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Religiosity Among Incarcerated Women: A Study Based on Research Conducted Among Women Incarcerated in the External Ward in Lubliniec

ABSTRACT

This article presents and analyzes findings from panel research conducted in April 2023 among a group of 77 women serving prison sentences in the External Ward in Lubliniec, part of the Herby Prison. These results are compared with an earlier study conducted in June 2012 on the same group of women at the then Lubliniec Prison. The aim of the study was to examine changes in the religiosity of incarcerated women, in terms of their knowledge of religious doctrines, emotional connection to religion, frequency of religious practices, the relationship between moral life and religion, and their sense of connection to the Church.

The findings suggest that the inmates generally demonstrate an average level of religiosity, with most reporting a moderate self-assessment in areas such as emotional connection to religion, religious practices, the link between moral life and religion, and their relationship

KEYWORDS

religiosity, prisoners, women, prison, panel research

SPI Vol. 27, 2024/3
e-ISSN 2450-5366

DOI: 10.12775/SPI.2024.3.006en

Submitted: 18.06.2024

Accepted: 18.07.2024

with the Church. However, a noticeable shift toward more extreme positions was also observed, with an increase in self-reported levels at both the very strong, strong, weak, and very weak ends of the spectrum. These results may point to a possible “de-churchification of religiosity,” which is likely tied to significant social changes taking place in Poland.

Introduction

The issue of religiosity is deeply significant, as it constitutes one of the components of human identity (Grabowska 2023: 85–86). Social, economic, and cultural changes taking place in Poland are influencing the religiosity of Poles. Sociologists identify two key processes affecting religiosity within society: secularization and desecularization (Kućko 2019: 212). According to Janusz Mariański, these social changes are leading to “not only the weakening of traditional religions and Churches but also the development of new forms of spirituality, which can take various shapes” (Mariański 2016: 3). Defining religiosity depends on the perspective adopted. From a theological standpoint, religiosity is understood as a moral virtue associated with both internal and external worship. In sociological and psychological perspectives, however, it refers to the attitude toward the laws and traditions of a specific religion that are accepted, adopted, and put into practice (<https://encyklopedia.pwn.pl/haslo/religijnosc>). As Mariański observes: “a sociologist is not concerned with religiosity in general but with that which shows links to social life; which is entangled in a specific socio-cultural context” (Mariański 2016: 3). From a psychological perspective, Dariusz Krok notes that religiosity involves “internal psychological processes related to the experience of a specific relation to God treated as a reality existing outside the visible world” (Krok 2009: 127).

Questions surrounding the absolute, transcendence, eschatology, and the meaning of existence have preoccupied humankind since the dawn of time. As a result, the subject of religiosity has long been of interest to representatives of major psychological schools of thought. For Sigmund Freud, religiosity is closely linked to the figure of the father, whose idealized image is projected onto the concept of God (Wulff 1999: 245). Freud viewed human thinking about God as purely postulative and filled with illusions. He argued that religion

poses a threat to human development because it hinders personality growth and infantilizes individuals (Tokarski 2006: 154). To Freud, the very concept of God is a postulative illusion. Nevertheless, Freud acknowledged certain beneficial aspects of religiosity, such as its role in reducing anxiety, shaping moral and social order, and enhancing a sense of security (Jaworski 1989: 35). According to Jerzy Strojnowski, the Freudian approach can contribute to purifying religiosity by eliminating elements that distort or disrupt it, such as idolatry or the self-serving motives of individuals and societies (Strojnowski 1983: 80–101).

Carl Gustav Jung held a perspective on religiosity that differed significantly from Freud's. Jung believed that religion could become a source of strength and self-confidence for individuals (Wulff 1999: 372). In his view, religion represents the pinnacle of cultural development (Jaworski 1989: 36). He approached religion pragmatically, pointing to its therapeutic dimension and its supportive function in addressing existential concerns such as finding meaning in life or preparing for death. For Jung, humanity and the human soul possess an ingrained religious function (Tokarski 2006: 154). He even stated, "the soul is *naturaliter religiosa*" (Jung 1970: 224). Erich Fromm identified two potential forms of experiencing religiosity: authoritative and humanistic. Authoritative religiosity involves submission and worship, where an individual blindly surrenders to a higher force, relinquishing love and independent thought. In contrast, humanistic religiosity centers on the individual and allows for self-discovery and self-development (Tokarski 2006: 155). Fromm's approach to religiosity also stressed its therapeutic dimension (Jaworski 1989: 38). He argued that every human being has an intrinsic religious need, although this need does not necessarily involve belief in or worship of God or an absolute being. Instead, it may manifest as reverence directed toward other people, ideas, or causes (Fromm 1966: 137).

Viktor Frankl, the founder of logotherapy, emphasized the therapeutic dimension of religiosity but did not confine it solely to this realm. He argued that religion has a positive impact on personality integration and helps individuals discover the meaning of existence (Tokarski 2006: 155). According to Frankl, every human being harbors an unconscious religiosity (Makselon 1998: 48). He maintained that humans are religious beings and that excluding transcendence

in discussions about humanity is inherently flawed and doomed to failure (García-Alandete 2024). William James, in contrast, posited that religiosity is not rooted in a psychic basis but is instead a continuation of psychic phenomena (Tokarski 2006: 155). He believed that faith and its expressions grow out of feelings (Wulff 1999: 372). James approached religion pragmatically, with a focus on its benefits to humanity, such as liberation from the structures of evil. He paid attention to religious experiences, treating them objectively as connections to a transcendent realm beyond the self, rather than as subjective inner states or products of the self (Hintz 2010: 335–336).

Gordon Allport differentiated between two types of religiosity: extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic religiosity is instrumental and aimed solely at achieving social or personal benefits (Jaume, Simkin, Etchezahar 2013: 72). It is not deeply connected to the individual's inner life and is often characteristic of immature individuals with low emotional security. This form of religiosity is a defense mechanism against emerging problems and is used to fulfill personal goals, which leads to a selective and inconsistent attitude toward religious truths (Donahue 1985: 418–423). In contrast, intrinsic religiosity is closely tied to a person's motivation and has a direct impact on their life, becoming an end in itself (Jaume, Simkin, Etchezahar 2013: 72). This mature form of religiosity helps one to understand the world and becomes a guiding principle in life. It emphasizes values such as fraternity, kindness, and love, as well as the need to build and participate in a community (Kasik 1998: 172).

Religiosity is closely linked to the concept of the sacrum, which in Christian terms refers to God. Romuald Jaworski suggests that the concept of God, shaped in individuals through socialization and reconstructed via empirical cognition, is reflected in their attitudes and beliefs (Jaworski 1989: 58). He identifies two types of religiosity that fulfill a person's relationship with the sacrum: personal and apersonal (Jaworski 1989: 50). Personal religiosity is characterized by an individual's active engagement, and becomes the guiding principle of their actions and attitudes. Individuals with personal religiosity demonstrate the ability to express it outwardly and are more adept at assimilating religious truths. They tend to exhibit higher levels of religious tolerance and openness to new ideas. This form of religiosity is deeply integrated into an individual's value system, with

norms and customs associated with religion internalized consciously and voluntarily. Such individuals strive to embody these values in their lives, which often correlates with reduced anxiety and increased self-esteem. Personal religiosity also helps to integrate a person's value system, offering a framework for a purpose-driven and meaningful life. In this perspective, theocentrism (a focus on God) fosters allocentrism (a focus on others), as God becomes the ultimate point of reference for actions and attitudes, promoting altruism. Stability in personal religiosity extends to a person's worldview, emotional and motivational spheres, and their approach to existential or traumatic challenges. The relationship with God is personal, where God is perceived as a distinct entity, serving as the recipient of religious attitudes and behaviors (Jaworski 1989: 50–58).

Apersonal religiosity, by contrast, is marked by a lack of initiative in religious fulfillment and limited motivation to align alleged religiosity with one's attitudes. It is reproductive and lacks authenticity. Individuals with apersonal religiosity often display rigidity in their thinking and worldview, as well as prejudice and fanaticism in religious matters. Religion is not internalized into their value system or attitudes, and their religious practices tend to be superficial and driven by external pressures, such as social expectations. These individuals may experience higher levels of anxiety related to the religious sphere and perceive, and their religiosity is often influenced by external factors rather than internal convictions. Apersonal religiosity is associated with feelings of existential emptiness and a lack of purpose or meaning in life. God is anthropomorphized through projection mechanisms, and religiosity becomes a means to achieving personal goals rather than an end in itself. This form of religiosity is unstable and prone to crises, reinforcing egoistic attitudes. For individuals with apersonal religiosity, God is not a relational being but a tool for satisfying specific needs or attaining certain values (Jaworski 1989: 50–58).

Religiosity occupies an important place in the lives of people deprived of their liberty. Bernhard Grom emphasizes the importance of faith and religion in enduring difficult experiences (Grom 2009: 107–109). It can become a coping strategy, particularly in situations like imprisonment and penitentiary isolation. According to Janusz Mastalski, religion positively influences the process of social

rehabilitation, as it provides individuals with a new perspective and imbues their lives with meaning. As Mastalski observes, religious beliefs and practices can help individuals uncover their inherent goodness, rebuild self-respect, forgive themselves and others, find motivation to change, define life's purpose and priorities, and enhance overall quality of life (Mastalski 2021: 146).

This view is echoed by Jan Dezyderiusz Pol, who emphasizes the goal of "religious rehabilitation," that offers prisoners an opportunity for transformation rooted in their spiritual sphere. Religiosity, in this context, is particularly important as it enables prisoners to release feelings of guilt and assume responsibility for themselves and their future actions (Pol 2013). Between 2000 and 2013, a number of studies in the United States examined the influence of religion on the lives of prisoners, both during incarceration and after release. These studies revealed that religious prisoners were less likely to commit disciplinary infractions and serious crimes compared to their non-religious counterparts. Moreover, religiosity was shown to have a positive effect on reducing violence in prison populations (Meade 2023: 2).

Research methodology

The research sought to examine what changes have taken place in the religiosity of incarcerated women in terms of knowledge of religious truths, emotional connection to religion, level of religious practice, the relationship between moral life and religion, and connection with the Church. The panel research¹ method enabled an examination of the dynamics of these changes over time. This approach not only allowed for the depiction of internal dynamics within the group but also provided insight into some of the mechanisms that determine these changes. Although the study revisited the same prison, it involved a different group of female respondents than those surveyed eleven years earlier. Therefore, the researchers were able to assess the relative dynamics of religiosity among women in incarceration, each

1 A panel study entails measuring the same characteristic in a group of individuals at least twice over a given interval. For a more detailed discussion of the panel method, refer to the articles included in Hajduk (1993) write more extensively about the panel method. See also Lewowicki (1987; 2002).

with unique social experiences and often different life circumstances. The theoretical framework suggests that incarceration can both strengthen and activate religiosity. Therefore, the changes observed in religious attitudes among incarcerated women may reflect broader societal trends, even in the context of deprivation of liberty.

The study utilized Jaworski's Religiosity Evaluation Scale (Skala Oceny Religijności, SOR), a questionnaire designed to assess religiosity in group settings. This tool addresses questions related to five dimensions of religiosity, distinguishing between personal and apersonal religiosity. The questionnaire comprises five questions: the first three assess religious attitudes in cognitive (knowledge of religious truths), emotional (emotional connection to religion), and behavioral (level of religious practice) dimensions. The fourth question examines the link between moral life and faith, while the fifth evaluates the respondent's relationship with the Church as their religious reference group (Jaworski 1989: 109).

The initial research using the SOR was carried out in June 2012 with 77 women serving sentences in the (then) Lubliniec Prison.² A follow-up panel study, involving an equivalent number of respondents, was conducted in April 2023 in the same facility, which had since undergone administrative changes and became the External Ward in Lubliniec of the Herby Penitentiary Institution.

Religiosity of the convicted women

In the surveys, the majority of female respondents rated their knowledge of religious truths as good, though there was a slight decline in these declarations between 2012 (58.4%) and 2023 (54.5%). Meanwhile, the percentage of women assessing their knowledge of religious truths as very good increased from 11.7% to 13%, and the

2 The results obtained in 2012 concerning religiosity, along with additional findings not included in this study regarding the image of God and values, were utilized in Paweł Czajka's Master's thesis entitled *Religijność i świat wartości osadzonych kobiet. Na podstawie badań w Zakładzie Karnym w Lublińcu* [Religiosity and the World of Values of Female Prisoners: Based on Research Conducted in the Penitentiary Institution in Lubliniec]. The thesis was prepared in the Department of Psychology of Religion at the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow under the academic supervision of Fr. Prof. dr hab. Józef Makselon.

percentage rating their knowledge as poor rose from 23.4% to 29.9%. The number of respondents who reported having no knowledge of religious truths decreased from 5.2% to 2.6%. In the re-surveys, all respondents provided answers.

Table 1. Self-assessment of knowledge of religious truths

Categories	Research 2012		Research 2023	
	N (77)	%	N (77)	%
Very good	9	11,7	10	13
Good	45	58,4	42	54,5
Weak	18	23,4	23	29,9
None	4	5,2	2	2,6
No response	1	1,3	0	0

Source: author's own study.

In terms of emotional connection to religion, a medium level of self-assessment dominated among the female convicts in both surveys, although there was a decline from 51.9% in 2012 to 38.9% in 2023. However, the re-surveys showed an increase in the number of respondents describing their emotional connection to religion as very strong (from 7.8% to 14.3%) very weak (from 3.9% to 5.2%), or nonexistent (from 6.5% to 13%). Conversely, there was a slight decrease in the number of respondents indicating a weak emotional connection, which dropped from 13% to 11.7%.

Table 2. Self-assessment of an emotional connection to religion

Categories	Research 2012		Research 2023	
	N (77)	%	N (77)	%
Very strong	6	7,8	11	14,3
Strong	13	16,9	13	16,9
Medium	40	51,9	30	38,9
Weak	10	13	9	11,7
Very weak	3	3,9	4	5,2
None	5	6,5	10	13

Source: author's own study.

In terms of the self-assessment of religious practice, the majority of respondents declared a medium level in both surveys, though this figure decreased significantly from 58.4% in 2012 to 40.3% in 2023. Notable changes were observed in other categories. The number of respondents declaring a very strong level of religious practice rose sharply from 1.3% to 10.4%, while those assessing their practice as strong increased from 9.1% to 13%. Similarly, there were increases in the weak (from 11.7% to 15.5%) and very weak (from 6.5% to 10.4%) categories. The proportion of non-practitioners fell from 13% in 2012 to 10.4% in 2023.

Table 3. Self-assessment of level of religious practice

Categories	Research 2012		Research 2023	
	N (77)	%	N (77)	%
Very strong	1	1,3	8	10,4
Strong	7	9,1	10	13
Medium	45	58,4	31	40,3
Weak	9	11,7	12	15,5
Very weak	5	6,5	8	10,4
None	10	13	8	10,4

Source: author's own study.

Most people declared a medium level of self-assessment regarding the connection between moral life and religion, although this decreased from 57.1% in 2012 to 43% in 2023. Consequently, there was an increase in the number of respondents rating this connection as very strong (from 3.9% to 13%), strong (from 13% to 20.7%), and weak (from 10.4% to 12%). The proportion of prisoners indicating no link between moral life and religion decreased from 10.4% to 6.5%. In 2023, all respondents provided answers to this question.

Table 4. Self-assessment of the connection between moral life and religion

Categories	Research 2012		Research 2023	
	N (77)	%	N (77)	%
Very strong	3	3,9	10	13
Strong	10	13	16	20,7
Medium	44	57,1	33	43
Weak	8	10,4	12	15,5
Very weak	2	2,6	1	1,3
No relation	8	10,4	5	6,5
No response	2	2,6	0	0

Source: author's own study.

Among women assessing their level of connection to the Church, the majority indicated a medium level. However, there was a notable decline in this category, from 41.5% in 2012 to 27.3% in 2023. The survey results also show increases in self-assessments at the weak level (from 19.5% to 31.1%), very strong level (from 5.2% to 6.5%), strong level (from 13% to 14.3%), and among those who reported no relationship to the Church (from 9.1% to 13%). Additionally, the number of respondents refusing to answer this question rose from 5.2% to 6.5%. The data indicate clear trends toward a decline in the sense of connection to the Church.

Table 5. Self-assessment of feeling connected to the Church

Categories	Research 2012		Research 2023	
	N (77)	%	N (77)	%
Very strong	4	5,2	5	6,5
Strong	10	13	11	14,3
Medium	32	41,5	21	27,3
Weak	15	19,5	24	31,1
Very weak	5	6,5	1	1,3
No relation	7	9,1	10	13
No response	4	5,2	5	6,5

Source: author's own study.

Summary

The analysis of the research findings reveals notable changes in the religiosity of incarcerated women over the eleven-year period. Although the average level of religiosity continues to dominate—most frequently reflected in self-assessments of emotional connection to religion, level of religious practices, connection between moral life and religion, and feeling a connection to the Church—a shift towards more polarized attitudes is apparent. This is evidenced by an increase in declarations of self-assessments at both the very strong, strong, weak, and very weak levels. The research captures the women's current self-assessment of religiosity during their time in prison, making it difficult to determine whether incarceration itself positively influenced their religiosity, or if religiosity became a coping mechanism for dealing with penitentiary isolation. Assessing this causal relationship could form the basis for future, separate studies.

The findings suggest that incarceration strengthens and activates religiosity in individuals but simultaneously weakens its institutional aspects. Similar observations were made by Barbara Grabowska in her study among students from Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia: “we observe the individualization of religiosity manifested in a move away from religious affiliation, and the phenomenon of ‘faithless affiliation.’ Students often declare a belief in God while not always stating their religion and, at the same time, emphasizing the importance of religion in their lives” (Grabowska 2023: 94–95). The results indicate a potential “de-churchification of religiosity,” which is likely linked to the significant social changes taking place in Poland, as noted by Mariański (2015: 37). He points out, however, that such a phenomenon should not be assessed without considering “the processes of deepening religiosity and greater religious authenticity among those who remain religious, as well as the emergence of various forms of new spirituality and religiosity in Polish society, some of which may compete with traditional religiosity” (Mariański 2015: 42–43).

Current trends in Polish society show both a decline in religiosity and its intensification within smaller groups, characterized, however, by higher levels of religious commitment and adherence to a system of practices, beliefs, and values that is consistent with their practiced

religion (Kućko 2019: 211). This dynamic may also extend to the prison population, though further in-depth research is needed to confirm this hypothesis.

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