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Religious Education of Convicts: Features, Problems, Improvement Solutions

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Abstract

Introduction: in modern society, more and more attention is being paid to the protection of human rights and freedoms, including in places of deprivation of liberty. One of the most important aspects is ensuring religious freedom, guaranteed by the Constitution of the Russian Federation. In this regard, such an area of educational work as religious education of convicts deserves special attention. Educational work with religious prisoners is an important activity of the penitentiary system contributing to their re-socialization, formation of law-abiding behavior and spiritual and moral development. The article discusses problems of organizing work with religious convicts in penitentiary institutions. Practical obstacles to the implementation of religious education in conditions of isolation and the realization of religious rights and freedoms of convicts are analyzed. Recommendations are proposed for improving work with religious prisoners, taking into account the religious specifics and needs of this category of persons. *Purpose:* to identify the features, problems and ways to improve the religious education of convicts in places of deprivation of liberty. *Methods:* method of analysis of literary sources, psychological verbal and communicative method, questionnaire. *Results:* the data obtained allow us to draw several important conclusions regarding the nature of the religious needs of convicts. There is a relative balance between religious demands and the need for psychological support; the totality of categories such as spiritual issues, communication, and family problems accounts for 77.1% of all appeals, indicating the dominance of personality-oriented, dialogical forms of interaction over formal or material aspects of religious practice. The structure of appeals reflects the specifics of the conditions of imprisonment and

religious care performs compensatory and therapeutic functions. The organization of religious education should be based not only on familiarization with religious values and satisfaction of direct religious needs, but also on the willingness to provide comprehensive support, affecting the social, emotional and family aspects of the life of convicts. *Conclusions*: religious education in places of detention and respect for religious rights and freedoms of convicts are an important factor contributing to the formation of law-abiding behavior and spiritual and moral development of a person. The following groups of factors influencing the effectiveness of educational work on the spiritual and moral support of persons deprived of liberty are identified: nature of the problem; personality of the suspected, accused, and convicted; personality of the priest; organizational conditions; and systemic factors. Taking these factors into account will contribute to improving forms and methods of religious education of suspected, accused and convicted persons in isolation, as well as creating organizational conditions for its implementation.

Keywords: penal system; correctional institutions; educational work; religious prisoners; religious education.

5.8.1. General pedagogy, history of pedagogy and education.

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Introduction

In modern society, more and more attention is being paid to the protection of human rights and freedoms, including in places of deprivation of liberty. One of the most important aspects is ensuring religious freedom, guaranteed by the Constitution of the Russian Federation. Article 28 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation specifies that every citizen has the right to freedom of religion, which includes the possibility of individual or collective religious worship, as well as the refusal of such, as well as the right to autonomous choice, possession and dissemination of religious or other beliefs, followed by the implementation of actions based on these beliefs. In this regard, such an area of educational work as religious education of convicts deserves special attention on the part of penal system employees. Educational work with religious prisoners is an important activity of the penitentiary system, contributing to their re-socialization, formation of law-abiding behavior, spiritual and moral development.

Religious education in penitentiary institutions has a number of features and is fraught with certain difficulties due to both regime requirements and the religious diversity of convicts. As part of the penitentiary impact, the clergy addresses the task of promoting the familiarization of a person in conditions of im-

prisonment with spiritual and moral values and “helping the convict to overcome the propensity to sin and commit crimes” [1, p. 305]. It can be argued that serious changes have recently been observed both in the consciousness of convicts and the spiritual and moral work with them conducted by the staff of the penal system [2, p. 50].

The problem of religious education of convicts is discussed by V.V. Artamonov, L.I. Belyaeva, A.M. Bogdanovskii, N.Ya. Voskoboinikov, M.N. Galkin, M.N. Gernet, Yu.A. Kashuba, D.O. Matveev, V.V. Merkur'ev, A.A. Piontkovskii, S.V. Poznyshchev, N.S. Tagantsev, I.Ya. Foinitskii and others. Scientists note significant pedagogical potential of religion that contributes to the formation of mental balance and benevolence in convicts, reorientation of values and priorities, and acquisition of positive emotions. They emphasize the need to acquaint convicts with spiritual and moral values, change their inner attitudes, and develop moral feelings.

However, despite the growing attention to the problem of religious education of convicts, the issue of the specifics of this process, the content structure of convicts' appeals to representatives of the clergy, and ways of becoming Orthodox remains insufficiently studied. Understanding these provisions will make it possible to optimize the activities of staff and clergy

in correctional institutions and increase the effectiveness of spiritual and moral education in places of detention.

Changes in legislation and problems of organization of religious education of convicts

In order to implement the order of the Ministry of Labor of the Russian Federation of October 5, 2023 No. 742n "On approval of professional qualification groups of professions of workers and positions of employees of institutions of the penitentiary system of the Russian Federation", as well as the instructions of the Federal Penitentiary Service of Russia of December 27, 2023 No. ex-07-104943, from January 1, 2024, positions of assistant heads of pre-trial detention centers for work with believers were introduced. To date, these positions have been introduced in 207 pre-trial detention centers.

It should be noted that this category of employees should meet a number of requirements in the field of:

- professional knowledge (regulations and official documents regulating the relevant field of activity in relation to the performance of specific official duties, including those regulating the presence of the suspected, accused and convicted in pre-trial detention centers, the main sections of theology, the content of foundations of the faith, taking into account knowledge of new religious movements, social, ethnic, interreligious (confessional) and cultural differences;

- professional skills (practical provision of state-religious and socio-religious interaction, participation in interreligious and interethnic dialogue).

We would also like to focus on the following duties of assistant heads of pre-trial detention facilities working with religious prisoners:

- participation in the consideration of appeals, statements, suggestions and complaints about human rights violations in the field of freedom of conscience and religion;

- promptly informing the authorities of the institution on problematic issues related to the exercise of the rights to freedom of conscience and religion of persons held in the institution, making proposals for their solution;

- monitoring compliance with professional and ethical standards of relations between the staff of the institution and persons in custody,

as well as representatives of registered religious organizations visiting the institution;

- participation in the preparation and implementation of planned events aimed at the spiritual and moral education of the staff of the institution;

- carrying out work to inform convicts and persons in custody about religious rites and ceremonies in the institution, taking into account the internal regulations of pre-trial detention facilities and other regulatory legal documents;

- conducting disciplinary and canonical supervision over the functioning of prison services for the spiritual and pastoral care of convicts and persons in custody, as well as conducting divine services and other events in churches operating on the territory of the institution.

However, the effectiveness of religious education for persons deprived of liberty largely depends on solving organizational, scientific, and purely practical problems. Despite the existence of a legislative framework in the area under consideration, a number of problems arise in penitentiary practice that hinder the effective organization of educational work with religious convicts.

Let us focus on some of them.

1. Staffing issues at the current stage of the penal system development. Nowadays, there is a shortage of qualified specialists with knowledge in the field of religious studies, psychology and the specifics of working with convicts who profess different beliefs. Accordingly, a system for training and advanced training of staff in matters of interaction with religious organizations and religious prisoners is needed. At the same time, we would like to emphasize that the issues of education also concern penitentiary clergy. Since 2014, the institution of assistant heads of territorial bodies of the Federal Penitentiary Service of Russia for work with believers is functioning. In 2024, positions of assistant heads of pre-trial detention centers for work with believers were introduced, and further they are to be introduced in correctional facilities. So, today the following additional professional programs are being implemented in departmental educational organizations: "Organization of work with believers in institutions of the penitentiary system of the Russian Fed-

eration" (professional retraining, training takes place at the Academy of the Federal Penitentiary Service of Russia); "Organization of work with believers in pre-trial detention centers" (advanced training, training takes place on the basis of the Academy of the Federal Penitentiary Service of Russia and the Tomsk Institute of Advanced Training of Employees of the Federal Penitentiary Service of Russia).

2. Difficulties in organizing systematic interaction with representatives of various faiths. Today, penitentiary institutions are characterized by a significant confessional diversity of convicts. Not only Orthodox Christianity, which is traditional for most regions of Russia, is represented, but also other religions (Islam, Buddhism, Judaism). Organizing interaction with such a wide range of faiths requires significant efforts and resources, and a high level of intercultural competence among correctional facility staff. It is also necessary to take into account issues related to interfaith harmony, primarily in order to exclude the possibility of religious conflicts between convicts who profess different religions. In this regard, it is important to create conditions for interfaith dialogue and cooperation, and to hold joint events aimed at strengthening mutual understanding and respect between representatives of different faiths. We believe that in order to resolve this issue, it is necessary to work out a mechanism for the accreditation of clergy to visit penitentiary institutions, as well as issues of regulating their activities.

3. Prevention of religious extremism is one of the urgent problems in the organization of religious education of convicts in modern penitentiary practice. Risks of spreading radical religious ideologies among the convicts are still very high. In addition to ongoing programs aimed at countering religious extremism and fostering a tolerant attitude towards representatives of various faiths, interaction with traditional religious organizations that can have a positive impact on convicts can play an important role.

4. Restrictions on the exercise of religious rights and freedoms of convicted persons due to the need to ensure security and order in penitentiary institutions. It is well-known that ensuring security is a priority task for the execution of criminal penalties. In this regard, employees

are charged with the duty to prevent possible violations of the detention regime under the guise of religious activity. Persons hiding behind religious beliefs may enter correctional institutions to commit illegal acts, propagandize extremist ideas, or recruit new members. In this case, it is necessary to seek a balance between regime requirements and the convicts' right to freedom of religion. For example, it is necessary to develop flexible schedules for clergy visiting penitentiary institutions, taking into account regime requirements and the needs of religious convicts.

5. Issues related to individual religious beliefs. Insufficient attention is paid to individual religious needs of the convicts who profess different religions. The imposition of any religion or religious practice is unacceptable. It is necessary to take into account religious affiliation when organizing educational work with convicts and developing individual programs for their re-socialization.

6. The religious aspect of the problems of organizing work with believers is that the religious needs and beliefs of convicts often remain ignored or underestimated. So, this leads to the violation of their rights and freedoms, as well as reduces the effectiveness of educational work. Persons held in penitentiary institutions should be able to regularly confess, speak out before a clergyman, and sufficiently satisfy their needs in performing traditional rituals [3; 4].

7. The role of religious education in the process of re-socialization of convicts. Religious beliefs can have a positive impact on re-socialization of convicts, contributing to the formation of moral values, responsibility for their actions and the desire for law-abiding behavior. It is necessary to use this potential in educational work [5].

8. Contradictions between religious dogmas and penal requirements. It is necessary to look for compromise solutions that take into account the religious beliefs of convicts and ensure compliance with regime requirements. For example, it is necessary to take into account religious requirements when organizing meals for convicts, etc.

Study of the activities of assistant heads of pre-trial detention centers in organizing religious education with suspected, accused and convicted persons

In order to understand the problems, assistant heads of pre-trial detention centers for working with believers face, and how the existing difficulties can be effectively solved, we surveyed 87 male students engaged in the additional professional training program "Organization of work with believers in pre-trial detention centers" conducted at the Academy of the Federal Penitentiary Service of Russia and the Tomsk Institute for Advanced Training of Employees of the Federal Penitentiary Service of Russia in 2024-2025.

Taking into account the role of spiritual support for suspected, accused, convicted persons and the essentially unique status of assistant heads of pre-trial detention centers for working with believers in the context of the penal system humanization, we analyzed the issues of spiritual and moral support for persons in conditions of social isolation.

It is found out that men most often apply to a priest for advice and help (81% of those who have applied). It would seem that this indicates that men in pre-trial detention centers seek spiritual support more actively than women. This may be associated with psychological characteristics of men, their need for moral support in stressful situations, or cultural norms that encourage men to seek help in certain contexts. This figure is close to the actual sex ratio in pre-trial detention centers, respectively, the frequency of appeals on the part of men and women is approximately the same or slightly different. Nevertheless, it cannot be ruled out that the need for spiritual help in conditions of isolation is universal, but its manifestations may be associated with gender-specific patterns of behavior and types of crimes.

The analysis of the responses shows that people aged 35-40 (39%) most often seek spiritual help. People at this age face a unique set of challenges (key factors) that force them to rethink what they have achieved and look for deeper foundations than material success or a career, for example:

- existential rethinking, which, as a rule, is expressed in a crisis of achievements (for example, it becomes clear to a person that they are unattainable). There are external markers of success, but they do not always bring inner satisfaction, which creates a feeling of emptiness;
- high social and psychological stress ("sandwich generation"): double responsibil-

ity. At this age, people often find themselves caught between caring for their underage children and aging parents;

- relationship crisis: family routine (a marriage lasting 10-15 years may face a crisis, resentment accumulates, partners may move away from each other). People are looking for advice on how to save a family or how to get through a divorce. Reassessing one's partner and oneself as a partner/parent;

- professional and financial instability, desire to change activities. There is a strong desire to give up everything and start a new life – change profession, open one's own business, move to another place. This is a risky step, so there is a need for moral and spiritual support;

- the first serious losses. By this age, people are more likely to face the death of relatives, sometimes parents or peers. It makes them think about the fragility of life and seek solace.

In connection with the all stated above, spiritual help becomes a resource for overcoming a difficult life stage.

Convicts' problems to discuss with a clergyman are also of interest. Thus, the predominance of exclusively spiritual issues (faith, confession, communion, baptism) (34.6%) indicates that for a significant part of the convicts religion is not a formal attribute, but a real spiritual need. It is consistent with the concept of existential crisis in conditions of isolation described by V. Frankl [6], i.e. deprivation of liberty stimulates rethinking of life values. Researchers note that religious faith can perform a compensatory function, providing convicts with semantic guidelines and hope for spiritual rebirth, the penitentiary environment becomes a space where the issue of searching for meaning, moral choice, repentance and restoration of connection with the transcendent is acute [7]. Convicts' need for the sacraments (confession, communion) and rituals being performed reflect not only the formal profession of faith, but also the deep inner need for purification, forgiveness and acquisition of a new identity, which is a key element of re-socialization.

The second group of problems with which convicts go to a clergyman is related to the need for emotional support. Quantitatively, this group is only slightly inferior to the religious demands – 23.4%. This fact highlights the multifunctional role of the clergyman in the penitentiary system, who often acts not only as a

spiritual mentor, but also as a trusted person, psychologist, and social worker. In conditions of isolation and a lack of trusting relationships, the priest becomes one of the few representatives of society to whom the convict can turn for an objective opinion and advice. This function of spiritual care goes beyond strictly confessional activities and approaches the task of providing basic social and emotional support.

The third place is occupied by issues related to family relations (19.1%). The destruction or weakening of family ties is one of the most painful problems for those held in pre-trial detention centers [8; 9]. Contacting a clergyman in this context may be due to both the search for spiritual advice (for example, regarding reconciliation with the loved ones) and the need for emotional relief. Religious discourse traditionally pays considerable attention to family values, which makes a priest a competent adviser. In addition, a clergyman can act as an intermediary in restoring broken family ties [10].

Requests for spiritual literature occupy the fourth place in the hierarchy of requests (12.3%), which indicates people's desire for independent spiritual development and education. Reading religious texts can be considered as a form of self-help and a means of structuring time in isolation. This need also reflects the educational function of religion in the penitentiary context, where access to information is limited, and spiritual literature can serve as a source of moral guidance and life wisdom [11].

The smallest group consists of appeals related to the acquisition and storage of religious objects (crosses, icons, and candles) (7.6%). A relatively small number of such requests can be connected with regime restrictions on the storage of items in a correctional facility and the fact that such issues are more utilitarian in nature and do not require regular contact with a

clergyman. Nevertheless, the existence of this category indicates the importance of material symbols of faith for some convicts, for whom religious objects serve as signs of identity and a means of maintaining contact with spiritual tradition.

The data obtained allow us to draw several important conclusions regarding the nature of the religious needs of persons in pre-trial detention. First, there is a relative balance between religious demands and the need for psychological support. This indicates that the role of a clergyman in a penitentiary institution is multifunctional: he acts simultaneously as a spiritual mentor, psychological consultant and social worker [12]. Second, the totality of the first three categories (spiritual issues, communication, family problems) accounts for 77.1% of all appeals, which indicates the dominance of personality-oriented, dialogical forms of interaction over the formal, ritual or material aspects of religious practice. Third, the structure of appeals reflects the specifics of imprisonment conditions: social isolation (the need for communication), existential crisis (spiritual issues), and destruction of social ties (family problems). Religious care in this context performs compensatory and therapeutic functions.

Organization of religious education should be based not only on familiarization with religious values and satisfaction of direct religious needs, but also on the willingness to provide comprehensive support, affecting social, emotional and family aspects of convicts' life.

Factors influencing the effectiveness of religious education for people in isolation

The analysis of the data obtained makes it possible to build a differentiated model of the factors influencing the effectiveness of the work carried out on the spiritual and moral support of persons in isolation (Table 1).

Table 1

Factors influencing the effectiveness of religious education for people in isolation

Group of factors	Contributing to efficiency	Reducing efficiency
1	2	3
Problem	Presence of spiritual issues, need for support	Administrative, legal, and financial problems
Identity of the suspected, accused, convicted	Religiosity, motivation, openness	Formal attitude, distrust, opportunistic issues, unrealistic expectations

1	2	3
Identity of the priest	Professionalism, empathy, work experience	Lack of training, formalism
Organizational conditions	Regular meetings, confidentiality	Regime restrictions, irregular meetings, lack of time
Systemic factors	Support from the administration of a pre-trial detention center, well-established cooperation with departments and services	Isolation of the priest, a lack of coordination with the staff of a pre-trial detention center

Taking these factors into account will contribute to improving the forms and methods of religious education of suspected, accused and convicted persons in isolation, as well as creating organizational conditions for its implementation.

Conclusion

Thus, the organization and implementation of religious education with convicts is a complex and multidimensional process that requires a competent approach, respect for religious feelings and beliefs, and respect for the principles of freedom of conscience and religion. Undoubtedly, this is a challenge for the penitentiary system today, which requires an integrated approach and consideration of the religious specifics of persons serving criminal sentences.

In addition, today the issue of activities of the institution of assistant heads of correctional institutions specializing in interaction with people in isolation has been practically resolved. According to preliminary information, at the first

stage, the positions under consideration are to be introduced in 97 of the approximately 700 correctional institutions in the country. The chairman of the Synodal Department for Prison Ministry, Priest Kirill Markovskii draws attention to the high efficiency of the existing institutions of assistants. He also stresses that the introduction of the new position would provide additional opportunities for clergymen to work more effectively with convicts, including minors and those who have committed serious crimes [13].

It is worth mentioning that the objective determination of true reasons for religious conversion in conditions of imprisonment requires further empirical research using valid methods of data collection and analysis. At the same time, it should be remembered that religious education in places of deprivation of liberty, respect for religious rights and freedoms of convicts are important factors contributing to the formation of law-abiding behavior and spiritual and moral development of a person.

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