A place of greater safety: An analysis of penal sacred spaces

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The role of religion and chaplaincy in prison is significant in historical and contemporary settings, yet scholarly attention is limited regarding how chaplaincy spaces are experienced physically and relationally, and whether (and how) they are made 'sacred.' This article summarises qualitative research undertaken at HMP Berwyn and HMP Wormwood Scrubs towards completion of a thesis for an MSt in Applied Criminology, Penology, and Management. The article presents the ways in which sacred spaces had physical, imagined, and relational characteristics, and how the wider prison regimes enabled and inhibited access to sacred spaces for people in prison.

Existing literature suggests that interrogating the role of religion in prison life can deepen our understanding of the emotional geography of prison life.[1] Such work indicates that faith provides relief from the pains of imprisonment, albeit not entirely. Even religious spaces do not wholly escape the prison regime and may reinforce disciplinary measures or serve as reminders of what has been lost. This article employs a sensitising theoretical framework drawn from Edward Soja's notion of Third Space and compares how sacred space is made and felt in the two prisons from physical (bricks and mortar), imagined (ideas of a place) and relational (social) perspectives.[2]

A range of sources inform the term 'sacred,' which serves as a proxy term for strong cultural or religious associations of divinity, holiness, or extreme importance. The idea of 'setting apart' (like a religious festival or a holy untouchable object) consistently emerges as central to sacredness, and this became core to the working definition employed in the research. Although 'setting apart' did appear fundamental to sacredness in these prisons, the normalcy or sense of 'outsideness' of faith services surprisingly enhanced perceptions of sacredness, challenging traditional theories that sacredness and normality are worlds apart. What is considered mundane or 'usual' beyond prison walls (silence, food, friendship, etc.) can be exceptional inside, meaning that normalcy itself can feel rare and thus sacred. While 'setting apart' remains crucial here, the unique emotional landscape of prison life, and the role of religion within it, challenges interpretations of sacredness as only possible in holy churches and secret groves.

The title of this article is an ironic play on reductive interpretations of the supposed safety that chaplaincy spaces offer, which is a safety made possible by the constraints of the prison itself. Or as one prisoner put it, 'If prison wasn't this bad, the chapel wouldn't feel so safe'.

Literature review

The confinement of prison life is textured by a deeply layered emotional geography.[3] Individuals experience these institutions with frustration, tension, camaraderie, fear, and occasional solace. Although religion is not the central focus of most key literature, faith is widely acknowledged as reducing certain 'pains of imprisonment' by offering comfort and psychological relief.[4] Contemporary prisons, however, face considerable pressures, including excessive sentencing, changing demographics, staff shortages, gang affiliations, and intensified security measures.[5] These conditions shape every aspect of prison life, including faith-based activities.

At the same time, prison chaplaincy has historically been perceived as a form of 'soft control', intended to pacify tensions and to support institutional goals.[6] This perspective aligns with arguments that religion can

1. Crewe, B. W. (2014). The Emotional Geography of Prison Life. *Theoretical Criminology, 18*(1), 56-74.
2. Soja, E. (1996). *ThirdSpace.* Malden.
3. Crewe, B. (2007). The sociology of imprisonment. In Y. Jewkes (Ed.), *Handbook on prisons* (pp. 123–146). Willan.
4. Sykes, G. (1958). *The society of captives: A study of a maximum security prison.* Princeton University Press.
5. Liebling, A., & Williams, R. (2023). Do prisons cause radicalization? Order, leadership, political charge and violence in two maximum security prisons. *British Journal of Criminology, 67,* 97–114.
6. Beckford, J., & Gilliat, S. (1998). *Religion in prison: "Equal rites" in a multi-faith society.* Cambridge University Press.

foster self-discipline in line with the stated goals of imprisonment.[7] Yet recent scholarship reveals a more complex landscape: while chaplaincy may reinforce control, it can also provide genuine opportunities for personal growth and social connection.[8] In a context where movement and autonomy are heavily curtailed, the presence of sacred objects or rituals can grant a rare sense of ownership or identity.[9] Understanding how sacredness emerges within prisons requires a broader inquiry into space and time. 'Carceral Geography' tells us that prisons are more than physical structures; they are dynamic arenas where social relations, power, and symbolism converge.[10]

Edward Soja's theory of Third Space considers how space is simultaneously physical, imagined, and relational.[11] He rejects binary thinking, such as inside/outside and real/imagined, and argues that space is constantly being negotiated and is rife with contradictions. This flexible approach resonates with prisons, where people living in prison and prison staff inhabit overlapping realities, each shaped by personal histories, institutional mandates, and power imbalances. Some studies show how temporary events, such as Christmas celebrations, can disrupt the typical free/captive binary, creating a festive 'in-between' state that feels closer to a domestic or communal environment.[12] From this perspective, even highly regulated spaces remain open to moments of spontaneity or reinvention. Or, rather, there are moments when a prison can foster countercultural spaces and practices that create nodes of 'anti-prison' activity.[13]

Third Space is not an exhaustive framework; rather, it is a 'sensitising' tool that accommodates new insights as they arise from fieldwork or conversation.[14] Its emphasis on the inseparability of space and time is especially relevant in prisons, where the regulation of time dictates the flow of daily life. Time itself becomes part of how space is perceived and used, generating conditions in which faith can assume heightened significance. Moments or places marked as sacred may therefore allow brief moments of escape from prison life. Situating religion within this reframes religious spaces in prison as neither wholly controlled nor entirely emancipatory. Such ambivalence underscores the dual role of chaplaincy: it functions both 'within' and 'against' prisons.

The 'sacred'

The sacred has historically helped communities to draw boundaries around important spaces, objects, and practices. Such boundaries are not uniform, however, because religious and cultural traditions differ. Therefore, this work adopts a cross-cutting definition, bridging the theories offered by Émile Durkheim (where sacredness is characterised by both 'setting apart' and its societal function),[15] and Mircea Eliade (for whom the sacred holds a genuine transcendent quality),[16] rather than trying to compile an exhaustive list of different theories.

> ...faith provides relief from the pains of imprisonment, albeit not entirely.

Constraints in prison, such as resource limitations, shared spaces, regimented timetables, affect the ways religious and spiritual activities are delivered and experienced. In such conditions, the boundaries between different faith groups can become more sharply defined, and a pluralistic approach to chaplaincy often leads to 'multi faith' rooms that accommodate various rituals. A 'multi-faith' strategy can grant minority faith communities separate spaces (sometimes called prayer rooms or mosques within prison walls), underscoring the deep entanglement of religion and institutional politics. Meanwhile, researchers note that religious gatherings can become moments of creativity or even resistance, where contraband is exchanged, or prisoners covertly challenge power dynamics.[17]

7. Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison.* Vintage Books.
8. See footnote 7: Beckford & Gilliat (1998).
9. Beckford, J. (2001). Doing time: Space, time, religious diversity and the sacred in prisons. *International Review of Sociology, 11*(3), 371–382.
10. Moran, D., Turner, J., & Schliehe, A. K. (2017). Conceptualizing the carceral in carceral geography. *Progress in Human Geography, 42*(5), 666–686.
11. See footnote 2: Soja (1996).
12. Munn, M., & Sanjenko, B. (2022). Captive Christmas: Unwrapping the third space. *Howard Journal of Crime and Justice, 61*(3), 329–346.
13. Gilligan, J., & Lee, B. (2004). Beyond the prison paradigm: From provoking violence to preventing it by creating "anti-prisons". *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences,* 1036, 300–324.
14. Chatterton, P. (2010). Seeking the urban common: Furthering the debate on spatial justice. City, 14(6), 625–628.
15. Durkheim, E. (1912). *The elementary forms of religious life.* The Free Press; William, L., & Vogt, E. (1979).
16. Eliade, M. (1957). *The sacred and the profane: The nature of religion* (W. R. Trask, Trans.). Harcourt, Brace, and World. (Original work published 1956).
17. Gilliat-Ray, S. (2005). From 'chapel' to 'prayer room': The production, use, and politics of sacred space in public institutions. *Culture and Religion, 6*(2), 287-308.

Such complexity underscores the concept of emotional geography, as these chaplaincy areas or prayer rooms represent pockets of comfort, spiritual solace, or social connection within a broader punitive environment. They are 'set apart' in a literal, architectural sense, but also psychologically, as participants may temporarily feel less bound by the harsh routines of prison life. At the same time, the 'mundane' aspects of everyday life in prison (such as sharing a coffee or engaging in a heartfelt conversation), can feel extraordinary in a setting that severely restricts personal agency.

This section arrives at a working definition of sacred spaces as those set apart from their surroundings and which have a spiritual or otherwise impactful quality. Within the prison environment, this set-apartness interacts with the realities of confinement, reshaping how people in prison perceive and create meaning. Traditional ideas of the sacred may be supplemented, or even upended, by the unexpected significance that prisoners place on routine and personal connection. Overall, this discussion highlights how classical theories of the sacred must be reconsidered when applied to contemporary prisons.

'Carceral Geography' tells us that prisons are more than physical structures; they are dynamic arenas where social relations, power, and symbolism converge.

Method

This study adopted a comparative approach by examining two prisons (HMP Berwyn and HMP Wormwood Scrubs). Although not rigorously comparative, including both institutions enabled a broader scope for identifying shared or divergent themes rather than evaluating lone institutional performance.[18]

Data collection centred on participant observation, which spanned 1 intensive week at each site and included observations of — and conversations with — roughly 250-300 individuals in each prison, across chapels, religious spaces, wings, outdoor spaces, and personal cells. During these periods, the researcher joined daily routines in chaplaincy areas, attended religious services, and shadowed chaplains on wing visits. This immersive approach is well-suited to capturing subtle dynamics within prison environments.[19] Convenience sampling was used, whereby anyone present and willing to participate (chaplains, prisoners, officers, external visitors) was included.[20] Given the constraints inherent to prison regimes (for example, unpredictable timetables, security protocols, frequent lock-downs, etc.) this flexible sampling strategy maximised opportunities for data collection in both establishments.

Semi-structured interviews were also arranged for chaplaincy staff who were absent during the observation weeks. The interviews followed a loose guide to allow participants to delve into issues arising from field notes. Recording devices were avoided due to concerns that they might inhibit open dialogue or create distrust in a high-security context. Instead, handwritten field notes were taken and expanded at the end of each day.

Data were analysed through a blend of deductive and inductive coding. Three thematic Third Space categories (physical, imagined, and relational) were identified in advance to reflect key elements of a Third Space perspective. However, additional codes and themes were analysed outside of that framework and emerged organically from research, ensuring findings were not narrowly confined.[21] This integrative approach aligns with established thematic analysis techniques, where the researcher acknowledges both anticipated and unexpected patterns in the data.[22] Field notes were entered into NVivo for consistent organisation and ease of retrieval.

Limitations were encountered in design and research. First, each site visit lasted only one week, restricting prolonged immersion and relationship-building. Second, different architectural layouts and security procedures (especially the older structure at Wormwood Scrubs) sometimes limited the researcher's freedom to move spontaneously. Third, convenience

18. Bartlett, L., & Vavrus, F. (2017). Comparative case studies: An innovative approach. *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education, 1*(1), 5–17.
19. Jacobs, J. B. (1974). Participant observation in prison. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 3*(2), 221–240.
20. Abbott, P., DiGiacomo, M., Magin, P., & Hu, W. (2018). A scoping review of qualitative research methods used with people in prison. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 17*(1), 1-15.
21. Naeem, M., & Ozuem, W. (2023). A step-by-step process of thematic analysis to develop a conceptual model in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 22*, 1-18.
22. Maguire, M., & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 8*(3), 3351-3365.

sampling may produce selection bias, favouring participants who already engage in chaplaincy or religious spaces. Finally, the researcher's dual identity (a Ministry of Justice employee and an independent academic) necessitated careful boundary management to avoid inadvertently influencing participants or overstating institutional authority.[23] This was achieved through rigorous socialisation of participant information sheets, verbal explanations to chaplains, orderlies, and people in prison of the exact researcher remit, and discussions with the managing chaplain about expectations and research parameters.

Findings

HMP Berwyn's chaplaincy is in a modern, centralised area comprising two multi-faith rooms. One room focuses on Christian, Buddhist, and Pagan practices and paraphernalia. The other room emphasises Islamic, Sikh, and Hindu worship, with prayer mats facing a *minbar* and a separate Sikh shrine shielded by curtains, next to a small Hindu *mandir.* Both rooms are near the chaplaincy office and separated only by short corridors, reflecting Berwyn's rehabilitative ethos and modern design.[24]

Wormwood Scrubs has a large Victorian chapel at the prison's centre, complemented by a World Faith Centre and prayer hall located elsewhere. The Grade-II listed chapel, akin to a small cathedral, is a traditionally Christian space featuring an altar, pulpit, and arches. Paintings of saints line the walls, creating a solemn, if imposing, atmosphere. The World Faith Centre is a multi-faith room that contains separate cabinets for several religions, though it remains relatively plain and unadorned unless opened for a specific service. The adjoining prayer hall serves primarily for Islamic worship, with posters dedicated to Islamic teaching and a partitioned area for female staff. Compared to Berwyn, the chaplaincy architecture of Wormwood Scrubs is more dispersed, and prisoner movement is constrained by older infrastructure, security measures, and gang-related restrictions. This distributed layout can hinder easy access to religious activities, reinforcing a sense that sacred spaces exist at multiple, often distant, points in the institution. Taken together, these physical contrasts illustrate how architectural design, location, and the arrangement of religious symbols may shape how sacredness is perceived and practiced.

The physical

The 'physical' theme contained codes including quietness, aesthetic distinctiveness, and a sense of sanctuary. Chaplaincy areas in both prisons offered perceptible calm, contrasting starkly with loud and often chaotic wing environments. Participants repeatedly emphasised silence as a core component of sacredness, with some describing it as the only time they could 'hear themselves think.'[25] Services were often held in quiet or with minimal noise, prompting reflections that time felt shorter and more precious during religious gatherings than on the wings.

Many respondents viewed chaplaincy as a place of safety and respite.

Silence also emerged as a sign of group respect.[26] Although most participants welcomed this, some resisted it, particularly during Friday Prayers in HMP Berwyn. Observers noted occasional talking or confrontational behaviour until the recitation of the Quran, at which point the congregation collectively enforced silence. This illustrates how theological perspectives can imbue certain moments with heightened sacredness, since breaking silence during scriptural reading was seen to undermine spiritual benefits.[27]

Conversely, Rastafarian and Buddhist ceremonies at Wormwood Scrubs featured drumming and chanting.[28] Participants likened these rhythms to a meditative state, mirroring the effect of silence in Christian or Quaker services. Whether silent or musical, these rituals offered a break from everyday stresses—akin to Durkheim's 'collective effervescence.'

Finally, many respondents viewed chaplaincy as a place of safety and respite. Drug use and violence were said to be minimal inside these spaces, making them feel physically protective. Vulnerable prisoners,[29] for

23. Liebling, A. (2014). Postscript: Integrity and emotion in prisons research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 20*(481), 387–543.
24. Bennett, T. P. (2017). *HMP Berwyn.* https://tpbennett.com/work/justice/hmp-berwyn/
25. Picard, M. (1948). *The world of silence.* Eight Day Press.
26. Turner, V. (1966). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure.* Cornell University Press.
27. Vlăduțescu, Ș. (2014). Communication of silence at Martin Heidegger: Sygetics—Logics of thinking silence. *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences, 17,* 49–54.
28. Mabbett, I. W. (1993). Buddhism and music. *Asian Music, 25,* 9–28; Murrell, N. S., Spencer, W. D., & McFarlane, A. A. (1988). *Chanting down Babylon: The Rastafari reader.* Temple University Press.
29. 'Vulnerable prisoners' are those considered to be at an elevated risk of harm or exploitation, such as those incarcerated for sexual offences.

instance, appreciated chaplaincy time as a chance to escape social isolation. Yet, conflicts still occasionally arose when wing tensions or perceived dangers carried into sacred environments.

In sum, the physical theme underscores how chaplaincy spaces, through quietness or purposeful sound, aesthetic distinction, and relative safety, are set apart from the ordinary prison experience.

The imagined

Participants reported feelings of sacredness, sanctuary, and a sense of ownership/purpose in chaplaincy spaces. Their accounts reinforced the idea that sacred space is set apart, whether understood as overtly religious or as offering a secular kind of sanctuary.

Many people in prison described these places as sacred in a theological sense, aligning with Christian teachings that God is 'present' when believers gather.[30] Others emphasised cultural reasons: Irish Travellers, for instance, felt communion rites, rosary beads, and chaplain blessings crucially sustained their faith and identity,[31] echoing research showing chaplaincy is especially trusted by this group. A Christian chaplain at Berwyn offered - as a soft challenge - the view that people are inherently sacred, highlighting a theological view that the 'divine spark' surpasses architecture. Some non-religious people in prison preferred the term 'sanctuary' over 'sacred', suggesting the space allowed mental respite without necessarily invoking the divine.

'If prison wasn't this bad, the chapel wouldn't feel so safe'.

A sense of ownership or purpose was also significant. Chaplains often took active steps to 'activate' multi-faith rooms, using symbols or temporary partitions to respect different religious needs.[32] Berwyn's so-called 'Third Way',' keeping most faith symbols visible at once, contrasted with the neutral World Faith Centre of Wormwood Scrubs, which stored items in cupboards, to be revealed only during specific worship. Neither approach clearly dominated in promoting sacredness; rather, participants appreciated the intention and respect shown in both models.

Beyond formal chapels or multi-faith rooms, chaplains helped sanctify personal cells, at times blessing them after distressing events. In one case at Wormwood Scrubs, a prisoner upset about occupying a cell where a friend had died requested a ritual cleansing. This highlights the broader chaplaincy role in addressing spiritual, cultural, and emotional needs, illustrating how sacredness extends beyond designated faith areas.[33]

Finally, partial participation by the researcher underscored how easily such spaces become shared stories. During a Buddhist service at Wormwood Scrubs, the researcher was invited to meditate alongside people in prison, a moment that bridged observer and participant roles. While this raised ethical questions, it fostered rapport and exemplified how these spaces are co-constructed.[34] It was through discussion with the chaplain present, that these concerns could be quickly rationalised, and the participation adapted accordingly to allow for a more active yet safe participation in the meditation. This relational and dynamic approach allowed for a more immersive and flexible research approach.

The relational

Three relational codes emerged strongly: food and drink, chaplaincy managerialism, and pro-social religious identity building. Food and drink were especially notable at Berwyn, where post-service coffee and biscuits allowed up to 15 minutes of relaxed conversation with fellow prisoners and public visitors. This small ritual fostered intense normalcy, offering a brief respite from incarceration. One orderly remarked that, during this time, prisoners and visitors became indistinguishable, reflecting the heightened social value of shared refreshments in restrictive carceral settings.[35] At Wormwood Scrubs security protocols curtailed such gatherings, shifting communal bonding to wing visits or corridor chats while escorting prisoners to services.

Chaplaincy managerialism also played a significant role. Chaplains in both prisons were perceived as trusted intermediaries, providing pastoral care relatively free from punitive aims.[36] They 'activated' religious spaces through sermons, blessings, and one-on-one support, balancing urgent crisis response with long-term spiritual or emotional development.[37] Managing

30. Lewis, C. S. (1940). *The problem of pain.* Zondervan.
31. MacGabhann, C. (2011). *Voices unheard: A study of Irish Travellers in prison.* Irish Chaplaincy in Britain.
32. Tipton, L. (2011). *The role and contribution of a multi-faith prison chaplaincy to the contemporary prison service.* Cardiff Centre for Chaplaincy Studies.
33. Bermudez, J. (2020). Emplacing spiritual practices through architecture. *Architecture, Culture, and Spirituality Forum, 25*(45).
34. See footnote 23: Jacobs (1974).
35. Brumberg-Kraus, J. (2024). *Food and religious rituals. In Oxford research encyclopedia of food studies.* Oxford University Press.
36. Becci, I. (2011). Religion's multiple locations in prisons. *Archives de sciences sociales des religions, 153,* 65–84.
37. Cooke, B., & Macy, G. (2005). *Christian symbol and ritual: An introduction.* Oxford University Press.

chaplains oversaw multiple faith services, distributed space fairly, and resolved inter-faith tensions. Their efforts helped maintain a collaborative atmosphere, reinforcing the impression that chaplaincy exists partly outside the usual prison hierarchy.[38]

The pro-social religious identity building code was most salient among people in prison seeking personal transformation. Many Christian participants spoke of being 'born again' and saw prison as a chance to reconnect with faith. Rastafarian adherents stressed historical and political dimensions of their religion, while Irish Travellers emphasised the comfort of sacraments and cultural rites. Across these faith traditions, communal worship inside prison heightened both belonging and moral reflection, illustrating how collective rituals can engender a renewed sense of self.

However, the project revealed that issues beyond Third Space, particularly regime constraints, could thwart attempts at cultivating sacred experiences. Participants in both prisons noted frequent lockdowns, staff shortages, and ongoing post-COVID restrictions that prevented them from attending services.[39] Missing baptisms or routine worship sessions after 'waiting all week' led to frustration and feelings of neglect, with many people in prison blaming prison officers for failing to escort them.[40] This inconsistency not only undermined morale, but also fostered mistrust in an institution that is, for many, already isolating.

Conclusion

This research indicates that sacred spaces do indeed exist in HMP Berwyn and HMP Wormwood Scrubs, confirmed by observations and testimonies from chaplains, orderlies, and prisoners. Their existence points toward a broader pattern in English and Welsh prisons, where sacred spaces function simultaneously as sites of transformation, spiritual development, respite, and, paradoxically, as reminders of the prison regime. They are set apart from daily life by distinct physical layouts, religious symbols, communal rituals, and relational dynamics.

Participants consistently described these spaces as creating opportunities for temporary 'outsideness' or normalcy within an otherwise stressful, highly regulated setting. The threefold Soja-inspired framework—physical, imagined, and relational—applied well to analyses of chapels and multi-faith rooms. Quietness, communal food and drink, faith leadership, and the pursuit of collective effervescence were all viewed as critical to producing moments of sacredness. Yet, prison regimes can obstruct deeper engagement; staff shortages, restricted movement, and post-COVID protocols frequently prevented access to services or truncated them, leading to frustration and disappointment.

Future research should include women's prisons, as religious experiences have been shown to have gendered dimensions or international systems that lack a Christian-centric chaplaincy model.[41] [42]

Ultimately, whether prisoners view these spaces as genuinely sacred depends on theological perspectives, personal contexts, and social functions. Many participants said they felt closer to the divine or to a deeper sense of self, perceiving chaplaincy areas as rare places where personal dignity and meaningful connection still flourish. In these fleeting moments, a prisoner may rediscover a sense of normalcy, hope, or personal growth otherwise scarce in the carceral world.

For practitioners and policymakers, this work may help to quantify the positive impact that faith delivery continues to have on the lives of people in prison. While faith is often politicised, and its benefits deemed hard to evidence, we ought to remember that faith brings an opportunity for order, transcendent experience, and pro-social identity formation that can transform lives and improve the carceral experience. Qualitative studies such as the one presented here (albeit limited), point to an evidence base for understanding the role of faith services in rehabilitation and enrichment. With the post-COVID prison regime posing issues for access to education and faith services, we ought to reflect on the importance of religious spaces and services in the lives of people in prison, be they religious or not; and how we can use that to instil change.

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38. See footnote 36: Tipton (2011).
39. Coomber, A. (2022). *The prison system after Covid-19.* Howard League for Penal Reform.
40. Liebling, A. (2015). A new "ecology of cruelty"? The changing shape of maximum-security custody in England and Wales. In K. Reiter & A. Koenig (Eds.), *Extreme punishment: Comparative studies in detention, incarceration and solitary confinement* (pp. 91–144). Palgrave Macmillan.
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42. Lyons, A. J. (2021). Karma and punishment: *Prison chaplaincy in Japan.* Harvard University Press.