

Islam in Prison. Finding Faith, Freedom and Fraternity

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For decades, prisons have been viewed as breeding grounds for extremism. Despite increased attention to religion in prisons over the past 30 years, most research has focused on the radicalisation of inmates and the corrosive impact of extreme Islamism. *Islam in Prison: Finding Faith, Freedom, and Fraternity* offers a refreshing departure from this narrative. Skilfully written and thoroughly researched, it deftly challenges the cliché that prisons are hotbeds for extremism by presenting a balanced and accurate portrayal of Islam within prison. This book provides a compelling account of how Muslim prisoners' worldviews are typically characterised by mainstream Islam and that Islam in prison can foster positive attitudes towards rehabilitation. Based on the largest international study of Islam in prison conducted between 2018 and 2021, this book offers a 'one stop shop' of the topic. Grounded in extensive research undertaken by the Understanding Conversion to Islam in Prison (UCIP) programme, the authors employ a robust methodology, weaving together perspectives from a diverse range of individuals in the prison system. Though the comparative analysis leans heavily on English and Swiss

prisons over French ones, the overall sample remains comprehensive.

Starting with gripping case studies of three prisoners, the book sets the stage for chapters that lead onto core research questions. Vibrant illustrations enrich the text, particularly benefiting visual learners. Chapter 1 provides essential background information on Islam and a broad socio-demographic portrait of their characteristic sample of 279 Muslim prisoners. It offers an excellent overview of Islam, breaking down complex terminology and contextualising it within current events. The chapter introduces the concept of Islamist extremism, exploring the 'them vs. us' mentality and addressing the over-representation of Muslims in prison populations.

Chapter 2 marks the transition to the data-driven portion of the book, providing a detailed exploration of what Islam looks like within the prison context. The authors skilfully integrate quotes from their research participants, adding a personal touch that brings the data to life. The use of informative textboxes is another strength of this chapter, offering readers concise and relevant information that complements the main text.

Chapter 3 explains why prisoners choose Islam, starting with a clear explanation of the conversion process. The authors categorise Muslim prisoners into five types, providing clarity on their varied motivations. They compare the experiences of male and female Muslim prisoners and contrast the cynical views from prison officers with prisoners' genuine accounts of spiritual awakening. The chapter acknowledges the study's limitations (p103) and consistently

supports explanations with robust data (p105).

Chapters 4 to 6 address the third research question: what types of Islam(-ism) are followed in prison? The authors introduce their tripartite model of Islamic worldviews, categorising it into mainstream, Islamism, and Islamist extremism. This model is clearly presented, setting the stage for more in-depth exploration in the subsequent chapters. The authors explain their data collection methods clearly (p111), using the appendix to detail exactly how UCIP ascertained the worldviews of Muslim prisoners. In my opinion, while this chapter challenges mainstream views of extremists in prison, it overlooks the concept of disguised compliance.¹

Chapter 5 offers a refreshing perspective on mainstream Islam in prison, highlighting how it provides structure, community, and spiritual support to inmates. Despite occasional font issues, the chapter stands out for its positive portrayal and use of quotes to bring prisoners' experiences to the forefront. Chapter 6 tackles Islamism and Islamist extremism in prison, offering a balanced perspective that helps readers grasp different perspectives of the issue. On page 143, the authors address what I believe to be the main limitation of their study: the possibility that some prisoners who might identify as Islamist or extremist chose not to participate in the research. The study found only one prisoner classified as a violent Islamist extremist, but I wonder if the results were skewed because others in this classification declined to participate. Despite this, the authors incorporate additional data and insights to support their findings. They consider the reasons some prisoners gave for not

1. See Acheson, I. and Paul, A. (2021). Hiding in plain sight? Disguised compliance by terrorist offenders. European Policy Centre. Discussion Paper 09. [Online] Available at: https://www.epc.eu/content/PDF/2021/Disguised_compliance_by_terrorist_offenders.pdf (Accessed: 10/11/2021).

engaging in the research and include ethnographic observations of prison events. Moreover, the chapter hints at the crime-terror nexus in prison (pages 145-148), providing insights into the broader implications of Islamist extremism within the prison estate.

Chapter 7 uses detailed case studies drawn from the data to explore the risks and opportunities of choosing to follow Islam in prison. This approach effectively keeps the reader engaged and provides varied, interesting, and detailed examples. The chapter cleverly ties together previous discussions on the different types of Muslim prisoners and Islamic worldviews. The case studies illustrate various experiences and outcomes, including one instance of radicalization (p164). The chapter compares the experiences of Muslim prisoners in the UK, Switzerland, and France, though it relies more heavily on English data. It also highlights the fear some prisoners have of openly practicing Islam (p176-177).

Chapter 8 is the first of two chapters addressing the fifth research question, focusing on the role of Muslim prison chaplaincy. It is clear that this theme, hinted at in previous chapters, emerged strongly during data collection. The chapter provides guiding principles for best chaplaincy practices to support the rehabilitation of Muslim prisoners, including interfaith experiences and services. It offers a fascinating comparison of Muslim chaplaincy across different countries, including the provision of dedicated spaces / mosques. Notably, it discusses the tendency of Muslim chaplains to avoid contemporary issues and reiterates that prisoners with Islamist extremist views represent a small proportion of the total Muslim prison population.

Chapter 9 explains the balance needed between a naïve and suspicious response in managing Muslim prisoners. It highlights the crucial issue of insufficient training for staff, noting that some were surprised by the finding that most prisoners hold mainstream Islamic views. This underscores the importance of training so prison officers can differentiate between common Muslim practices and Islamist extremism. The chapter offers practical principles for engagement, mindful of the authors' outsider status and the challenging role of prison officers. These principles are clear and jargon-free, making them highly useful for prison staff to implement. In my view, this chapter, and indeed the entire book, would be highly beneficial for prison officers to read.

Chapter 10 provides a comprehensive conclusion, beginning with an outline of each preceding chapter. The authors adeptly weave their arguments together, presenting the concepts of 'The Virtuous Cycle of Rehabilitation' (p252) and 'Avoiding the Vicious Cycle of Extremism' (p253). They contend that their data suggests no Muslim prisoner is beyond redemption. With the support of skilled and compassionate prison chaplains, the more prisoners who experience the Cycle of Rehabilitation, the less likely they are to be drawn into the Vicious Cycle of Extremism. They compare the prison systems of different countries and identify 'gaps that need to be plugged' such as improving the chaplaincy provisions for female Muslim prisoners. These gaps will be addressed in their follow-up research programme, PRIMO (Prison-based Interventions for Muslim Offenders), which will focus on four key areas of need identified by the UCIP study.

Overall, I really enjoyed reading this book. It provides a thorough and balanced exploration of Islam in prison. The book is grounded in extensive research and the authors utilise data from a wide range of methods, making the methodology suitable for replication in an even larger study. It effectively challenges the stereotype that prisons are incubators of extremism, presenting a more complex and varied picture. The use of case studies, quotes, and constant comparative analysis across different countries adds depth and richness to the discussion and enhance the reader's understanding of the complexities and nuances of practicing Islam in prisons. It serves as an excellent resource for anyone interested in the intersection of Islam and the prison system.

However, the potential for skewed data due to non-participation in this study remains a concern. While the majority of prisoners in the study appeared to make genuine efforts to reform, the possibility of disguised compliance or non-participation by extremists is an important consideration. Despite the authors alluding to this limitation, I feel it would have added more transparency to the study to know how many Muslim prisoners in the sampled prisons chose not to participate. Nevertheless, I find *Islam in Prison* to be an insightful and comprehensive examination of a very critical issue, offering both theoretical perspectives and practical guidance. It provides valuable, jargon-busting recommendations for chaplaincy and prison management, making it an essential read for those involved in the prison system and interested in the role of Islam within it.