the dependent variable (Y) will be the effect that X has on the tendency to practice religion.

In an attempt to investigate this phenomenon, the author conducted an 8-month study during the years 2009-2010 at the Polunsky Unit, home to the most active death chamber in the country. This survey employed participant observation and intensive interviews to determine the answers to 53 core questions (these can be seen in full in Appendix A). Global sorting was employed to develop

the interview and survey questions while purposive sampling was used to obtain a cross-section of participating and non-religious respondents. According to an analysis of the survey results, our hypothesis was somewhat confirmed, though the effects of interviewing men in solitary confinement while on Death Row (versus regular inmates in LTSC) cannot be presently determined.

For starters, a brief overview of the religious environment within the general population may be useful for comparative purposes. In his doctoral dissertation, Harry Dammer conducted an extremely in-depth study of the subject of religion in prison. This work is nearly 300 pages of very interesting data, but for the purposes of this study a few points are exceedingly relevant. First, Dammer found that the religions most practiced in a particular prison setting closely match the religious traditions most present geographically in the region where the prison is located (pp. 130-131), and this represents the "importation theory" oft-discussed in sociological literature (Weinberg, 1942). Dammer found that because religion is "so pervasive in our culture, inmates cannot help but import in part some of the religious beliefs of their childhood" (p. 132). He also found that there were basically four reasons that inmates engaged in religious practices while incarcerated, and these included the influence of fellow inmates, the influence of family or friends outside the unit, in-prison seminars, and personal decisions. It should be noted at this point that all of these reasons deal explicitly with the involvement of other people. Dammer noted that amongst the prisoners' responses, the primary root reason for religious involvement dealt with attempts to banish a sense of solitude and despair (p. 135). All were looking for some source of hope for the future (p. 148), and this point will become central to this discussion shortly.

Whether or not a person truly believes the claims of their religion is not of central importance to the survivability of the belief system. For instance, a person may or may not believe that a child was born roughly 2000 years ago through human parthenogenesis, or that Muhammed flew on a winged horse from Medina to Mecca, or that when the Buddha was born two great jets of water began to pour from the sky, but if they act as if they believe these things, the belief can be copied by a new generation. Ultimately, no one currently alive personally witnessed the incredible events that religions claim to have ~~happened~~^{taken place}, so none of these occurrences have any basis in primary-source-dependent history and thus believers must learn of ~~these~~ events from other humans. Religion, then, is just like any other cultural information transmitted from one person to the next. The biologist Richard Dawkins coined the term "meme" to describe these packets of information, and posited that they copy via a process of differential replication, much like a gene does. (For a simple taxonomy of these memes, see Appendix B.) Memes compete against each other for fitness, with the meme most apt to replicate surviving. Language, slang idioms, even how boats are built are examples of memes (Dennett, 2006). Darwin himself noted this in respect to words, when he said: "The survival or preservation of certain favoured words in the struggle for existence is natural selection" (Darwin, 1871). As these concepts propagate amongst human hosts, the successful ones eventually go to fixation, becoming endemic.

All religions recommend and require some form of group interaction, such as attendance at the local church/synagogue/mosque/ashram/sangha. The reasons for this are complex, but can be boiled down to the fact that it is in these locations that believers can come into contact with priests (meme-shepherds), who can enstall and solidify

"proper" religious behavior. "Bad" or improper behavior can be shamed, and co-religionists can be further enmeshed in the social web, installing defensive walls against external competing memes. Religious authorities of all stripes seem to understand this, even claiming that it is "vital to seek fellowship with other Believers, so that the Holy Spirit can come upon you" (Wartick, 1951).

We hypothesize that when a human being is removed from the socio-cultural context, the meme transmission process breaks down. Beliefs which must be "taken on faith" may be preserved by the strong-willed, though it is far more likely that they will decay to the point of collapse. Without the presence of priests or co-religionists, a man is left with only that which is understandable to him. Few dogmatic religions are like to survive such a treatment, if any.

The data tends to back this up. The first question of the survey attempts to peg the participant's past religious behavior (ie, their beliefs prior to being placed in LTSC), while the second gauges their present affiliation, if any. The results are striking: most major denominations suffered an exodus of believers, with some going entirely extinct. The less dogmatically oriented religions tended to hold steady or swell, with the "Unaffiliated's" growing at the fastest rate. When a religion was "born", this resulted from the presence of a singularly dedicated religious group to proselytize^{ing} to these inmates via correspondence; the primary example of this deals with the "Quakers," who have a long history of ministering to inmates on Death Row. The two largest pre-incarceration groups - the Baptists and the Catholics - suffered the worst under these conditions. Based on the personal interviews undertaken, it would appear that the loss of community

was the central reason for this exodus. The Catholic religion is steeped in tradition and form; once deprived of their catechism classes and their masses, it would appear that the faith grows difficult to maintain. For the Baptists and other evangelicals, the loss of the specific personalization of faith found in these churches seems to be the predominant factor in loss or change of faith. As subject #47 explained, "it just dont feel the same back here."

In the real world, even if a person starts to lose their faith in a religion (orthodoxy, as in "right belief"), they can still propogate the religious meme by right behavior (orthopraxy). This, however, is difficult if not impossible under the environmental conditions present in a control unit; quite simply, without any measure of social contact, there can be no behavioral copying, not for a system as complicated as a religion. The survey shows a general numbing of the religious impulse, with an increasing number of respondents claiming to be merely "spritual," or with new religions popping up in shallow form. For instance, a number of participants claimed to be "orthodox christians," but could not adequately describe a single doctrinal position of that sect. Likewise, several prisoners claimed to be "pagan" or "Wiccan," but literally had no idea what these belief systems claimed about the metaphysical nature of the universe. Needing to believe something, yet prevented from doing so, these inmates clung to whatever religious flotsam they could grab hold of.

Curiously, this is somewhat similar to the two-generation proces of secularization which ocured in many European nations after the second World War. The first postwar generation still "believed" in god, but simply had better things to do on a Sunday morning (Rees, 17). Their children, however, had no real knowledge

about the claims of religion, ultimately abandoning the concept in huge numbers. Ritual behavior is often time and resource consuming. Such acts tell other people that our beliefs are sincere, such as spending valuable time in church, or in giving hard-earned money to a religious charity (or, to a significantly greater degree, scourging one's skin with a whip for the cost of sin). Such behavior is known as "costly signaling" (Rees, 40). Sans this signaling, there were few behaviors to mimic for this second generation, and they thus went their own way, with the atheism meme ultimately going to fixation.

In the Polunsky Unit, this same process appears to be taking place. No concept of a loving and benevolent creator can withstand this brutal environment. The psychological tendency for these inmates to withdraw progressively into themselves and lose all hope combines with the loss of meme transmission to create an environment which is extremely infertile ground to any belief system which does not provide instant gratification.

The one exception to this trend appears to cover religions which are entirely internal and experiential, such as Buddhism. The core doctrines of Buddhism do not require any notion of faith; indeed, within the Dhammapada the notion of believing in something which has not been personally witnessed is clearly taught against (Buddharakkhita, 2003). Still, this practice does require extreme amounts of self-control and mental discipline, which, according to the literature, is in rather short supply in these control units, and the presence of Buddhist practitioners was not found to be commonplace.

In his Contemporary Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots, sociologist George Ritzer spends a number of pages on Talcott Parsons's AGIL scheme. Parsons believed that in order

for a system to survive, it must meet a set of four imperatives, or conditions (p. 68). The first, "adaptation," deals with how well a system fits into its environment; if a system remained at odds for long with its context, it would ultimately collapse (p. 68). In the oubliette of the LTSC cell, few inmates can hold to a belief in the goodness or fairness of anyone, including other human beings that profess to follow these beliefs. Most religions - especially religions based on "revealed" (hearsay) wisdom - fail under these circumstances.

The second of Parsons's imperatives is that of "goal attainment," wherein a system must define its goals and expand into new territories (p. 69). In many cases, religion also fails this imperative, as it is incapable of "saving" or bringing peace to many of its practitioners, and cannot disseminate into new converts. As noted, only religions dealing entirely with experiential wisdom and a self-centric focus are likely to survive intact in these environments.

The third condition in the AGIL scheme is "integration" (p. 69). Integration deals mostly with making certain the various subsystems within the larger structure of a system work together. In the religious context, this work has mostly been accomplished hundreds (if not thousands) of years in the past, with the rough edges or other troubling theological speed bumps ironed out. Modern society has also sandblasted many religious traditions down to the point that what is left is merely a brand, something easily sold and consumed by busy people. Thus, integration is perhaps the one imperative in Parsons's scheme that survives the administrative segregation landfill.

Finally, Parsons believed that "latency," or pattern maintenance, "refers to the need for a system to furnish, maintain, and renew

the motivation of individuals" (p. 70). If the coping mechanisms of religion are ineffective in the solitary confinement environment, it is unlikely that the motivation levels of its practitioners are going to be high. Quite simply, in this world, norms and values that produce no positive change in conditions are destined to rot and fall away. Given these facts, it is clear that most religious memes fail the AGIL test, and this might be one way to explain the process of fraying religious beliefs found on the Polunsky Unit.

It has been clear to many observers that the use of LTSC may very well be one of the greatest human rights violations currently occurring in the United States. The psychological damage suffered by these prisoners is severe and long-term, a fact which cannot be diluted by the sophistry of conservative politicians. What has never been touched on thus far in the literature is the increased psychological trauma suffered by these inmates when placed in an environment which is ultimately toxic to their once-cherished beliefs. Considering the spread of this new penal tactic, activists have noted that the states most aggressively employing its use are located in the southern portions of the United States. These states also tend to be amongst the most pious in the nation, and activists might consider informing these citizens that the penal ideologies currently chosen by their elected leaders are highly detrimental to the belief in their god.

Virtually all aspects of this subject have yet to be investigated. A longitudinal study on the "survivability rate" of various religions in this environment might prove to be very interesting, and ultimately useful by proponents of penal reform. This sort of research could easily get at the heart of what sort of natural phenomenon religions

really are. Is religion a cultural symbiont? A memetic parasite, successful not for the effect it has on its hosts, but rather due to its talent for replication? What are the long-term psychological effects of the men thus imprisoned? If released, are they ever able to "find god" again? The potential avenues for research are endless.

What is clear, however, is that this research must be done, and done correctly. In an age where 21st century weaponry can be co-opted by religious zealots still locked into the 14th, no aspect of the religious phenomenon should go unresearched. The days are long since dead when these systems of belief were ruled victors by fiat, and it is past time that we put them under the same microscope lenses that religion once attempted to prevent from being built.

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A SIMPLE TAXONOMY OF THE NEW REPLICATORS
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