

Proposal for presentation at IAMS Conference in Seoul, August 2016

Title

Conversions in the context of prison: experiences, narratives, and transformations

Abstract

Religious conversions in prison are rather common. One reason of their commonality is that in conversions the interests of inmates converge with those of the wider public: For inmates conversions are an opportunity to create an alternative self-narrative and a new identity; for the public they are conducive to good order (prison administrators' perspective), a success of religious proclamation (religious visitors' perspective) or an element of dramatic criminal biographies (media perspective).

The paper explores several issues related to prisoners' conversion experiences in in the Asian context of Hong Kong: How common are such conversions? What kinds of transformation do conversions bring? How are they experienced? What religious directions do conversion processes take? How are they nurtured and how sustainable are they? And, importantly, emerging from a context of relational dependence, how genuine are they?

After considering methodological difficulties of the research, the paper works through quantitative and qualitative steps: Through *short interviews* with *all* inmates of a few particular prison groups (some specific workshops in prison: inmates with long sentences, first-time offenders, recidivists), it will, on a small scale, survey the frequency of prisoners' conversions and the subjectively experienced religious changes involved. Through *extended interviews* with a *small number of* inmates and ex-inmates, including persons who later disaffiliated from their previous religious change, it will investigate subjective experiences of transformation and establish what factors help sustain conversions. As a prison chaplain in Hong Kong for the past 19 years, the author has unlimited access to prisoners.

Author

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Suggested study group

Interreligious issues or
Religious freedom and mission