

Q&A: How Islam and Buddhism can help prisoners

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As religious diversity grows in Quebec, the province's prisons are having to adapt to inmates' diverse religious needs. Some inmates turn to alternative faiths such as Islam or Buddhism. Why do they do this? What do they get out of it?

These are the questions asked by Géraldine Mossière, a professor at

Université de Montréal's Institute of Religious Studies, and one of her Ph.D. students, Catherine de Guise.

To learn more about the topic, the two researchers interviewed [prison](#) chaplains and people who volunteer in prisons.

We spoke to de Guise, whose studies are jointly supervised by the Institute for Social Sciences of Religions at Université de Lausanne, to find out more.

Who did you find attends Buddhist workshops in prison?

The people who took part in Buddhist meditation workshops were very diverse. Some were converts to the religion. Others saw meditation as a personal development tool and started meditating as a secular practice. Still others belonged to different religions.

How can these religious practices help people heal?

They heal on three different levels: physically, ethically and socially.

Buddhism asks people to look deep within themselves and encourages personal transformation. The experience can be very physical: some people cried. It can also manifest itself in different ways through the body. One person claimed meditation helped them become aware of certain things. An inmate said: "I realized that when I hurt other people, I'm also hurting myself." As for Islam, the practice of prayer can affect people in a different way.

With respect to ethics, Islam is a more prescriptive system. It's like a [code of conduct](#) that can be broken down into a number of practices,

such as the [dress code](#), dietary restrictions and prayer. In contrast, Buddhism is more of a philosophy of life based on values such as kindness, [self-compassion](#) and impermanence. Self-compassion is a concept that resonated particularly well with inmates. People don't often show compassion for convicted criminals, so inmates hadn't worked on forgiving themselves and showing themselves compassion.

Ultimately, these practices transform their community ties. Becoming Muslim means joining a group with a well-defined identity. It also ensures a certain degree of protection provided by others of the same faith. Meanwhile, Buddhist workshops generally had three parts: an informal discussion with the volunteers, a meditation session and a group discussion. Group discussions created a safe space where inmates felt more comfortable being vulnerable. In prison, inmates have to act tough for their own safety, but group discussions open up a space where they can talk about their weaknesses.

Are Buddhism and Islam equally popular in prisons?

The kind of Buddhism practiced in prisons is a contemporary, Westernized Buddhism that's given up some of its religious aspects. People talk about it like a philosophy or ethical system with a more subjective and individualized approach that focuses on personal development. This form of Buddhism is viewed positively compared to Islam, which suffers from a lot of stigma in countries of the North.

This interpretation of Buddhism is more easily accepted in prisons. It allows volunteers to easily conduct Buddhist meditation activities by framing them as mindfulness meditation and, in effect, secularizing them.

Should prisons change how they regard religious

practices?

Religious diversity requires institutions to rethink the [religious services](#) they offer and adopt new measures that don't necessarily have to cost much. Health care services offer spiritual care providers. These providers take a secular approach and provide care based on the religion of the individuals they support. Prisons could consider offering internships for spiritual care providers. Or they could simply add more spiritual and religious texts to their libraries and allow for a more diverse range of volunteer-run activities.

At present, the prevailing model in the prison system is a multifaith model, where people of different religions receive support from a chaplain and volunteers. However, an interfaith model with spiritual care providers might be a better way to ensure that individual needs are met.

Provided by University of Montreal

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