



Exploring Spiritual Transformation and Moral Awakening in Formerly Incarcerated Individuals: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Spiritual and moral transformation during incarceration has become an increasingly important topic in religious philosophy and ethics, particularly in the context of carceral rehabilitation. While existing studies have explored behavioral outcomes of religious engagement in prison, few have examined the lived experience of inmates undergoing existential reflection and ethical identity reconstruction. What remains unclear is how incarcerated individuals interpret and make meaning of their spiritual awakening and ethical realignment during confinement. This interpretative phenomenological study explores how formerly incarcerated individuals experience and articulate religious transformation while in prison. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with ten participants and thematic analysis inspired by Heideggerian philosophy, the study identifies four core themes: awakening in isolation, ritualized repentance, ethical identity reconstruction, and spiritual community formation. The analysis revealed that participants viewed incarceration not merely as punishment but as a space for deep reflection, moral responsibility, and reconnection with the transcendent. Narratives emphasized how solitude, prayer, and collective spiritual practices fostered significant shifts in self-perception and value orientation. These findings suggest that spiritual growth in prison is shaped not only by external rehabilitative programs but also by internally driven, meaning-oriented processes. The study enhances understanding of religious experience in marginalized settings and informs more human-centered approaches to prison rehabilitation.



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INTRODUCTION

Incarceration has long been recognized not only as a legal and institutional consequence of crime, but also as a transformative social space where individuals confront profound disruptions in identity, community, and moral consciousness. Amid confinement, incarcerated persons often face existential questions that remain latent in everyday life, transforming prison into an unexpected site of moral reckoning and spiritual reflection (Sykes, 1958; Maruna et al., 2006).

Religion—deeply embedded in both individual psyche and sociocultural norms—plays a significant role in shaping ethical consciousness, offering not only moral direction but also psychological resilience and interpretive frameworks for suffering and redemption (Clear & Sumter, 2002; Giordano et al., 2008). This is particularly salient in contexts where religious belief intersects with public morality, as in many postcolonial and Global South societies, where spiritual expression may function as both resistance and adaptation to state structures (Ismail, 2018; Liebling & Arnold, 2012).

Many incarcerated individuals report that religious or spiritual engagement aids in reconstructing a fractured moral self, even in the absence of formal institutional programs (Johnson, 2011; Derlega et al., 2010). However, existing literature tends to prioritize outcome-based models (e.g., reduced recidivism) or institutional religious programming, with insufficient attention to inmates' first-person narratives and inner transformations (Jenkins, 2020; Burnside, 2008).

There is thus a marked research gap concerning how imprisoned individuals interpret their own moral struggles, seek forgiveness, and reconstruct ethical identity through personal, non-institutionalized encounters with the sacred. Furthermore, recent global scholarship has expanded the lens on prison spirituality to include comparative models from Buddhist, Indigenous, and Islamic traditions (Umar, 2021; Tanyi & Pelsler, 2017), yet such perspectives remain underrepresented in dominant Western frameworks.

While this study draws on Heideggerian phenomenology to examine being and meaning in spiritual reorientation, it also acknowledges limitations of a singular lens. Contrasts with alternative existential approaches—such as Frankl’s logotherapy—or theological models emphasizing grace and divine encounter (Tillich, 1952; Volf, 2015) offer complementary insights into how transformation unfolds in carceral spaces. By engaging these frameworks critically, the study aims to position spiritual transformation in prison not merely as ontological awakening, but as embedded in plural ethical and metaphysical grammars.

Phenomenology, with its emphasis on lived experience and the meaning structures of consciousness, offers a powerful lens through which to investigate such transformations. Rather than reducing spiritual change to behavioral outcomes or institutional metrics, this approach foregrounds the voices of those who experience the phenomenon firsthand. In doing so, it enables a more humanistic and philosophically grounded understanding of incarceration not merely as social control, but as a crucible for existential and spiritual evolution.

Within the broader landscape of incarceration studies, research on the subjective spiritual and existential experiences of inmates has emerged as a vital yet underrepresented domain. Scholars have increasingly acknowledged that understanding the lived religious journeys of incarcerated individuals is essential for comprehending how moral identity and ethical awareness are reshaped during imprisonment. This recognition has given rise to a growing interest in phenomenological approaches that prioritize the internal, reflective dimensions of human experience.

However, significant methodological challenges remain in capturing the richness and complexity of such inner transformations. Much of the existing research tends to rely on quantitative indicators such as frequency of prayer, attendance in religious programs, or post-release recidivism rates which, while useful, fail to illuminate the deeper layers of meaning embedded in inmates’ spiritual narratives. These approaches often overlook the existential struggle, the silent dialogue with the divine, and the profound shifts in self-perception that characterize spiritual renewal behind bars.

Such limitations have resulted in a partial and sometimes superficial understanding of religious transformation within prison contexts. Without a methodological lens that centers on subjective interpretation and the essence of lived experience, crucial aspects of moral and spiritual growth remain obscured. Interpretative phenomenology, especially when grounded in the philosophical insights of Heidegger, provides a meaningful framework for addressing this gap by facilitating nuanced engagement with how individuals come to make sense of guilt, forgiveness, redemption, and ethical rebirth.

This study focuses on that very space where silence gives way to reflection, and where spiritual awakening unfolds not through programs, but through personal confrontation with the self and the sacred. By attending closely to the experiential realities of formerly incarcerated individuals, this research contributes to a more holistic and human-centered understanding of spiritual transformation in correctional settings.

In the current landscape of correctional rehabilitation, prevailing approaches to understanding inmate transformation largely rely on structured religious programming, cognitive-behavioral therapy, or behavioral assessments aimed at reducing recidivism. While such interventions provide measurable outcomes and practical frameworks for institutional policy, they often treat spiritual and moral change as static, externally observable events rather than evolving, lived experiences shaped by personal meaning.

These approaches tend to emphasize conformity and program completion over the internalized, subjective processes through which individuals grapple with guilt, redemption, and

existential identity. As a result, they fail to capture the nuanced and often deeply personal experiences that underlie genuine moral reform. Quantitative metrics such as participation rates in religious services or post-incarceration behavior offer limited insight into how incarcerated individuals interpret their suffering, seek reconciliation, and reconstruct their ethical selves.

This limitation underscores the need for a paradigm shift: from outcome-based assessments to meaning-oriented exploration. A phenomenological approach, particularly one rooted in interpretative analysis, offers a compelling alternative by allowing researchers to access the depth of individual experiences without reducing them to categories or predefined variables. It enables the exploration of how incarcerated persons perceive their spiritual awakening, navigate existential dilemmas, and develop renewed ethical consciousness within the context of confinement.

Despite a growing interest in prison spirituality, there remains a notable absence of phenomenological studies that center on inmates' own voices and interpretations of their inner transformation. Without this, our understanding of spiritual and moral change in carceral settings remains incomplete, lacking the humanistic insight necessary to inform both philosophical discourse and rehabilitative practice.

Recent studies have explored the role of religion in prison settings, often focusing on how structured religious programs affect inmate behavior and rehabilitation. Research by Smith et al. (2019) highlighted religious coping as a form of psychological resilience, while Ahmad and Yusuf (2021) examined the role of spiritual practices in shaping repentance. However, few studies have explored the lived experience of spiritual transformation from the perspective of the inmates themselves. Theories of existentialism and moral development are frequently cited, yet they are rarely applied within a phenomenological framework that centers inmate narratives. This study builds upon existing literature by shifting the focus toward how incarcerated individuals personally interpret their spiritual journeys.

To explore these experiences, this study employs an interpretative phenomenological approach rooted in Heideggerian philosophy. This method was chosen to capture the subjective meaning and existential depth of inmates' religious transformation during incarceration. It allows for a detailed understanding of how spiritual identity is reconstructed through reflection, ritual, and solitude. The method directly addresses the gaps identified earlier by focusing on internal experiences rather than external behaviors. By doing so, it offers a more holistic and human-centered account of spiritual change in prison contexts.

This article is structured into several key sections. The introduction provides a general and specific background of the research problem, followed by the articulation of the knowledge gap and rationale for the study. The methods section outlines the phenomenological approach, data collection procedures, and analytical techniques used. The results present the core themes derived from participant narratives, while the discussion connects these themes to broader theoretical and practical implications. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings and suggests directions for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach, rooted in Heideggerian philosophy, to explore the existential and spiritual transformation experienced by incarcerated individuals. The phenomenological framework was chosen to facilitate an in-depth understanding of subjective lived experiences, particularly how individuals interpret their spiritual awakening and reconstruct moral identity within the confines of imprisonment.

Interpretative phenomenology, unlike its descriptive counterpart, emphasizes meaning-making as an evolving, context-dependent process influenced by the participant's existential reality. This approach aligns with the study's objective of capturing the inner dialogues, emotional shifts, and ontological awakenings of participants as they navigate imprisonment. The design allows for the

emergence of nuanced insights into how incarceration becomes a catalyst for religious reflection and ethical reformulation.

Participants

Participants consisted of formerly incarcerated individuals who experienced significant religious and existential transformation during their incarceration. Selection was conducted through purposive sampling, focusing on individuals who demonstrated a conscious engagement with religious practices and self-reflective processes while imprisoned.

Inclusion criteria required participants to be adult males aged between 25 and 55, with a minimum incarceration period of one year, and who had voluntarily participated in prison-based religious activities. Exclusion criteria included individuals with ongoing psychiatric conditions that might impair narrative coherence or recall of spiritual experiences. The final sample included ten participants, all of whom had been released within the last two years. Their educational backgrounds varied from primary education to university-level attainment.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face in confidential settings chosen by the participants. The interviews followed a flexible protocol that included open-ended questions designed to elicit deep reflections on spiritual experiences, moral conflicts, and transformations during incarceration.

Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Interviews were conducted in a quiet, private environment to ensure emotional safety and comfort. Verbatim transcription was performed following each session. In cases where participants became emotionally distressed, interviews were paused, and participants were offered the option to discontinue. A field note journal was also maintained to capture contextual and non-verbal cues that enriched the interpretative analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which emphasizes the co-construction of meaning between the participant's narrative and the researcher's interpretative engagement. Transcribed data were reviewed multiple times to ensure immersion.

Key phrases and statements were coded and grouped into meaning units, which were then clustered into emergent themes. These themes were examined across participants to identify convergences and divergences in experience. The analysis proceeded through a six-step iterative process, which included data familiarization, initial coding, development of emergent themes, cross-case analysis, synthesis of thematic structure, and articulation of essential meanings.

Qualitative data software (NVivo) was utilized to organize, code, and retrieve textual data, facilitating transparency and traceability of analytical decisions. The process aimed to illuminate the existential dimensions of participants' spiritual journeys, anchored in their individual lifeworlds.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional ethics review board prior to data collection. All participants were provided with written and verbal explanations of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Written informed consent was obtained from each participant. Anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms, and identifiable information was excluded from all transcripts and final reporting. Data were stored securely in encrypted digital files accessible only to the research team. The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and conformed to national guidelines for social research ethics.

RESULTS

Awakening in Isolation – Experiencing Divine Presence in the Depth of Confinement

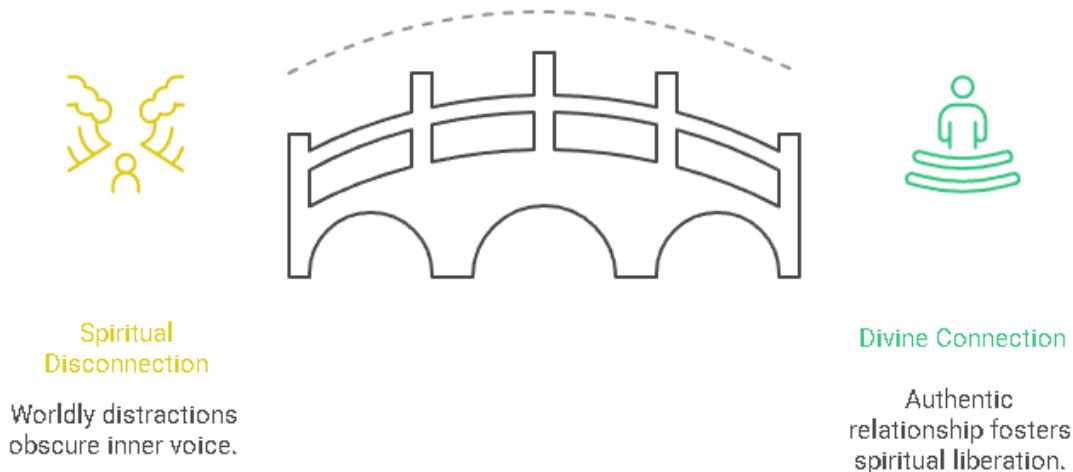
Participants described prison as a paradoxical space where physical confinement initiated a profound sense of spiritual liberation. Rather than a place of punishment, the prison became an unexpected site of awakening a sacred solitude where they encountered a deeper relationship with God.

“I began to feel that Allah had never left me, especially in the darkest moments. Prison became the place where I finally heard His voice.” (Participant 4)

Several participants narrated how their isolation stripped away worldly distractions, allowing them to confront their inner selves. This confrontation gave rise to a sense of remorse, but also opened a path toward divine connection. The spatial silence of incarceration was interpreted not as emptiness, but as a spiritual echo chamber.

“No television, no phone, no one to fool. I could only speak with God. For the first time, I was honest with Him and with myself.” (Participant 2)

Prison Isolation Sparks Spiritual Awakening and Divine Connection



The Path of Repentance – Religious Rituals as Healing Practice

For many participants, repentance was not a one-time act but an ongoing journey marked by religious rituals, such as prayer, fasting, and scriptural recitation. These practices were not merely obligations but were imbued with deeply personal significance. They became vehicles of healing and ethical realignment.

“When I bowed in prayer, I felt my crimes unfold in my mind. But instead of shame, I found grace. Each rakaat was like washing my soul.” (Participant 7)

The participants emphasized that these rituals, when practiced in solitude and sincerity, became transformative rather than performative. Religious acts, typically communal in nature, assumed new depth in solitary practice restoring a sense of agency and ethical clarity.

Redemption through Reflection – Reconstructing Moral Identity

Participants reported engaging in deep existential reflection, leading to a reconstruction of moral identity. They no longer defined themselves solely by their past actions but by their capacity for change and spiritual growth.

“I don’t call myself a criminal anymore. I call myself a human who failed but then found the courage to stand up.” (Participant 5)

This shift was closely linked to what participants described as a ‘spiritual reorientation.’ The self was no longer viewed as a static entity shaped by crime, but as an evolving being in pursuit of

ethical and religious renewal. For some, this redefinition was facilitated by religious mentors or fellow inmates who shared similar paths of transformation.

Community of the Converted – Shared Spirituality among the Marginalized

Although prison is often portrayed as a space of violence and despair, participants also found a surprising sense of spiritual community. Shared rituals, informal discussions about religion, and mutual support created an emergent ethical brotherhood. In this community, religiosity functioned as a binding force, replacing prior group affiliations rooted in criminality.

“We used to gather not to talk about the streets, but to read the Qur’an and cry. We became brothers in repentance.” (Participant 1)

This theme highlights the social dimension of spiritual transformation how personal religiosity, when shared, fostered empathy and collective ethical development. The prison mosque, study circles, and peer-led sermons played a central role in facilitating this experience.

The phenomenological analysis reveals that incarceration, while physically restrictive, became a fertile ground for profound spiritual encounters and existential redefinition. Participants’ narratives converge around themes of divine presence in solitude, ritualized repentance, moral reconstruction, and the birth of a spiritual community. These experiences are not merely psychological coping mechanisms but are understood by the participants as genuine transformations rooted in existential authenticity and religious devotion.

DISCUSSION

The present study revealed that incarceration, while often associated with punishment and social marginalization, can serve as a profound site of existential and spiritual transformation. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, participants described solitary moments, ritual practices, and shared reflections that reconstructed their understanding of self, morality, and divine presence thus addressing the central question of how imprisoned individuals experience and make meaning of religious transformation.

These findings offer direct insight into the research question by uncovering the internal processes through which inmates engage in ethical realignment and spiritual renewal. Rather than being passive recipients of institutional religious programming, participants emerged as active agents of their own moral reinvention. Their narratives emphasized personal accountability, introspective awareness, and emotional vulnerability dimensions that cannot be adequately captured by conventional behavioral metrics or institutional assessments. In doing so, the study contributes a nuanced understanding of spiritual awakening in carceral contexts as a deeply human experience rooted in silence, suffering, and self-confrontation.

The results resonate with and extend prior work by Smith et al. (2019), who observed religious coping as a psychological strategy, but this study goes further by situating such coping within existential reflection and ethical reconstruction. Similarly, while Ahmad and Yusuf (2021) acknowledged the value of spiritual rituals in fostering repentance, the current findings highlight how those rituals become transformative only when internalized within the individual’s personal narrative. This aligns with Heidegger’s concept of “being-toward-death,” where awareness of one’s finitude prompts a search for authentic meaning. The study also supports the limitations noted in literature that relies heavily on external indicators of religiosity, reaffirming the necessity of phenomenological approaches to fully grasp the inner contours of inmate experiences.

The implications of these findings extend beyond individual narratives, offering significant insight for correctional systems, religious counselors, and rehabilitation programs. The transformative experiences described by participants underscore the need for carceral environments that allow space for personal reflection, spiritual exploration, and ethical self-reconstruction. From a cultural and professional perspective, the study calls for a shift in how incarcerated individuals are perceived not merely as offenders, but as moral agents capable of introspection and redemption. By recognizing the

depth of existential change that can occur in prison, policymakers and practitioners may reconsider how spiritual support is integrated into correctional frameworks.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations that must be acknowledged. The sample size, though appropriate for phenomenological research, was limited to ten formerly incarcerated males within a specific sociocultural context. This restricts the transferability of findings to broader populations, such as female inmates or individuals from different religious backgrounds. Furthermore, the reliance on retrospective narratives may be influenced by memory reconstruction or post-release experiences. While these narratives offer valuable insight into subjective meaning, they do not represent objective outcomes or universal truths about incarceration.

Future research may build upon these findings by exploring comparative perspectives across gender, religious affiliation, and cultural settings. Longitudinal studies that examine inmates' spiritual development during and after incarceration could offer a more dynamic understanding of how moral and existential identities evolve over time. Additionally, integrating phenomenological insights with other qualitative or mixed-method approaches could enrich the multidimensional understanding of spirituality in correctional life. Such inquiries would continue to expand the theoretical and practical significance of existential and ethical transformation within marginalized populations.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experience of spiritual and moral transformation among formerly incarcerated individuals through an interpretative phenomenological lens. The findings revealed that incarceration, though often stigmatized, served as a profound context for existential reflection, repentance, and the reconstruction of ethical identity. Participants described solitude, religious rituals, and shared spiritual practices as catalysts for existential awakening and renewed moral agency. Beyond restating known behavioral outcomes, this study advances theoretical understanding by framing prison spirituality as a meaning-making process rooted in Heideggerian existential structures—being, guilt, and authenticity—rather than as compliance with institutional religious programs.

This reconceptualization contributes to a more nuanced phenomenology of carceral spirituality and introduces the concept of "ritualized moral agency" as an emergent construct worthy of future theoretical elaboration. The study thus offers a human-centered perspective on rehabilitation, one that foregrounds subjective meaning and ethical self-reconstruction. Future research could adopt comparative designs involving female inmates, whose spiritual narratives may be shaped by gendered experiences of confinement and shame. Interfaith studies could also illuminate how different theological frameworks (e.g., Islamic, Christian, or Indigenous cosmologies) mediate processes of forgiveness and ethical rebirth. In addition, longitudinal designs tracking post-release trajectories would provide critical insight into the durability and evolution of spiritual transformation over time.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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