

# *Time for Change:*

*A Study of Religious Conversion and Self-Identity in Prison.*

by

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## THESIS SUMMARY

This thesis provides a sociological analysis of religious conversion in prison. In depth-interviews were conducted in order to obtain accounts of prisoners' experiences and subjective perceptions of conversion.

Four main research objectives are addressed. Firstly, questions about prisoners' identity are considered. Secondly, the social processes involved in religious conversion are analysed, paying particular attention to the meaning of religious conversion for prisoners. Thirdly, an analysis of the role of religion in the everyday lives of converts is provided. Lastly, the process of personal change that accompanies conversion is discussed, to enhance the analysis of self-identity and personal change more generally.

The way in which prisoners' self-identity was questioned prior to conversion is discussed. The importance of experiences other than imprisonment in this process is particularly highlighted.

This thesis emphasises the role of both reflective and interactive processes in religious conversion. The ways in which self-reflection led to a contemplation of religious ideas is highlighted, as is how participation in religious activities drew individuals into religious life and belief. These considerations are placed within the context of prison life.

The role of religion in the everyday lives of prisoners is explored. In particular, the role of religion in enabling inmates to transcend the restrictions of the prison environment, and reconceptualise themselves and their lives, is highlighted.

Although the thesis is about religious conversion within the particular context of the prison, changes in self-identity and behaviour are viewed more widely. The analysis highlights the ways in which self-identity is negotiated in everyday life, and emphasises the dual roles of self-reflection and interaction in its construction and maintenance.

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## Introduction.

This thesis considers how we might understand religious conversion in prison sociologically. The impetus for this study came from a number of reports in both the secular and religious press (for example Palau 1993, Kershaw 1999, McGrandle 1996, Millington 1998) about prison conversion. Although this is not a new phenomenon, a number of Christian publications in 1996 and 1997 (for example Apichella 1996, Powe 1996, Ward 1997) documented a large increase in the number of such conversions. These claims centred around HMP Lewes, where there were a reported 262 conversions to Christianity between January and July 1995. Whether or not such figures are accurate, these reports pointed to a phenomenon that is very much under-researched from a sociological perspective.

These reports, along with books written by those who have experienced conversions in prison (for example Jackopson 1981, Hamilton 1997), argue that prisoners have been transformed through conversion to Christianity<sup>1</sup>. One article claimed that:-

...99 per cent of the men are completely rehabilitated and permanently changed.

(Ward 1997, 23)

These claims have impacted upon prison policy in the USA, Israel<sup>2</sup> and now Britain, as religious rehabilitation programmes have been implemented on specially designated religious wings of prisons (Kershaw 1999, Timor 1998).

All this begs the question of how we can understand religious conversion in prison from a sociological perspective, and, more specifically, how we can understand the personal change that apparently accompanies it. Following this, the research for this project was designed to address the question '**How can religious conversion in prison be understood sociologically?**'.

The study can be located as part of a recent resurgence of interest in religious conversion (Percy 2000, Lamb and Bryant 1999, Romain 2000). It sits at the interface between three different areas of sociological enquiry, investigations into human identity (Jenkins 1996, Giddens 1991), research into religious conversion, much of which was conducted during the 1970s and 1980s in response to the rising number of New Religious Movements (Snow and Machalek 1984, Rambo 1989, Beckford 1978, Barker 1984), and

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<sup>1</sup> The most recent case to be publicised was that of Karla Faye Tucker, who was on death row in Texas, USA. She appealed against the death penalty on the grounds that her conversion to Christianity had transformed her, and that she was involved in Christian work in prison. Her appeal was turned down and she was executed in March 1998. Information about this case was obtained from [www.abcnews.aol.com](http://www.abcnews.aol.com) and [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) on 2.3.98.

<sup>2</sup> The religious rehabilitation programmes in Israel are based on the Jewish rather than the Christian faith.

enquiry into the effect on individuals of the prison and other institutional regimes (Bettleheim 1986, Goffman 1991, Sykes 1958).

Consideration of this literature points to reasons why the prison might be a particularly good context in which to base a study of religious conversion and personal change. Prison can be seen as one of a variety of contexts in which self-identity might be questioned. This questioning may occur as a result of mortification processes (Goffman 1991, Bettleheim 1986) that occur when a person enters a total institution, such as removal from the home environment, loss of personal possessions, and identification of self by the use of a number or surname. It may also occur as a result of the process of 'prisonisation' (Clemmer 1958, 1970) during the course of a prison sentence, replacing an individual's own values and attitudes with those of the institution.

Whilst the definition of what constitutes a total institution, and whether the prison can be defined as such, is open to debate, and it is acknowledged that different people make use of different adaptive strategies within an institution (Goffman 1991), we would expect imprisonment and enforced adherence to the prison regime to have some effects on self-identity. The prison environment certainly constitutes what Berger and Luckmann (1991) termed a 'marginal situation' where the basic parameters of everyday life are altered, and taken-for-granted assumptions, concerning appropriate ways of acting, are undermined. By looking at the accounts of prisoners, this study addresses whether their self-identity has been questioned, either before or during imprisonment, and if so, the processes through which this questioning occurred.

Conversion to religion has been viewed as a process through which individuals actively seek to adopt a new world view and reformulate their self-identity (Barker 1984, Taylor 1976). It seems plausible that a religious world view might be adopted by prisoners in order to replace existing ways of interpreting the world, that prisoners might turn to religion in order to find ways in which to live successfully in the prison environment, and to deal with questions that have been raised about self-identity. According to Musgrove (1977), marginal situations are powerful agencies of resocialisation where individuals are rendered particularly open to new ways of perceiving themselves and organising their lives. Studying religious conversion in the prison context allows us to consider both ways in which previous world views and conceptions of self are undermined, and ways in which new ones are attained. This study looks at the process of conversion in prison, particularly taking account of the meaning that involvement in religion had for those who converted. It discusses the ways in which inmates came to participate in activities organised by the prison chaplaincy and how Christianity came to be defined by them as attractive, appropriate, and worth pursuing further.

There is little mention in the existing literature on conversion of the way in which, following conversion, a religious world view is rendered continually plausible for the convert. For commitment to religion to be maintained, it must be effective in the everyday lives of converts, continually providing them with evidence that their decision to adopt religious beliefs was a good one. This study not only provides insight into the

way in which inmates might encounter religion and find it attractive, it also provides an assessment of the role of Christianity in the everyday lives of prison converts, describing the ways in which it provides orientation towards daily life and towards the future. It also looks at other processes that promote continued adherence to Christian beliefs.

A further impetus behind the study was Berger and Luckmann's (1991) contention that:-

If the processes involved in the extreme cases are clarified, those of less extreme cases will be understood more easily.

(Berger and Luckmann 1991, 176)

This is a sentiment echoed by Goffman (1991) and Bettelheim (1986) in their studies of 'extreme situations'. Conversion need not be seen as a specifically religious phenomenon (Greil and Rudy 1983, 1984; Long and Hadden 1983) and therefore the processes involved when self-identity is questioned, and personal change is achieved through religious conversion in prison, can enhance our understanding of personal change more generally, and the ways in which self-identity is negotiated in everyday life. A concern to understand these issues is driven by an understanding of self-identity as a process that is continually negotiated throughout adult life (Goffman 1987, Mead 1967). Using prison converts' accounts of personal change through conversion, this study provides an analysis of changes in self-identity, behaviour, and ways of interpreting the world. It discusses both the way in which personal change can be achieved through religion, and how such changes can shed light on the way in which personal change, more generally, might be achieved.

The above concerns are reflected in the objectives that were formulated for this research. These are:-

- 1) To consider the processes through which self-identity is rendered problematic for those in prison.
- 2) To provide an account of the process of religious conversion in prison, particularly with regard to the meaning that conversion has for prison converts.
- 3) To analyse the way in which conversion to Christianity impacts upon the everyday lives of prison inmates, and the processes through which commitment is maintained.
- 4) To analyse the social processes involved in conversion in the prison setting in such a way as to enhance our understanding of self-identity and personal change more generally.

The scene is set for the discussion of these objectives by a review of literature in Chapter 1. This starts with a discussion of studies that consider the effect of the prison environment on inmates. This provides some insight into ways in which self-identity might be questioned by imprisonment, and a chance to address the context in which this research is set. There follows a thematic discussion of existing studies of religious conversion and the few studies which consider the role of religion in prison. Problems with previous work are identified and the way in which this study fills gaps in our

knowledge about conversion is outlined. This chapter also includes a review of the theoretical standpoint from which the study is approached, and the way the individual and their relationship to society is conceptualised. Chapter 2 outlines the way in which this study was designed, the methods used to obtain data, and the methodological issues that arose during the course of the research.

Chapters 3 to 6 mirror the objectives for the research. Chapter 3 considers ways in which self-identity was questioned for inmates both before and during imprisonment. It also provides an analysis of the experience of imprisonment that provided a context for conversion. Chapter 4 considers the process of conversion itself, describing the ways in which inmates encountered and became interested in Christianity, and the way that this interest was developed through participation in activities organised by the prison chaplaincy. Chapter 5 looks at the ways in which, following conversion, Christianity impacted upon the lives of prison converts. It provides an analysis of the way in which a religious world view enabled converts to live successfully in the prison environment, rebuild positive conceptions of self, and orient successfully towards the future. It also gives an account of ways in which beliefs are confirmed and commitment maintained on a day to day basis.

Chapter 6 reflects upon the accounts of personal change given by the converts. There is an analysis of the way in which Christian beliefs give rise to changes in self-identity, particularly with reference to overcoming stigma. There is also an examination of how we can theorise the change that occurs as a result of conversion to Christianity. Accounts of change are then used to provide insight into why Christianity was an effective agent of change for these individuals, and what criteria might be necessary for personal change in general to be accomplished. There is also a discussion of the way in which individuals act out changes in the way they see themselves, and the way that such changes, and conversion, are incorporated into a coherent biographical narrative by converts.

Lastly, Chapter 7 weighs up what this study has contributed to sociological knowledge about imprisonment, conversion and personal change. The limitations of the study are acknowledged, and further research that might build upon the findings is identified.

## Chapter One

# The Problems of Imprisonment and the Process of Religious Conversion.

This chapter aims to provide an overview of existing literature about imprisonment and religious conversion. Reviewing this literature serves to locate the present study within other areas of sociological interest, particularly in the light of the dearth of studies linking religion to the prison context.

As we have seen, one of the interesting aspects of this study is that it is concerned with two experiences that might affect self-identity: imprisonment, which may break down the individual in some way, leading to a crisis in self-concept and a questioning of established ways of acting and interpreting life; and religious conversion, which may function to provide a new world view, basis for action, and ways to think about self and others. In order to frame the study of these issues, this chapter firstly provides an overview of literature regarding imprisonment, in order to identify problems which prison inmates may face, and some of the ways in which they try to deal with them. I then turn to a consideration of studies of religious conversion, addressing the way in which the process of conversion has been theorised and the direction that recent research concerning conversion has taken.

The final part of the chapter is concerned with the way in which changes in self-identity might be theorised. Here I outline the various theoretical orientations from which I draw in theorising conversion as a change in self-identity.

### The Prison Environment and Self-Identity.

Before looking at how conversion might occur in the prison environment, it is necessary to consider some of the processes that may affect individuals living in prison prior to, and following, their conversion. The literature which I will consider here addresses processes that impact upon the lives of those in prison and the ways in which they affect behaviour and self-identity.

Firstly, I will consider studies which address the impact of imprisonment on the individual and the ways in which they adapt to institutional life. Secondly, I will review literature concerning ways in which prison inmates change during their sentence, the concept of prisonisation and inmates' fear of deterioration. I will then discuss ways in which religion in prison has been theorised.

## ***Mortification.***

Goffman (1961) and others who have studied total institutions (e.g. Bettelheim 1960) have drawn our attention to a variety of 'mortification' processes which occur when an individual enters a total institution. Although Goffman's main study was conducted in a mental hospital, he also regarded the prison as a total institution and gave examples from studies of the prison environment to back up his arguments. His analysis of both 'mortification' processes and subsequent strategies of adaptation to the institution was centred in a concern with self-identity and is therefore relevant for our purposes. He argued that,

The recruit comes into the establishment with a conception of himself made possible by certain stable social arrangements in his home world. Upon entrance, he is immediately stripped of the support provided by these arrangements. In the accurate language of some of our oldest total institutions, he begins a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations and profanations of self. His self is systematically, if often unintentionally, mortified.

(Goffman 1961, 24)

Goffman then stated that these processes are fairly standard within total institutions and include role dispossession, 'civil death', having extensive notes written about ones self, being photographed, weighed, fingerprinted, assigned a number, having personal possessions removed, being undressed and issued with institutional clothing, being instructed on rules of conduct, having quarters assigned, being addressed by number or surname only, and being tested for obedience and submission to authority. Loss of what Goffman (1961) termed 'identity equipment', including name, clothing, usual washing products and so on means that the inmate can no longer present the self that he did on the outside, and no longer has a stable personalised environment to remind him who he is. This, coupled with lack of privacy, lack of different spheres of interaction, public availability of information about ones self, and forced association with a particular group of others, means that even after the admission procedures have stopped, the self-identity of the inmate is continually undermined.

Sykes (1958, 1970) argued that the mere fact of being in prison serves as a particularly harsh reminder of the prisoner's lost status and rejection by society,

The prisoner is never allowed to forget that, by committing a crime, he has forgone his claim to the status of a full-fledged, trusted member of society.

(Sykes 1970, 448)

Sykes (1958, 1970) also identified aspects of prison life which attacks the self-identity of the inmate. He referred to the deprivation of goods and services, which in mainstream society play an important part in defining the individual's conception of himself; the 'social definitions which equate his material deprivation with his personal inadequacy'

(Sykes 1970, 450); and the deprivation of heterosexual relationships which may generate anxiety about masculinity and his status as 'male', denying him the picture of himself usually reflected through the eyes of the female half of the population. He also referred to deprivations of autonomy, security, and stability, and to difficulties in forming relationships in the prison environment.

Sykes (1958, 1970) asserted that the conditions and deprivations of imprisonment are a constant threat to the prisoner's self conception, as is the mere fact of being in prison which reminds the inmate that they have been rejected by society. Sykes (1958, 1970) and Goffman (1961) both contended that if inmates are to endure psychologically, they must find ways of rejecting their rejecters (those in the outside world and those in authority), and ways of adapting themselves to the conditions in which they have to live.

### ***The Inmate Social System.***

Sykes (1958, 1970, Sykes and Messinger 1970) contended that adaptation is achieved through the formation and adoption of a variety of social roles, which together form the inmate social system. The values of this system, he asserted, stress inmate solidarity and cohesion,

A cohesive inmate society provides the prisoner with a meaningful social group with which he can identify himself and which will support him in his struggles against his condemners.

(Sykes and Messinger 1970, 407)

Goffman (1961) had a more negative view of adaptation, stressing, not identification with other prisoners, but resistance to identification with the institution. He stated that,

Built right into the social arrangements of an organisation, then, is a thoroughly embracing conception of the member - and not merely a conception of him *qua* member, but behind this a conception of him *qua* human being.

(Goffman 1961, 164)

Even the privileges which are offered, he argued, infer some kind of definition of the inmate and their needs and desires. All activity which is expected of them implies a conception of them and generates assumptions about identity. In resisting identification with the institution, the individual can resist the definition of himself which it implies.

The inmate culture, or 'underlife' of the institution, is, for Goffman (1961), about resisting institutional conceptions of self, and the world view that comes with them. Inmates 'withdraw from the official self and the world officially available to it' (Goffman 1961, 170) through what Goffman termed 'secondary adjustments'. Such adjustments involve engaging in unauthorised activities, using unauthorised means, or

even showing much more commitment to institutional codes than is asked for or desired. This process is summed up neatly in the following quote,

... we find that participants decline in some way to accept the official view of what they should be putting into and getting out of the organisation and, behind this, of what sort of self and world they are to accept for themselves. Where enthusiasm is expected, there will be apathy; where loyalty, there will be disaffection; where attendance, there will be absenteeism; where robustness, some kind of illness; where deeds are to be done, varieties of inactivity... wherever worlds are laid on, underlives develop.

(Lemert and Branman 1997, 81)

Goffman (1961) argued that although this process is very visible in hospitals and prisons, it is not exclusive to them. The kind of defence it points to can be seen as an essential aspect of the self.

Models of the inmate culture, such as those put forward by Goffman (1961) and Sykes (1958, 1970), have been termed 'deprivation models'. They concentrate on the way in which adopting a new value system helps to mitigate the 'pains of imprisonment' (Sykes and Messinger 1970), and concentrate on adaptation as a strategy rooted in, and to overcome, the deprivations of the prison environment.

In opposition to this model, the 'importation model' was advanced by, for example, Irwin (1970), Irwin and Cressey (1962) and Heffernan (1972). Those who advocated this approach recognised that sentencing, conviction and imprisonment are problematic for individuals because they constitute a collapse of the 'world as usual'. Imprisonment removes the individual from a network of social relationships, and renders them unable to fulfil obligations and social roles. Irwin (1970) argued,

One's identity, one's personality system, one's coherent thinking about himself depend upon a relatively familiar, continuous, and predictable stream of events. In the Kafkaesque world of the booking room, the jail cell, the interrogation room, and the visiting room, the boundaries of the self collapse.

(Irwin 1970, 39)

In this respect his argument is similar to those put forward by Goffman (1961) and Sykes (1958, 1970). However, advocates of the importation perspective have disputed that the process of admission to prison, and the institutional environment, eradicate or render unimportant all former orientations, identities and modes of adjustment. They have also taken issue with Sykes' (1970) contention that the origin of the inmate social system lies within the institution, and exists primarily to mitigate the pains of imprisonment, arguing that his studies (Sykes 1958, 1970, Sykes and Messinger 1970) overlooked the dramatic effect that behavioural patterns imported from outside the prison can have on the conduct and modes of adaptation of inmates. According to importation theorists,

... [prisoners] bring a set of values with them when they come to prison, and they do not leave these values at the gate.

(Irwin and Cressey 1962, 145)

Irwin and Cressey (1962) isolated three distinct subcultures within the prison, which derive their characteristics from the social situations of prisoners in the outside world. These subcultures involve ways of adapting to the institutional environment, *and* ways of thinking about and relating to the outside world, for instance, whether and how individuals plan for release.

The 'thief subculture' shares its values with the criminal subculture of the outside world and is carried into the prison by career criminals. Their reference groups remain outside the prison and their method of adaptation is largely concerned with making their time within the institution as easy as possible and planning for release. 'Convict subculture' is associated with those who have spent large parts of their lives in institutions, although Irwin (1970) argues that some of its tenets rub off on all prisoners. For those who adhere to this system, prison constitutes the only world to which they orient themselves. Reference groups are within the institution, and methods of adaptation are largely concerned with living successfully in prison, and enhancing status in the prison hierarchy. The 'legitimate subculture' is linked with those who did not have any involvement with criminal activity on the outside. These individuals are concerned with achieving goals through means which are legitimate outside the prison context, and measure success using mainstream criteria.

Irwin (1970) and Irwin and Cressey (1962) demonstrated that it is necessary to study social processes in prison with reference to the entire lives of the prisoners being studied, rather than merely addressing what happens to them once they are imprisoned. Cohen and Taylor (1972) shared this view, and expanded on the importation perspective. However, they were concerned that many studies of adaptation to prison portrayed prisoners as essentially passive, failing to consider the meaning that subcultures or secondary adjustments have for different individuals. In other studies, inmates were not credited with having their own ideology through which to organise their experience and fight back against the institution, and the history of both prison and individual are not considered. Cohen and Taylor (1972) stress that prison subculture is formed through a conscious, creative process, rather than existing as a set of pre-existing prescriptions and roles. With this in mind, the meaning of imprisonment for individual inmates, and the histories of both prison and prisoner must be taken into account.

### ***The Meaning of Imprisonment.***

Like others, Cohen and Taylor (1972) began their study of 'psychological survival' in prison by outlining the way in which the order and meaning of life is disrupted through imprisonment and how this can impact upon the self-concept of the individual. They argued that being imprisoned can cause individuals to see the fragility

of the web of meaning they previously took-for-granted. This realisation can lead to reflection upon issues of existence, life and death, which are usually bracketed from everyday consideration. Throughout their study, Cohen and Taylor (1972) were concerned with the way in which ideologies, imported from outside the prison, function to help prisoners make sense of their situation. According to them, a range of such ideologies and identities are brought into prison, and are not necessarily stripped away by mortification processes.

Cohen and Taylor (1972) contended that prisons should not be seen as 'people-processing factories'. The pre-institutional self, according to them, does not lose importance in the way that Goffman (1961) assumes. They stressed, for example, that a group of prisoners who appear to share a criminal code, are not necessarily a homogenous group, but differ in important ways in terms of lifestyle, opinions and ideologies. In the lives of those they studied,

...violence had been displayed in a wide variety of very different circumstances; its mere employment did not in any way constitute a common behavioural or social link between the men.

(Cohen and Taylor 1972, 151)

Ideologies, according to Cohen and Taylor (1972), not only constitute a means of making sense of imprisonment and surviving institutional attacks on the self, but also link the crime and past life of the individual to life in the present through pointing to their relationship to authority. It is with reference to this relationship that Cohen and Taylor (1972) categorised the prisoners they studied, analysing their careers, the influence of biography, modes of adaptation, and ideology, in order to create a fuller picture of inmates than had been produced by other studies. They argued that:-

The diversity of the ideologies which men refer to can be lost sight of by sticking to such concepts as inmate culture and criminal culture in order to explain differences in adaptation to prison.

(Cohen and Taylor 1972, 158)

During their study, they found evidence in the talk of inmates, of ideologies that were variously political, religious, to do with maximising pleasure, subverting rules and so on.

That the meaning of imprisonment can be transformed by ideology is backed up by the work of Bettelheim (1960). He found that political prisoners in the concentration camp survived better than those who did not have a political ideology with which to make sense of their imprisonment. According to Cohen and Taylor (1972), different ideologies not only make sense of imprisonment in different ways, but have very different shelf-lives. Some, they argued, are long lasting, such as those which involve a continual search for new ways to subvert rules. Others, such as confrontation and escape, may die out after several unsuccessful escape attempts. Individuals may also discover new ideologies through conversion, which can occur as a result of a number of factors including,

... prolonged self-examination, reading, conversion by another believer...  
(Cohen and Taylor 1972, 162)

Although ideologies are imported from outside and are used consciously and creatively by inmates, according to Cohen and Taylor (1972), it is factors within the prison that influence which ideologies stand the test of time,

New ideologies may enter the culture from outside and be taken over by inmates, although this process will be partly dependent on the availability of certain ideological 'props' within the prison...  
(Cohen and Taylor 1972, 179)

It seems that there are many elements, both internal and external to the prison, which affect the prisoner and which we must take into consideration.

A review of these studies has demonstrated some of the ways in which the experience of imprisonment can undermine self-identity. It is clear that prisoners must seek out ways to adapt to the vastly different environment in which they find themselves, and that this adaptation is, in some ways, constrained by the nature of the institution. It is important to note, however, that prisoners are not passively controlled by institutional forces, and do not leave past orientations completely behind. It is necessary to consider the lives of prisoners in their entirety, rather than merely what happens to them after imprisonment; the different ways that prisoners try to make sense of their situation; and the active way in which individuals attribute meaning to their lives, define both themselves and the institution, and forge adaptive strategies in order to exist within the prison environment. This study therefore includes a consideration of the interaction between individual, biographical and contextual processes.

In addition to considering what happens to individuals in the initial stages of imprisonment, as they adjust to institutional life, it is also necessary to consider processes that affect them during the course of their sentence. The studies reviewed in the following sections have considered these processes.

### ***Fear of Deterioration.***

The prisoner's fear of deterioration and institutionalisation whilst in prison has been brought to our attention in several studies (Cohen and Taylor 1972, Sapsford 1978, 1983, Flanagan 1982, Schmid and Jones 1991). All point to prisoners' hopes of leaving prison unchanged. This concern has often been associated with those serving life sentences, and other long term prisoners.

Flanagan (1982) asserted that at the forefront of the inmate's mind are concerns that, in the absence of personal relationships and the usual props to their identity, they will be unable to discount the definitions of self offered during imprisonment, and will

come to view themselves in a derogatory way. Prisoners also worry about the consequences of their inability to mark time and think about the future whilst in prison, and, following years of passivity and adherence to the institutional system, fear that they may lose the ability to think and make decisions for themselves. Cohen and Taylor (1972) noted that fear of deterioration as a result of adapting to the prison environment, for those they studied, stemmed from the visibility of inmates who were regarded as institutionalised and who served as examples of what they might become. This problem has been identified as a feature of life for all stigmatised individuals living in an institutional environment. Such individuals can neither identify with those in the outside world, nor with those who have adapted totally to the institution (Shaw 1991). The longer they stay in the institution, the greater the fear that they will become like those they define as institutionalised.

Sapsford (1978) provided an overview of studies of institutional life which concluded that institutionalisation does occur in prisons and is characterised by apathy, lack of motivation and loss of interest in the outside world. One such theory is Clemmer's (1970) theory of 'prisonisation'. Clemmer (1970) argued,

Every man who enters the penitentiary undergoes prisonisation to some extent.

(Clemmer 1970, 479)

Following his study, we might perceive institutionalisation as an inevitable feature of life in prison.

Prisonisation was characterised by Clemmer (1970) as the degree to which prisoners take on the ways of thinking, talking and acting of the prison and adhere to the criminal perspective. This shift in the taken-for-granted reality of life, he contended, can have serious effects on the prisoner's ability to reintegrate effectively into society upon release. He argued that there are certain universal traits of prisonisation such as learning an inferior role, learning the slang of the institution, and the recognition that nothing is owed to the environment for the goods and food they are supplied with. These universal factors affect all prisoners, even if they don't become prisonised to the greatest extent, and members of in-groups of prisoners who are seen as characteristic of prison values and perspectives. According to Clemmer (1970),

...even if no other factor of the prison culture touches the personality of an inmate of many years residence, the influences of these universal factors are sufficient to make a man characteristic of the penal community and probably so disrupt his personality that a happy adjustment in any community becomes next to impossible.

(Clemmer 1970, 480)

He contended that the process of prisonisation is assisted by the absence or deterioration of relationships with people outside the prison; by allegiance to particular groups of

prisonised individuals within the prison; and makes the individual immune to the influence of a conventional value system.

Many prisoners deal with the threat of deterioration by seeing their time in prison as 'time out' from their real lives. Sapsford (1978) referred to prisoners' perceptions of life in prison being seen as a period of being in limbo, where no decisions about the future can be made. He saw this as a coping strategy for those with indeterminate length sentences. Similarly, Cohen and Taylor (1972) witnessed a tendency among inmates to live in the present, and Jose-Kampfner (1990) argued that her subjects saw their lives in prison as periods of 'existential death'. Schmid and Jones (1991) observed that prisoners attempted to preserve their 'outside selves' until their release by conceptualising their time in prison as distinct from the reality of everyday life. They constructed new, prison selves to participate in institutional life. Schmid and Jones (1991) argued that this strategy does not prevent prisoners from undergoing at least some change whilst in prison. Other studies, however, have led us to believe that deterioration and institutionalisation are not inevitable facets even of long term imprisonment.

### *Against Prisonisation.*

Wheeler (1977) has drawn our attention to the role which time plays in the process of prisonisation. He found that with length of time served, or institutional career phase progression, commitment to the inmate code and the ways of the prison did not simply increase as suggested by Clemmer (1958, 1970). Instead, indications of prisonisation followed a U shaped curve over time. This led him to believe that,

...inmates who have recently been in the broader community and inmates who are soon to return to that community are more frequently oriented in terms of conventional values.

(Wheeler 1977, 192)

This 'resocialisation' seemed to occur regardless of whether close relationships in prison had been established.

Wheeler (1977) concluded that patterns of adjustment to the prison environment are not driven solely by either internal or external factors. Whilst changes which occur in the early or middle phases of a sentence may reflect intra-prison factors, the transition from the middle to the late phase of imprisonment can be regarded as largely a response to the external world and the anticipation of rejoining it. This contention was also made by Jensen and Jones (1976) in their study of female inmates.

Cohen and Taylor (1972) found that long term prisoners never lost sight of the possibility of release. Jose-Kampfner (1990) suggested that, after going through progressive stages of denial, anger, depression, mourning and acceptance, the final stage that the female prisoners she studied went through was one of hope for the future. This is backed up by Sapsford (1978) who argued that even in the case of life sentence prisoners,

interest in the outside world does not decline although involvement with it inevitably does.

It seems clear that many prisoners do not lose sight of the outside world. Flanagan (1980, 1982), and Richards (1978) also found that prisoners' interest in the outside world did not decline during imprisonment. In fact, deprivations relating to factors external to the prison were felt more acutely than those pertaining to life inside. Richards (1978) noted that most important to inmates was the loss of relationships with people on the outside; it was this that they feared, and that was regarded as the most severe deprivation of all. Flanagan (1980, 1982) corroborated this and also acknowledged the substantial variety which exists in individual responses to incarceration. This is a matter which is taken up by Thomas (1973, 1977, 1977a) and which has resonance with the importation studies considered earlier. He considered how pre-prison factors, including age and social class, influenced degree of prisonisation, number and quality of outside relationships, and evaluation of post-prison life chances.

Sapsford's (1978) study has brought to our attention a particularly important division which must be borne in mind when studying the prison population, that is, the fundamental differences between life sentence prisoners and those with fixed term sentences. He argued that those serving indeterminate length sentences experience a whole different set of problems, and exhibit different methods of adaptation, to those whose sentences are of a set length. He criticised other studies, particularly Cohen and Taylor's (1972), for not taking this difference into consideration, arguing that it is the uncertainty surrounding the date of release which constitutes the main psychological problem for 'lifers',

...even if the fixed-term man fails parole, he still knows when he will be released, while the lifer, though he may know the average sentence, can never count on release until it is actually granted him. This uncertainty weighs heavily on lifers, for in some senses the whole of their future lives are at risk from moment to moment; they can never know that they have not condemned themselves to a vastly extended prison term because of one momentary aberration.

(Sapsford 1978, 130)

The findings of his study showed that a group of life sentence prisoners who had passed the average release point were much more likely to show signs of prisonisation than others. This leads us to believe that prisonisation has more to do with *hope* of rejoining the outside world than anything else.

Flanagan (1982) also pointed to special problems caused by the indeterminate nature of life sentences, such as the inability to mark time, and the barriers which exist to considering life after release. However, he asserted that,

...while we may be able to identify specific problems and stresses that putatively are unique to long-termers, it is useful to remember that those problems may differ from those faced by all prisoners more in degree than kind.

(Flanagan 1982, 115)

Although he argues that '...long term imprisonment per se does not necessarily lead to damage to the person' (Flanagan 1982, 116) he failed to consider how uncertainty and loss of hope may detrimentally affect those serving life sentences. This appears to distinguish them radically from those who know, not necessarily when, but that they will be released.

We can see that there has been little agreement on the processes that affect prisoners during their imprisonment and little research on the meaning of imprisonment to individual inmates. The studies that have addressed prisonisation again bring to our attention that prisoners are not a single, uniform group, and point to the necessity of considering the prisoner's relationship to both the internal and external world.

The studies reviewed here allow us to start to think about the problems and lives of individuals in prison. The present study seeks to address some of the gaps in sociological knowledge about imprisonment, taking account of the past lives of prisoners, which do not cease to have influence when they enter the prison; and exploring the way in which both past and present experiences are given meaning by individuals as they make sense of their imprisonment, and how it fits into their biography as a whole.

As this is a study of religious conversion within the prison environment it is also necessary to take account of studies which link religion to prison. As I have already said, studies which focus exclusively on this link are thin on the ground, but those that do, and those that mention it in passing, are considered in the following section.

### **The use of Religion in Prison.**

As stated previously, Cohen and Taylor (1972) viewed the possession of an ideology, which can make sense of the experience of imprisonment, as an important part of the way in which inmates adjust to prison life and survive assaults on their self-identity. They acknowledged that conversion to a new set of beliefs in prison can have positive effects upon inmates. In fact, they encouraged such ideological conversion in the sociology classes that they conducted in prison, introducing the prisoners to literature which may help to explain, or provide greater understanding of, their situation. They argued that,

...sustaining ideologies are crucial to survival in extreme situations.

(Cohen and Taylor 1972, 162)

Such ideologies can be religious, but need not be. However, they pinpointed religious ideologies as some of those which can provide lasting ways of interpreting and orienting towards the prison environment. Belief in God, for instance, is able to provide the lonely inmate with a feeling that they are never alone.

Irwin (1970) and Heffernan (1972) regarded the use of religion in prison as part of the adaptive strategy of the prisoner, arguing that there is a link between practising religion in prison and a desire to be part of conventional society. Irwin (1970) described one category of prisoners, the 'square John' group, as most likely to participate in religious activities. He argued that this group continue to use conventional society as their reference group. They view their imprisonment as the result of a flaw in their character, with which they must deal in order to return to the conventional way of life. Irwin (1970) outlined three common ways that they might do this: joining self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous; seeking the help of experts and attending therapy; or turning to religion. He did not, however, go into any more detail about how religion in particular might assist the individual in this process.

Heffernan (1972) also linked religion with the 'square' system of adaptation. This group, according to her, try to recreate a conventional way of life within the prison. She argued that doing a job in prison provides the major link with conventional society, allowing the adoption of the worker role, and identification with standards of conduct familiar from life outside the institution. Participation in religious activity provides the next most important link with the outside world,

...participation in religious services supplies a second bond with conventional society and symbolically its most fundamental expression.

(Heffernan 1972, 136)

According to Heffernan (1972) religion may be particularly helpful for the inmate in resisting assaults on the self-concept. Using religious criteria, they can define themselves in a positive way that transcends the negative social evaluations of their criminal status.

Heffernan (1972) recognised other ways in which religion may be used in the prison environment. Prisoners in her 'cool' category of adaptation, who want to make life in the institution as easy as possible, may use it purely for its instrumental value. Those in the 'life' category, who organise life around the institution, may evaluate religious participation in terms of whether it provides anything of economic value within the prison or affords increased power or authority over other inmates. Since making a life within the institution requires the formation of affective bonds, religion may also be utilised as a way of meeting and getting to know people. She argued that religion should logically be rejected by inmates due to its position as part of the prison system, and their need to reject the institution and its staff as 'acceptable agents of rehabilitation' (Heffernan 1972, 138). It is supported, however, primarily as an ideological basis for societal or staff rejection, or for the connections that it can foster. Heffernan (1972) was clear, however, that there is a big difference between those for whom religion becomes a

source of normative evaluation of life and self, and those for whom it remains purely instrumental.

A problem with Heffernan's (1972) study is that she did not make clear whether those prisoners who participate in religious activity within the prison brought their religious orientations with them or experienced a conversion whilst serving their sentence. There may be fundamental differences between these two groups. Johnson's (1987) study addressed whether previous experience of conventional religion might predict the likelihood of prison conversion. His findings suggest that factors concerning religiosity that are applicable in the outside world have no meaning to prison inmates. This is because,

...nothing else is as important to inmates as being in prison.

(Johnson 1987, 208)

Contrary to Heffernan (1972) and Irwin (1970), Johnson (1987) regarded modes of adaptation, and orientations and definitions imported from conventional society, as secondary in meaning to the fact of being an inmate. In this respect his analysis is congruent with those of Goffman (1961) and Sykes (1958, 1970).

Studies which have focused on the connection between religion and prison include those by Skotnicki (1996), Timor (1998), Arnold (1987) and Peck (1987). Skotnicki (1996) contended that recent research and perspectives on rehabilitation within the prison environment do not take account of the positive effect which adoption of religion might have on individuals in terms of halting the criminal career. He also acknowledged the role which religion can play in formation of relationships, that,

A religious conversion leads the subject into wilful communion with other members of the specific religious community...

(Skotnicki 1996, 38)

This community may, he argued, provide continuity and social reinforcement for the individual, even after release. Timor (1998) also pointed to the use of religion in rehabilitation, arguing that it provides a new world view through which to make sense of the world, through which self can be defined positively, and which replaces the criminal world view. In addition, it can provide purpose in life, relationships with others, shared goals between prisoners and staff, and hope for the future. His research was conducted on the religious wards of Israeli prisons where those who wished to practice religion were separated from the rest of the prison community. The success of such wards, for Timor (1998), rested on such separation from other prisoners and the old world view. Those interviewed for this study remained on the same wings as non-religious prisoners. The findings of this study, then, provide us with new knowledge about how a belief system is maintained without the necessity of isolation from alternatives.

Arnold (1987) stressed that prisoners need to feel accepted and valued following their rejection by society. This need, he argued, often follows a life of pain and rejection,

and may give rise to a desire to change, feel better about themselves, and find hope for the future. He stated,

The inmate needs to feel that regardless of what he has done, he can join in an accepting community of believers and achieve a kind of regeneration.

(Arnold 1987, 211)

Through a discussion of the conversions of four inmates, he also made reference to the positive role of being accepted into membership by a church, and the role which forgiveness plays in the lives of those who have committed crimes. He also noted the parallels which prisoners may identify between their own lives and those of historical figures in the Bible, arguing that,

Religious literature, particularly the Bible, is full of the life histories of individuals who went beyond the point where society can forgive.

(Arnold 1987, 212)

This provides hope for inmates that, even though they have done something which both they and others regard as bad or evil, there is a chance to go beyond feelings of rejection and find forgiveness. Taking into account the specific nature of the belief system to which inmates convert is important to fully appreciate the meaning that conversion has for them. This is reiterated later in this chapter, and in Chapters 4 and 5 which describe the conversion process and the way in which belief is maintained.

The main theme of Peck's (1987) study of American prisoners serving life without parole was the link between religious faith and hope for the future. He discussed the way in which individuals found purpose in life, an acceptable way of living, and a means of survival in prison, by re-defining their situation in religious terms. They learnt to accept life in prison, and many were convinced that, despite the nature of their sentence, they would one day be released through the intervention of God. Peck (1987) argued that,

Unable to control their fate through the legal system, and for all practical purposes abandoned by society, LWOP inmates create a world of optimism that transcends reality.

(Peck 1987, 173)

He also pointed to the conventional world view adopted by those who participate in religious activities, stating that religion performs a rehabilitative function that succeeds in '...accomplishing what the criminal justice system failed to achieve.' (Peck 1987, 173).

Peck also made reference to the fact that participation in religion is one of very few options for activity available in prison. In British prisons, religion has a special place within the system due to the historical relationship between the state and the

Church of England. Beckford (1997) argued that in the light of this relationship, prisons are interesting sites in which to study religious participation. There is a legal requirement for each prison to have a Church of England Chaplain. The Chaplain facilitates religious participation for every faith, working with visiting representatives of other religious groups. This means that although there is a shortage of activities in general, there is, in comparison, a fairly large selection of religious activities in which the prisoner can become involved. Therefore, although the number of inmates who register a religious faith on admission is declining,

...religious activities and claims are relatively privileged in prisons and can therefore make a difference to inmates' conditions of life.

(Beckford 1997, 106)

The relationship between the Church of England and the Prison Service also means that even though the Chaplain is required to facilitate religious participation for all faiths, Christianity enjoys privileged status in prison (Beckford 1997).

Beckford contended that, during imprisonment, prisoners may have,

...more time, better resources and stronger encouragement either to acquire an interest in religion and a personal faith or to intensify a previous commitment.

(Beckford 1997, 108)

He asserted, however, that conditions in individual prisons make this more or less likely. These different conditions were taken into account in the present study when considering why, and how, inmates first became involved with religion.

These different perspectives on the use of religion in prison make us aware of various functions that participation in religious activities, and conversion to a new belief system, might have in the prison environment: as a way of making sense of, and reinterpreting, imprisonment and self-identity; as a way of orienting towards conventional society; and as a method of mitigating 'the pains of imprisonment', and problems associated with being defined as a prisoner.

This review has demonstrated the limitations of previous studies, and these have been taken into account in the design of this study. For instance, it appears to be important to study prisoners in the context of their lives as a whole, rather than merely from the time of imprisonment; the present study therefore addresses a variety of aspects of pre-prison life. It is also important to acknowledge that prisoners are not affected in a uniform way by imprisonment, and are not passive recipients of social forces. Individuals have the ability to define situations differently from their contemporaries; imprisonment therefore means different things to different people. The way in which meaning is constructed by individuals in prison is one of the focal points for this study. Drawing from the accounts that inmates gave of their pre-prison lives, their crime, and their imprisonment, I explore the way in which they defined their situation and

themselves. I look, in particular, at how religion contributes to the way in which prisoners define themselves and their situation, and hence the way in which they organise and conduct themselves in everyday life.

As the data for this study were analysed, it was useful to bear in mind several questions arising from the prison literature. For instance, what is the place of religion in adaptation to prison? Might participation in religion be a form of adaptation to prison life or a mode of resisting the prescriptions and identity ascriptions of the institution? Might participation in religious activities be a way in which to transcend the restrictions of the institution, or might it be better seen as a process of taking advantage of one of the options available to kill time during imprisonment? It was also important to consider whether conversion to religion made inmates content with life in prison or whether it, in contrast, oriented them increasingly towards the outside world. Did it have a role in the construction of a life in prison which was centred around conventional codes of conduct, or was its role rather to do with addressing problems that individuals perceived in themselves, allowing them to successfully re-enter society?

I also considered the way in which participation in the religious community fostered the formation of relationships in an environment where this is usually difficult, and for individuals, many of whom have lost contact with friends and family on the outside. I will come back to these questions later where they are relevant in relation to the stories of those interviewed for this study.

These are some of the questions brought up by the particular context in which this study is set. Since it is a study of religious conversion in prison, a review of literature about the process of conversion is also needed. This literature is considered in the following sections.

### **Sociological Research on Religious Conversion.**

Conversion is paradoxical. It is elusive. It is inclusive. It destroys and it saves. Conversion is sudden and it is gradual. It is created totally by the action of God, and it is created totally by the action of humans. Conversion is personal and communal, private and public. It is both passive and active. It is a retreat from the world. It is a resolution of conflict and an empowerment to go into the world and to confront, if not create, conflict. Conversion is an event and a process. It is an ending and a beginning. It is final and open ended.

(Rambo 1993, 176)

This, the concluding quote from Rambo's (1993) book *Understanding Religious Conversion*, illustrates some of the questions that have been asked about religious conversion and some of the contradictions that have been found in trying to pin it down as a concept. Rambo (1993) concluded that 'conversion' has many different meanings

and can be applied to different phenomena including: individual instances of conversion to a new belief or group; change in the religious tradition of large numbers of people following missionary activity; changes to ways of living or to modes of relating to God and others, and changes in views about the nature of reality. He asserted that,

...it means just what a given individual or group want it to mean, neither more nor less.

(Rambo 1993, 3)

It is perhaps because conversion is such a complex and multi-faceted concept that an inspection of the sociological literature on the subjects seems unable to provide satisfactory answers to many of the questions that sociologists may wish to address. This has been recognised by Thumma (1991) who stated,

These articles have put a tremendous effort into proving or disproving certain theories, explaining why various scholars disagree about what is happening and trying to find out what steps people go through to convert. Yet after all of this there is very little agreement about what conversion really is.

(Thumma 1991, 187)

Many studies have been conducted as evaluations or criticisms of other studies, the general formula appearing to involve comment on other people's methods and theories, followed by recommendations for ways in which research might, more profitably, be conducted. Even where there is an attempt to bring together diverse findings and impose some form of order upon them (e.g. Long and Hadden 1983), no concrete conclusions about conversion are drawn. There is certainly no coherent body of sociological literature from which to draw, and that which does exist is not easily organised into analytical categories.

For the purpose of this review, I have organised some of the relevant literature into sections for consideration. This, however, is not how the studies themselves are organised but rather the way in which they best inform the current study. Before I review some of the models of conversion which have been offered, and ways in which the conversion process has been conceptualised, I will outline some criticisms of these studies.

### ***Problems with Studies of Conversion.***

Nearly all the existing studies refer to conversion to New Religious Movements. Most were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s when there was concern over the growing number of New Religions and why people might want to convert to them. Barker (1984) draws our attention to one of the reasons why this subject might get a lot of attention, that is, that we cannot understand why people with good jobs, homes and families might want to give up such lives to become members of a communal religious movement such as the

Unification Church. Thumma (1991) and Greil and Rudy (1983) draw our attention to the fact that we are unlikely to find the same processes operating during conversion to a movement of this sort as we do when studying converts to traditional evangelical Protestantism or Roman Catholicism,

...instead of focusing narrowly on conversion to 'fringe religions', a variety of conversion settings should be studied. This would entail broadening the concept of conversion to cover all cases of radical change in personal identity or perspective, and it would entail the examination of all settings in which such radical change takes place.

(Greil and Rudy 1983, 24)

Just as we may expect to find different processes involved in conversion to different kinds of religion, we might also expect to find different processes at work in different social settings. These differences serve to make the study of conversion a complex task. The need to consider such differences demands that those of us studying conversion narrow our field of study sufficiently that we can provide a depth of analysis that allows us to draw concrete conclusions about the process of conversion in our chosen setting.

A link can be drawn here to Rambo's (1993) assertion that studies of conversion should not be narrowly focused on the individual. Those individuals who convert do not live in a vacuum, but exist within a set of social circumstances, and have specific biographies. Conversion is influenced by a matrix of relationships, expectations and situations and we must therefore examine the political, religious, economic, social, cultural and interactional context in which conversion occurs. Individuals come from a variety of circumstances to convert to a religious group. This is usually ignored by theorists who attempt to provide general models of how conversion takes place. Studying conversion within the prison setting allows us to pay special attention to the social context of conversion and the biographies of individuals whilst maintaining a narrow focus for research. In this study we are considering individuals with importantly similar circumstances, who all live, and have made the decision to convert to religion, in a very similar environment. Conducting the study within this particular restrictive environment allows us to take social circumstances into consideration in a way which is not possible elsewhere. Those who experience religious conversion outside of a total institutional environment do not have such importantly similar social lives, even those entering movements with communal living arrangements do not come together until they have at least made some decisions about the movement and its appeal.

Rambo (1993) made us aware of the need to consider the individual in their social context, underlining the importance of considering the particulars of the prison environment, as we did in the previous section, as well as the need to consider the life of the individual in its entirety. This study does not focus on the process of conversion in isolation from other processes and experiences which have been, and remain, important to those who have converted. I have already stressed the need to consider the role of religion in the way in which individuals define themselves and their situation during

imprisonment, we must equally take account of the role of crime and imprisonment in the process of religious conversion. It is this that the present study seeks to do.

Also neglected, according to Rambo (1993), is the role of theology in conversion, the way that specific *beliefs* function in order to make conversion a possibility. He stated,

Phenomenologically speaking, interpretations that deny the religious dimension fail to appreciate the converts' experience...

(Rambo 1993, 10)

By focusing exclusively on those who have converted to Christianity during imprisonment, this study again narrows its focus to allow an in-depth analysis of the process of conversion which includes consideration of the role of particular strands of belief in the conversion experience.

With the exception of a few studies (e.g. Bankston, Forsyth and Floyd 1981), the meaning of conversion to individual converts, and their own experience, has not been addressed. There has been a tendency to try to provide universal, ideal type models of the conversion process. Such models neglect the way in which individuals construct conversion as meaningful in their current circumstances, and in the light of their specific biographies. Even studies which have talked about the active construction of meaning by individuals, have tended to theorise without giving priority to the accounts of converts. As stated previously, this study uses the accounts of converts to investigate the meaning of both conversion and imprisonment, and the relationship between them.

The last criticism of existing studies of conversion is conceptual. Much of the conversion literature refers in some way to self-change or identity-change as synonymous with conversion. However, with the exception of studies which have proceeded from a symbolic interactionist orientation (Travisano 1970, Bankston, Forsyth and Floyd 1981), there has been no elaboration on the meaning of these terms. A study of personal change must start with an elaboration of these concepts, enabling a grasp of what it is that might change as a result of conversion. This is addressed at the outset of this study in a review of the way in which the individual, and changes in their self-identity, may be theorised.

Having considered several criticisms of previous studies of conversion, I will now look at various aspects of these studies which inform the present study and which demonstrate where it fits into existing sociological knowledge. I will begin with a look at the 'stage' models that have been advanced in order to explain the conversion process.

### *Stage Models.*

In 1965 Lofland and Stark put forward the first 'stage' model of the conversion process. They studied converts to the early Unification Church in America and advanced a model

of seven 'necessary and sufficient' conditions for conversion, which they described as follows,

For conversion to occur a person must:

1. Experience enduring, acutely felt tensions
2. Within a religious problem-solving perspective,
3. Which leads him to define himself as a religious seeker;
4. Encountering the D.P. at a turning point in his life,
5. Wherein an affective bond is formed (or pre-exists) with one or more converts;
6. Where extra-cult attachments are absent or neutralised;
7. And, where, if he is to become a deployable agent, he is exposed to intensive interaction.

(Lofland and Stark 1965, 874)

Although they recognised that this was a study of only one religious group, and as such the model cannot be regarded as generalisable, they did state that,

...it's terms are general enough, and its elements articulated in such a way as to provide a reasonable starting point for the study of conversion to other types of groups and perspectives.

(Lofland and Stark 1965, 875)

This is exactly how it has been used in the sociology of conversion. Many subsequent studies have been organised as tests of the Lofland-Stark model (e.g. Kox, Meeus and Hart 1991, Snow and Phillips 1980, Bankston, Forsyth and Floyd 1981) and elements of the model have been expanded upon (e.g. 'seekership' in Straus 1976). In 1993 Rambo put forward his own stage model, arguing that a model of this nature was appropriate because,

...conversion is a process of change over time, generally exhibiting a sequence of processes, although sometimes there is a spiralling effect - a going back and forth between stages.

(Rambo 1993, 16-17)

He did not propose his model as a universal description of the conversion process, but regarded it as a convenient way of organising complex data. The stages he outlined are: context; crisis; quest; encounter; interaction; commitment; and consequences. We will come back to what he had to say about some of these in due course.

I will now consider, in turn, three of the stages of conversion identified by both Lofland and Stark (1965) and Rambo (1993). Throughout the discussion I refer to the work of other theorists who have identified these processes as important in conversion.

### *Crisis as antecedent to conversion.*

It is necessary to consider what has been said about the existence of crisis prior to conversion in the context of the present study since, as we have seen earlier in this chapter, imprisonment can be regarded as a crisis, both in terms of loss of freedom and removal from the home environment, and in terms of its effects on the self. By considering what has been said about crisis and conversion, we can assess whether the experience of imprisonment might be likely to precipitate conversion for some individuals.

As we have seen, the experience of enduring, acutely felt tensions was the first condition for conversion identified by Lofland and Stark (1965). It has also been acknowledged as important in a number of other studies. Rambo, writing in Eliade (1987) argued that,

Virtually all students of conversion agree that some kind of crisis precedes conversion.

(Rambo, in Eliade 1987, 75)

Conversion, he continued, can be used as a coping mechanism. Following this, we might conclude that conversion in prison occurs largely as a strategy of adapting to, and coping with the prison environment, something precipitated by the need for survival in the institution. Conversion, however, is unlikely to be solely directed towards alleviating one single crisis situation. In his book, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (1993), Rambo conceptualised the crisis situation, whatever it may be, as an *opportunity* for change, forcing individuals or groups to address their limitations and problems. This can then lead to,

...a quest to resolve conflict, fill a void, adjust to new circumstances, or find avenues of transformation... the crisis may be the major force for change, or it may be simply the catalytic incident that crystallises the person's situation.

(Rambo 1993, 166)

Even James (1902), in his classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, referred to the experience of crisis as part of the conversion process. He asserted that conversion may involve a realisation of sinfulness or incompleteness, an individual's perception that they cannot succeed by themselves, or a feeling that there is nothing they can do to resolve their problems. James (1902) particularly concentrated on the role of Protestant theology in providing an answer to such dilemmas. Protestant beliefs, for instance, encourage the convert to give their problems to God, and provide them with an expectation that he will help.

Kox, Meeus and Hart (1991) developed this idea in their evaluation of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model. They claimed that those who eventually become converts experience a larger number of turning points, which destabilise their life situation, than

those who do not. Sudden negative life events, they argued, are more common among this group, who also seem to have little social support and are 'less able to create new transitions themselves' (p 237). In addition, they contended that converts appear to be involved, to a greater extent than others, in a search for solutions to personal problems, and tend to reflect on themselves more. Like James (1902), Kox, Meeus and Hart (1991) considered the attraction of religion to be the offer of a new perspective on how to deal with personal problems. What is important about this perspective, they say, is not that it is new, but that it is a perspective which can direct life and offer certainty. Converts no longer need to spend their time reflecting on their problems because,

To look for solutions by oneself is no longer necessary; henceforth a higher, charismatic power will do this.

(Kox, Meeus and Hart 1991, 238)

Lofland and Stark (1965) argued that the converts they studied at least *perceived* their life situations prior to conversion to involve considerable tension. Most felt a discrepancy between the life they desired and the situation in which they found themselves, and were frustrated in their aspirations. What seemed to be important was that this tension continued over long periods, and was acutely felt, even though the problems encountered were not qualitatively different to those experienced by the population as a whole. Turning points appeared to be crucial in bringing the crisis to a head. At the turning point each potential convert,

...had come to a moment when old lines of action were complete, had failed or been disrupted, or were about to be so, and when they faced the opportunity (or necessity), and possibly the burden, of doing something different with their lives.

(Lofland and Stark 1965, 870)

The potential convert, having spent a great deal of time reflecting on the desire to change and solve their problems, was faced with an opportunity to take action. New involvements and ways of acting were no longer just desirable, but possible and even necessary. Such opportunity might occur for the convict when they are arrested and their usual lines of action have failed them, when they are faced with the prison environment for the first time, or when they are sentenced.

Heirich (1977) backed up these contentions, but argued for a different approach to the study of conversion. He suggested that what lies behind conversion is the lack of a,

...sense of ultimate grounding - one that provides a clear basis for understanding reality, that provides meaning and orientation for understanding one's situation and acting in relation to it.

(Heirich 1977, 673)

A set of rules, explanations and ways of acting are usually taken-for-granted unproblematically by individuals, until something happens which casts them into doubt. Heirich (1977) argued that conversion should be seen as the process through which such taken-for-granted assumptions are changed. According to him, the questions we should ask when studying conversion concern the circumstances which might destroy clarity about taken-for-granted reality, and the ways in which an alternative sense of grounding comes to be taken seriously and asserted. New converts, he contended, have made a major examination of what was previously taken-for-granted, and of the possible new source of grounding, its claims, symbols and so on. The new reality will be taken seriously if it speaks directly to the problem encountered by the individual and explains it more satisfactorily than its predecessor and other competing ideologies.

Heirich (1977) specified several reasons why an examination of basic taken-for-granted assumptions might occur. For our purposes, two are particularly useful to mention. He stated,

If experiences or encounters take place that cannot be encompassed within current explanatory schemes yet cannot be ignored, present understandings of root reality may come into question.

(Heirich 1977, 674)

This has echoes of what Goffman (1961) said about total institutions. The experience of imprisonment, and the encounters that take place within the prison, are alien to many individuals; they have no 'recipes' for action in that situation and their usual ways of interpreting reality may not be useful. Heirich's (1977) contention, then, fits into the supposition that was made at the beginning of this study, that something is broken down and then rebuilt through religious conversion. Heirich (1977) argued that this something is the sense of grounding that comes from unproblematic adherence to a particular way of interpreting reality.

Heirich (1977) also stated that when an undesirable state of affairs is immanent and inevitable, many people start to reflect upon their most basic and taken-for-granted assumptions. Something undesirable which occurs whilst following current ways of understanding reality, interpretive schemes and ways of acting, can cause these ways of life to be questioned. For the career criminal, being arrested and imprisoned may bring into question their established lifestyle, unless they can explain the situation away as an inconvenient but integral part of the life they have chosen to lead. Heirich (1977) argued that for conversion to occur, the new explanatory scheme should offer a solution to the experiences that have shattered previous assumptions, we should therefore look to the content of the belief and the way in which it speaks to the situation of the convert in order to understand conversion,

...the new reality used by converts should speak directly to the problem they have encountered and should explain it more successfully than its earlier competitor.

(Heirich 1977, 675)

Heirich (1977) contended that his theory gives a clearer depiction of what the stress or crisis preceding conversion consists of, and how the process of conversion occurs. This study takes heed of his advice, considering the role that religion plays in relation to the experiences of those in prison, and its function as a means through which to deal with their problems. The content of Christian belief, and the way in which it is defined as appropriate by inmates, is particularly considered.

Bankston, Forsyth and Floyd (1981) also argued that a consideration of stress/crisis is crucial in understanding the process of religious conversion. They had a similar view to Heirich (1977) concerning the failure of established patterns of action but theorised in terms of identity change,

Tension which produces dissatisfaction with current identity would seem axiomatic in the understanding of any conscious identity change. We suggest, then, that tension may be taken as the initial precipitating experience in the career of the radical convert... prolonged tension within an individual implies a failure of current patterns of action to establish an 'acceptable self'.

(Bankston, Forsyth and Floyd 1981, 286-287)

A combination of these two approaches leads us to believe that disruption of current lines of action causes disruption of the self that went with those ways of acting, and may give rise to self-reflection as well as examination of the assumptions which underlie action. Bankston, Forsyth and Floyd (1981) were clear, however, that tension alone is not enough to promote conversion; a turning point must occur, and it is this which is the crucial catalyst for change,

...the turning point in the radical convert's career is represented by a combination of the *strong desire* to take some action to resolve identity problems with what is defined as a new *opportunity* for doing so.

(Bankston, Forsyth and Floyd 1981, 288, my italics)

It was crucial for them, as in Lofland and Stark's (1965) original model, that tension produces a desire to change and active seeking for alternatives which can then become resolved at the turning point when a feasible new option is presented. This idea of 'seekership' will be considered shortly. First, we must briefly consider whether the place of crisis in the process of conversion is as straightforward as it may seem from the studies outlined above.

Greil and Rudy (1983) outlined how the group affects the way that the potential convert sees themselves. They analysed conversion to the world view of alcoholics anonymous, during which the potential convert must 'hit bottom' in order to come to a point where they desire to change. In the case of these converts, it was contact with the movement which allowed them to define the point at which they had 'hit bottom', and

reconceptualise themselves as alcoholics who needed to change, rather than an experience of tension promoting a search for answers.

Snow and Phillips (1980) similarly challenged the notion that converts experience a greater degree of tension prior to conversion than is experienced by the majority of the population. What they found to be distinctive among converts was an increased tendency to re-examine their biographies after conversion to find evidence of discontent. I will examine the tendency of converts to restructure their biographies following conversion later, when addressing the ways in which converts account for their conversions. For now, I will consider the way in which some theorists have taken up the idea of seekership, conceptualising the convert as an active agent in the construction of meaning through conversion.

### *Seekership.*

The concept of seekership has been taken up, first and foremost, by theorists who wished to stress the active role of the convert in conversion. Lofland and Stark (1965) originally described seekership as,

... a floundering among religious alternatives, an openness to a variety of religious views...

(Lofland and Stark 1965, 870)

They did not conceptualise this floundering, however, as an active process of searching, but rather, a background factor or predisposition which makes it more likely that when the potential convert encounters a religious group, its ideas will be taken seriously.

Lofland (1977) criticised his earlier model of conversion for encompassing an overly passive view of the convert. He argued that attention should be given to their active role in the process of conversion, rather than seeing them as propelled through its various stages. He contended that we should look at the ways in which people go about *converting themselves*. Rambo (1993) echoed this assertion, arguing that perhaps we should not refer to *conversion* but to the process of *converting*.

Other theorists have taken up ideas of seekership and expanded them to provide a further critique of the passive conception of the convert found in many studies. Rambo (1993) argued that most people are engaged in some kind of quest to maximise meaning and purpose in life, but on top of crisis situations this search becomes more intense. People actively search for new options to provide solutions to their problems, help them change, or to sustain them following a difficult life event. Bankston, Forsyth and Floyd (1981) also stressed the active nature of the potential convert, arguing that to conceptualise conversion as a series of stages, which end in conversion for all who go through them, neglects to consider the nature of the human self,

Not all members of a society are equally potential converts, even if exposed to similar influences. The self is not mechanical, but rather a dialectical process of creativity and reflection. It is this dimension of self change which has been neglected by sociological accounts of conversion.

(Bankston, Forsyth and Floyd 1981, 280)

According to this view, the individual reflects upon the course of action they are taking, defining it in terms of their current interests and has the ability to change direction or take a different course of action at any time. No stage is deterministically sufficient for further movement in the direction of conversion, there are innumerable biographical contingencies and definitions of the situation which could affect progress. Bankston, Forsyth and Floyd (1981) argued that if current identity is seen as unsatisfactory, the individual may desire a break with it, seeking out new lines of action in search of new meanings of the self. This search may lead the individual into channels of action which are vastly dissimilar to previous ones. They stressed, however, that seekership does not necessarily take a religious form,

...seekership may take a number of alternatives, such as religious 're-birth' or psychiatric 'cure'.

(Bankston, Forsyth and Floyd 1981, 287)

It may be covert whilst various alternatives are considered, becoming overt when the problem solving perspective defined as most useful will be pursued.

Bankston, Forsyth and Floyd (1981) are aware that even though the individual is active in their search for new perspectives, the social structure does influence the number and type of conversions that are likely to occur. The particular cultural setting influences the frequency of circumstances in which identity becomes unsatisfactory and may limit the available problem solving orientations. This is particularly demonstrated in the prison environment where 'straight' options for changing oneself are limited to education, psychology or religion. The place of these options within the institution, and the way in which prisoners decide between them, will be addressed later in this study.

Straus (1976) identified seekership as the key to the conversion experiences of the young people he studied. These individuals developed a self-conception as 'seeker' as they went through a process of trying to create a satisfying life for themselves. During this process various options were tried, as they were encountered, and either accepted or rejected as a way of furthering their quest. Straus (1976) referred to this process as 'creative bumbling', to show that it is active but not particularly ordered. The individual may become involved with a great many different groups and organisations, as they seek out information and encounters with those they define as useful for their enterprise of self-transformation. Getting involved with these groups does not in itself signify conversion, but constitutes a way to find out more about them and to try out their lifestyles, enabling reflection on their appropriateness. After this stage many people drop out of participation and move onto another group. Straus (1976) stressed the way in which individuals actively use groups for the conscious creation of their lives, in contrast

with the traditional emphasis in studies of conversion on the ways in which groups use, and act upon, individuals.

Seekership, however, has not been universally identified as an influence on conversion. Seggar and Kunz (1972) found that the converts to the Mormon Church whom they interviewed were not so much seeking as sought. It was the church which was active in proselytisation,

It is interesting that our data include only one convert who sought the Church; all the others were proselytised by missionaries or by other lay members of the Mormon Church.

(Seggar and Kunz 1972, 182-183)

In addition, the converts they interviewed did not perceive more tension in their lives prior to conversion. Those who did have problems sought appropriate secular help and did not perceive any link between their problems and their conversion.

It is interesting to note the different findings of these various studies, and the way in which they might be influenced by social factors rather than telling us solely about individuals. For instance, the proselytisation of converts in the study above may be largely due to the theology of the group and their widespread missionary activities. Similarly, Straus's (1976) findings may be a result of the age group of those he was studying, and the time and place in which his study was conducted. Those whom he interviewed were all in their early twenties and at college, a time of life when greater experimentation with other forms of life takes place; and the study was conducted in the early 1970s in America, a time when many were sampling from the wide range of new religious or therapeutic ideas on offer, and self-fulfilment was foremost in the minds of many people (cf. Yanklovich 1982).

Other theorists have attempted to find a way of resolving the conflict between the passive and active views of the convert, proposing a model of conversion as a form of socialisation. Their ideas about socialisation, and the adoption of group perspectives through interaction, fit in with the two elements of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model which have been consistently restated as important by theorists from both orientations. Intensive interaction and the formation of affective bonds with group members are almost universally advocated as important in the conversion process. We will now consider the proposition that it is socialisation which lies behind conversion.

### ***Conversion as Socialisation and the Importance of Interaction.***

Long and Hadden (1983) claimed to have solved the incompatibilities of the two approaches to conversion, one seeing the individual as passive and the other active. They contended that conversion should be studied as a form of socialisation, which involves an interactive process between novices and group members. Those who are seekers are eager and willing to learn the ways of the group and actively receive from them. At the

same time, group members actively strive to incorporate newcomers into the group. Long and Hadden (1983) contended, therefore, that it is interaction which we should analyse and locate as central to the conversion process,

Analysis of interaction directs attention to both members and novices as active, creative participants in the conversion-socialisation process.

(Long and Hadden 1983, 7)

They argued that socialisation does not have to involve passive internalisation by novices, but that continuing interaction must take place which continually infers plausibility on the world view of the group.

Thumma (1991) agreed with this focus on socialisation, asserting that conversion must be seen as a process of dynamic interaction between potential converts and groups. He argued that studying this dynamic interaction allows us to take account of the social, historical and ideological context of the group and how these influence conversion; and also to address questions of self-concept and motivations for change on the part of the individual. Conversion should therefore be conceptualised as a process of negotiation between the individual and the group, within a specific context.

The formation of affective bonds with group members and intensive interaction have been the only two elements of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model to have been consistently restated as important in the conversion process. Snow and Phillips (1980), in their evaluation of the Lofland/Stark model, argued that affective bonds first function to allow a flow of information from the group to the potential convert. They may also make the group's message seem more credible, and hence participation becomes attractive. In order for conversion to occur, they contended, the formation of affective bonds must be followed up with intensive interaction. They argued that,

...intensive interaction is perhaps the most important factor in the conversion process once the prospect has been informed about and brought into contact with the movement.

(Snow and Phillips 1980, 442)

This is not merely the way that verbal commitment becomes behavioural, as Lofland and Stark (1965) asserted, but, through participation, the individual becomes 'oriented cognitively, emotionally, morally' (Snow and Phillips 1980, 443) to the group. Snow and Phillips (1980) went as far as to say that conversion is 'highly improbable' where there is no affective and intensive interaction.

The individual is not passive during their initial participation and interaction, they have an interest in the group and must actively explore it and find out about its world view before further action towards conversion can be taken. They then choose to participate in the group and continue interaction with them. For Snow and Phillips (1980), intensive interaction was the key to understanding how this interest and wish to participate leads to participation and belief. An analysis of the process of interaction also

allows us to see why one perspective might be chosen over another. Snow and Phillips (1980) did not go into further detail, however, about the way in which the world view of the group becomes central to the life of the individual, and thus how conversion is achieved. The following theorists, who have also concentrated on the role of interaction in conversion, have offered perspectives on how this occurs.

Greil and Rudy (1983, 1984) also regarded the formation of close personal ties within the group, and intensive interaction, as crucial to the conversion process. They saw conversion as a process of gradually coming to see the world as one's new reference group sees it. Participating in organisational activities is the way in which a transformation of identity, brought about by a change in perspective, can be cemented as the new self-concept and continually acted out.

Other studies (e.g. Zetterberg 1952, Bromley and Shupe 1979, Rambo 1993) found that learning and playing out the *role* of convert is particularly important in the transformation of the self-concept and orientation towards the perspective of the group,

Playing a role that conforms to reciprocal expectations in a social setting enables the potential or new convert to experience and enact a new way of life, frequently with a sense of mission; a new sense of self often emerges through the internalisation of a new role as a convert.

(Rambo 1993, 168)

Straus (1976) argued that the last stage and culmination of seekership involves intensive interaction *and* role taking. He contended that,

The central theme of realising transformation is that the seeker, through action within the shared human world, immerses self, consciousness, and life within the taken-for-granted reality of transcendence.

(Straus 1976, 266)

The seeker realises that the way to *be* changed, is to *act* changed. He/she takes account of every practical detail of living a transformed life, acting out the role of group member, often in an exaggerated form. The very smallest details of life as a group member are discovered in interaction and role playing, and are then acted out until they become part of taken-for-granted reality for the individual. The adoption of this new perspective and taken-for-granted way of living, which he sees as conversion, is achieved, according to Straus (1976) by '[m]astering the practical art of living a transformed life' (Straus 1976, 268).

### *Accounting for Change.*

There has been concern over the use of converts' accounts of conversion as objective data. Some theorists have merely brought this to our attention, whilst others

have actively sought to study these accounts. In this section we will consider some of these studies and their relevance for this project.

Greil and Rudy (1983) and Snow and Phillips (1980) questioned that there is always a distinct crisis before conversion, which can be objectively recognised and reported by the convert. Greil and Rudy (1983) asserted that other people or ideological prescriptions may define what constitutes crisis for the individual,

The explanation that people come to A.A. because they have 'hit bottom' is ideologically prescribed. For this reason, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which this explanation reflects a retrospective interpretation or actual subjective experience.

(Griel and Rudy 1983, 9)

A subjectively perceived crisis might not be what prompts the individual to attend A.A. meetings. Greil and Rudy (1983) discovered that the concept of having 'hit bottom' was often forced upon the individual by a family member, doctor or employer, and so the decision to attend meetings usually involved other people's definitions of the situation. In addition to this, the idea of 'hitting bottom' is part of the ideology of the group and is regarded as important in the process of recovery. This may mean that it is retrospectively pin-pointed as the reason for attendance by individuals looking for validation of their experience.

Snow and Phillips (1980) similarly argued that the pre-conversion strains and tensions spoken of by converts may be products of conversion itself. After conversion, converts have a new frame of reference through which to interpret the past. With this comes a new vocabulary of motive that allows them to attribute conversion to whatever, in retrospect, seems most appropriate and legitimates their experience,

...for many individuals, conversion to NSA involves either the redefinition of life before conversion as being fraught with problems or the discovery of personal problems not previously discernible or regarded as troublesome enough to warrant remedial action.

(Snow and Phillips 1980, 435)

The reinterpretation of biography following conversion is something which many other theorists have pin-pointed as important. Snow and Machalek (1984) emphasised that conversion accounts cannot be taken at face value, but should become objects of analysis which can tell us more about the process of conversion. They stressed the socially constructed nature of accounts, their retrospective character and temporal variability, and regarded biographical reinterpretation as an essential product of the conversion process. Mead (1968) and Berger and Luckmann (1991) argued that in everyday life we are involved in ongoing redefinition of biography and identity in the light of new experience, Snow and Machalek (1984) saw conversion as an example of this everyday process in exaggerated form. This point resonates with one of the objectives of the current study: to

use an analysis of an extreme case to promote understanding of the world of everyday life.

Redefinition and reflexivity are also exaggerated for converts according to Snow and Machalek (1984) because they are constantly being asked for accounts of their experience, and descriptions of how they have changed. This research represents another of these occasions in which converts are asked to 'tell their story'. The demand for such accounts may be heightened in the case of unusual groups, such as prison converts, who may become public spectacles. This is demonstrated by the numerous accounts in the media, and the desire of the public to know if prison converts have 'really changed'.

Snow and Machalek (1984) argued that accounts actually tell us more about the present than about the past,

...data derived from converts about their cognitive orientation and life prior to conversion should be treated as information that tells us more about the convert's current experience and orientation than about his or her past.

(Snow and Machalek 1984, 177)

Taylor (1978) also believed that accounts tell us about the post-conversion situation, the convert's current identity and the way in which it has been constructed. Like the others, he stressed that accounts are not an explanation of what is going on, but require explanation and interpretation themselves. He argued that the past is partly constituted by the accounting process; accounts of conversion are part of the process of conversion as they allow experience to be reworked and infused with new meaning,

In quite a literal sense, converts, in accounting for conversion, talk themselves into the experience of conversion in the past through engagement in the experience of accounting for conversion in the present.

(Taylor 1978, 319)

Through accounts, we can see how the past is constructed and accounted for in order to make present activity intelligible and justifiable. It is a process of re-membering (putting back together) the past, in a way which constructs the individual as a new person and successful convert, and presents former selves as convertible so that conversion can be viewed as a plausible option. Taylor (1978) argues that we should study conversion by looking at the way in which past and present are constructed through the activity of accounting. These contentions were taken into account in the analysis of the stories of prison converts. An awareness of the way in which accounting for the past can tell us about the way in which belief and self-identity are maintained in the present has been influential throughout this study.

Beckford (1978, 1983) argued that accounts may have more to tell us about the group to which someone converts than about the person themselves. He argued that although conversion accounts differ widely, for those who have converted to the same

group there will be important similarities. This is because accounts are 'accomplished constructions' which embody various rules for constituting certain experiences as religious conversions. Beckford (1978) asserted that we should consider the social contexts which give meaning to accounts. During research into converts to the Jehovah's Witnesses he found, embodied in the ideology of the movement, certain rules about what constitutes an appropriate experience of conversion. As this ideology changed over time, so did accounts of conversion. Cues about what constituted an appropriate experience were obtained from learning the rationale of the movement, and it was expected that individual experience, if genuine, would fit in with this rationale,

...Jehovah's Witnesses can draw upon their knowledge of the organisation's formal rationale when seeking to make practical sense of the conditions under which their conversion allegedly took place. This knowledge serves partially to constitute their own experience as a form of appropriate conversion.

(Beckford 1978, 254)

With reference to the movement's rationale, convert's explained that it made sense to have experienced the things they had, and to have converted in a certain way.

Snow and Machalek (1984) also made reference to the relationship between individual and group. They stated that accounts are expressions of basic themes in the group's ideology which have been mixed with personal biographies. They argued that conversion involves aligning one's own biography with the goals, ideologies and rituals of the group. The individual, however, is not passive in this process, merely giving an account of an official script, but creatively constructs an appropriate account of their conversion experience.

Studying conversion accounts, then, can tell us about the interplay between the individual and the group, the role of group ideology, and the way in which the individual constructs themselves and their experience. Accounts are not fixed, but vary over time, due to the changing ideology of the group, or alternatively, as a result of constructing and presenting a different self in line with an ideology of 'spiritual growth' (Snow and Machalek 1984).

Finally, Staples and Mauss (1987) and Stromberg (1993) have referred to the way in which accounts, and the use of certain types of language, allow the individual to *achieve* self-transformation. Staples and Mauss (1987) took issue with Snow and Machalek's (1984) assertion that biographical reorganisation follows, and is a marker of, conversion. They stated that it is not a reflection of some underlying change in consciousness, but a tool with which to achieve self-transformation. This theory extends Taylor's (1978) notion that accounting constitutes a part of the experience of conversion, asserting that it is through language that change is achieved. Staples and Mauss (1987) drew from Mead's (1967) theory that the self-concept is formed using information obtained during interaction. This knowledge, they argued, is also used for the construction of past and future selves. The universe of discourse which becomes

available to us through interaction provides us with a methodology for constructing our biography. Conversion, therefore, is a process whereby a new universe of discourse is used to reflexively change the self,

In self-transformation, we adopt a new universe of discourse and with it a new methodology for constructing the self.

(Staples and Mauss 1987, 142)

There may be a radical discontinuity with the past, as past selves are constructed from the new perspective as 'spurious', and the present self is constructed and experienced as the 'real' or 'true' self.

Stromberg (1993) argued that change can be achieved through use of the 'canonical' or religious language. Couching problems or aspects of the self in canonical language may allow them to be vocalised for the first time or seen in a different light. He contended that this process is demonstrated in the conversion narrative, and therefore by studying accounts of conversion we can apprehend the meaning that conversion has for the individual. He argued that,

Conflicts do not disappear subsequent to conversion; instead they come to be approached in a manner which makes their ongoing resolution possible.

(Stromberg 1993, 31)

Identity, according to Stromberg (1993) is acted out in the telling of stories about ourselves. Learning, over time, to construe life and self in terms of canonical language, creates a particular identity and becomes constitutive of experience. Reconciling problems in this way, or vocalising those which were previously unacknowledged and incorporating them into the self-narrative, gives the feeling of transformation. According to Stromberg (1993), what is particular about conversion to a spiritual perspective, as opposed to a secular one, is the way in which these processes are hidden from the person experiencing the change so that the changes and resolutions that have been experienced by the individual are attributed not to their own activity, but to that of God,

Of course, in the conversion narrative - as is common in ritual discourse - the constitutive processes at work are rendered *opaque* by a set of ideas that trace the efficacy of those processes to a mysterious and ultimately unknowable agency, that of the divinity.

(Stromberg 1993, 23)

It can be seen, therefore, that the converts' accounts of their experiences betray more than just information about what happened to them before and during conversion. By studying and analysing them in detail we can find out about the ideology of the group, the dynamic relationship between this and the individual's biography, and the construction and presentation of particular selves by the individual which may function to demonstrate, validate, or actually achieve change.

Having considered several aspects of the conversion process, as seen through the eyes of theorists with a range of perspectives, all that remains in this review of literature about conversion is to address the question of how we might define conversion, who has tried to pin it down conceptually, how this might be applied to the present study, and how we might distinguish converts from non-converts.

### *Defining conversion.*

There have been various attempts to come to a satisfactory definition of conversion and to distinguish it from those changes which are not conversion. For instance, Travisano (1970) distinguished between conversions which are 'drastic changes in life' and which require a 'change in the "informing aspect" of one's life and biography' and the 'adoption of a pervasive identity' (Travisano 1970, 600), and alternations which 'are a part of or grow out of existing programs of behaviour' (Travisano 1970, 601) and do not involve a dramatic change in identity or the way in which life is organised. Gordon (1974) similarly distinguished between conversion, alternation and consolidation. Lofland and Skonovd (1981) identified six 'conversion motifs', different ways in which conversion can be experienced according to factors such as the length of time over which the conversion process takes place, the amount of social pressure involved, the affective arousal that participation brings about and whether belief precedes participation or vice versa. In this way they were able to distinguish between different groups, and different ways in which conversion proceeds within them. Greil and Rudy (1983, 1984) similarly argued that,

There can be no single model to describe conversion to all perspectives in all social situations.

(Greil and Rudy 1983, 23)

However, it seems that the six motifs model is still too rigid. Greil and Rudy (1983) argued that there are as many conversion processes as there are organisational contexts in which conversion takes place, and therefore putting experience into distinct boxes in this way is not particularly helpful. There has been little agreement as to what constitutes conversion and what does not.

This leads us to consider why the findings in studies of conversion are so diverse. Long and Hadden (1983), Richardson (1985) and Kilbourne and Richardson (1988) have argued that it is those doing the research who construct the way in which conversion is viewed, studied and thus theorised. Long and Hadden (1983) pointed to different objects of interest in conversion studies which contribute to the way in which conversion is perceived. These may stem from trends within academic disciplines or from more political interests. For instance, those who wish to portray new religious movements in a negative light, and justify the kidnapping and 'deprogramming' of converts<sup>3</sup>, may theorise these groups as coercive, and conversion as a form of brainwashing, rather than

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of this see Barker (1984).

seeing the convert as a religious seeker. Kilbourne and Richardson (1988) accounted for discrepancies in accounts of conversion by delineating competing paradigms in conversion research, one having a conception of the individual as active and the other seeing them as passive in the conversion process.

The perspective of the researcher undoubtedly does influence the theory produced, indeed Berger (1963) asserted that definitions amount to little more than matters of taste. With this in mind, the way in which the individual is theorised for the current research is outlined explicitly in the last section of this chapter.

One theme that is common to studies of conversion is its inextricable link with accounts of personal change. Snow and Machalek (1983) argued that,

...the idea of radical change is at the core of all conceptions of conversion.

(Snow and Machalek 1983, 264)

Rather than asking what conversion is, then, a more profitable question to ask might be *what is it that changes when someone converts?* Snow and Machalek (1983) also took this approach, arguing that merely stating that conversion involves radical change does not tell us anything about the process itself. Instead we should ask,

Exactly what is it that undergoes radical change? Is it beliefs and values, behaviour and identities, or something even more fundamental that changes?

(Snow and Machalek 1983, 265)

This change has been variously theorised as a change in 'universe of discourse' (Snow and Machalek 1983, Travisano 1970), 'sense of root reality' (Heirich 1977), 'habitual centre of energy' (James 1902) and as any radical transformation of identity, not necessarily religiously oriented (Greil and Rudy 1983). One of the aims of this study, in describing the conversion process as it occurs in the prison context, is to outline what it is that changes for these particular individuals. A discussion of this can be found in Chapter 6.

### ***How do you spot a convert?***

The last aspect of religious conversion to consider for this review is the concern among some theorists to provide criteria for distinguishing converts from non-converts. For instance, Snow and Machalek (1983) described several properties of the talk and reasoning of the convert which can be used to distinguish them from those who are not converts. These include: evidence of biographical reconstruction; adoption of a master scheme through which all experience and events are interpreted; and the adoption of the master role of convert which pervades in all interaction and social situations.

The problem with such an approach is that it does not take account of the subject's own definition of themselves. Snow and Machalek (1983) found that individuals who did not demonstrate these properties in their talk did not call themselves converts, but lifelong Christians, yet they ignore the importance of this finding for the way in which we delineate those who are converts and those who are not. In calling themselves converts, individuals are making specific claims about their identity and are presenting specific selves in interaction. This is an important indicator of the construction of a new identity. Those who called themselves lifelong Christians had commitment to religion, but no conversion or identity change to demonstrate, yet others who have similarly always had faith, but have been 'born-again', may call themselves converts in order to say something specific about identity. They claim a difference between who they are now and who they were before, often in line with a particular religious ideology as outlined by Beckford (1978). Bankston, Forsyth and Floyd (1981) also tried to delineate the 'radical convert' by specifying that they must have gone through a sudden and drastic change. We know, from a consideration of the nature of converts' accounts, how difficult it is to get an objective measure of the way in which conversion took place, and therefore categorisations of this nature seem fruitless.

Staples and Mauss (1987) and Taylor (1978) have stressed the importance of individual's subjective definition of themselves as converts. Staples and Mauss (1987) argued that it is difficult to know, from Snow and Machalek's (1983) perspective, how much biographical reorganisation would be enough to indicate conversion, since following Mead (1967), we all engage in reinterpretation of ways of thinking, ourselves and our biographies on a day to day basis. In Snow and Machalek's (1983) view, how the subject defines themselves seems largely irrelevant in determining who is, or is not, a convert; the researcher is better qualified to judge. Staples and Mauss objected to this, arguing that because conversion is primarily to do with the self-concept of the individual, it is this that is of paramount importance in research,

Because we view conversion as an inherently subjective phenomenon, we believe that the subject, and only the subject, is qualified to tell us who he or she *really* is.

(Staples and Mauss 1987, 138)

The participants in their research were therefore selected by being asked, 'are you a convert?'. The way in which converts were selected for participation in the current study will be addressed in the following chapter.

### ***Studying Conversion in Prison.***

We can conclude that this review clarifies the need for additional research in the sociology of conversion. There is little agreement about the process of conversion, and more empirical research in different conversion settings is recommended by almost all of the theorists considered above. As I have said before, the context chosen for this study offers an ideal opportunity to study conversion in an environment where existence is

restricted, and the social situation of those who convert has importantly uniform characteristics. This study allows us to consider the relationship between conversion and social circumstances, advocated by Rambo (1993), for individuals who share more than just a conversion experience. Through reducing complexity in this way, all aspects of the experience of prison converts can be considered in depth, rather than merely concentrating on one aspect of the process in plural social situations. I will consider the way in which the experience of conversion can give meaning to the experience of imprisonment and the way that participation in religious activities fits into prison life, continually linking individual and context.

From the literature considered at the beginning of this chapter, however, it seems apparent that individuals do not leave everything at the prison gate. I therefore take into consideration the pre-prison lives of individuals. Asking them to give accounts which include life before imprisonment allows us to study the way in which life is reinterpreted by converts, and events are given new meaning, in relation to biography as a whole. This also allows us to consider the relationships between conversion and another experience common to those being studied: the experience of committing a crime. In fact, it is possible to argue that from the point of committing crime onwards these individuals share important experiences such as being tried, sentenced and stigmatised by the rest of society. In Goffman's (1961) terms, a career of the prison convert can be identified.

At the end of the earlier section on imprisonment I identified some of the questions, and issues of interest for this study, that came out of that literature. I will now briefly summarise some of the areas of interest that have been drawn out of the literature on conversion.

Particularly interesting in terms of this study is the idea that conversion is a response to crisis, or to some current situation which cannot be incorporated neatly into experience. During the discussions in Chapters 3 and 4, I will consider whether the experience of imprisonment constitutes a crisis situation for the individual, and if conversion is a way of incorporating that experience into biography and self-identity.

Although the role of self-reflection in conversion has been mentioned in relation to crisis experiences, its importance in the conversion process has been under-researched and under-developed. This study provides a thorough analysis of reflexive processes in conversion and the construction of self-identity.

Since interactive processes have been consistently identified as important in conversion, I also give attention to the role of interaction in conversion. I look particularly at the formation of affective ties with the religious group, the way in which converts adopt the perspectives of those with whom they interact, and the roles that converts can take as they participate in religious life.

Also of great interest is the way in which converts account for their conversion, and what this can tell us about the way they have constructed themselves as converts, and re-evaluated their lives in the light of this. Given the importance of considering the

social context of the convert, this study also considers the way in which accounts might reflect the ideology of the group. Since we are addressing ways in which the self may be undermined for these prisoners, and accounts of the self may be rendered untenable, exploring the way the individual presents themselves, and constructs an identity through their account of conversion, is particularly interesting.

During this study, the aim is not to evaluate existing studies, nor to distinguish between different types of conversion or test the conceptions already developed. Rather, it involves the study of those individuals who define themselves as converts, and the context in which they live, in order to come to an understanding of the process of conversion as it occurs in prison, the meaning conversion has for those who convert in prison, and to assess what it is that changes when someone says they have converted. Through an analysis of the accounts of these individuals I will identify the elements of the theories of others that are born out in the lives of those studied, but will also be able to provide an analysis of features of the conversion process which have not been considered previously, and are useful in furthering our understanding of conversion in prison and more generally.

It is necessary to reiterate that this study will incorporate elements of social theory into the analysis of conversion in prison, linking the study to theoretical debates on self-identity. As we have noted previously, both the literature concerning imprisonment (with the exception of Goffman's study), and that on conversion, is lacking in theoretical analysis. As a result of this aim, the function of the last part of this chapter is to make explicit the conception of the self which will be used as the starting point for analysis. Since I aim to consider self-identity in detail, both in terms of what happens to a person when they are imprisoned, and what happens when they experience a religious conversion, it is necessary to outline what is meant by self-identity, why this particular conception fits in with the study, and ways in which, from this perspective, changes in self-identity might be theorised.

### **Conceptualising Self-Identity.**

The purpose of this section is to outline the way in which self-identity is conceptualised for this study, and to specify why it is consistent with the assumptions about individuals and society inherent within the research questions. It is necessary to outline how the self is conceptualised at the outset so that it can be developed during the analysis of the interview data. Firstly, it is necessary to comment on the use of the term self-identity rather than merely self or identity which are often used interchangeably in literature on conversion. The term self-identity captures its simultaneously subjective and objective nature, that we are subjects, objects to ourselves through reflexive evaluation, and subjects and objects to others, both in terms of our visibility for them, and in terms of the self we present to them in interaction. Although a detailed analysis of the philosophical debates surrounding these issues is not called for here, I will briefly outline the theories of Mead (1967) and Goffman (1959, 1963, 1972) which are the basis for this conceptualisation. I will now consider the assumptions which are inherent within

this study, the theories which are congruent with these assumptions and from which I draw, and then go on to consider how these theories can contribute to the way in which religious conversion in prison may be theorised. Of course, this is only a starting point from which to theorise self-identity, other theory will be brought in as appropriate in the light of the findings of this study.

Enmeshed within the subject matter of this project are various assumptions about the nature of human beings. In theorising conversion as some sort of change in self-identity, it is assumed that such a change is possible. Assuming that individuals can change in adult life precludes us from theorising the nature of persons as set in stone, either genetically, or through early childhood socialisation. Any theories of self-identity from which I draw, must then include scope for theorising such change.

As outlined previously, it is hoped that study of an extreme situation might shed light on some of the processes through which our selves are constructed and reconstructed in everyday life. This assumes that change does not only occur in extreme situations, when the self is out under enormous pressure such as that described by Goffman (1961) or Bettelheim (1960), but that it is ongoing in the mundane world of everyday life. Self-identity is thus conceptualised not as a static entity, but as something that is constantly being made and remade, having a processual character. Theories from which I draw therefore, must also be congruent with the assumption that self-identity is an ongoing process.

Religious conversion is theorised here as a form of self-identity change, and not as an example of brainwashing or the coercive action of others on the individual. A consideration of the relationship between social processes and the activity of the individual locates conversion as a social phenomenon rather than as an 'act of God', and also assumes that the individual is capable of their own creative activity rather than being a passive recipient of social forces. The self cannot be regarded as passive here, if it were we would expect that in the regimented and highly controlled environment of the prison, where interaction is limited, either all or none of the prisoners would convert to religion. That they do not, signals interpretive activity on the part of the individual, that they define situations and attribute meaning to them in different ways depending on circumstances, interests at hand, and biographical factors. This must also be taken into account in the theories used.

The first theory I consider is Mead's (1967) theory of the self. It is interesting because it encompasses a notion of the dialectical relationship between the individual and society, and sheds light on the way in which we are simultaneously influenced by social factors, and actively reflect upon and interpret them.

### *Mead's theory of the development of self.*

G.H. Mead (1967) provided us with a theory of how the self comes into being during childhood, and the way in which we develop a reflexive attitude towards ourselves

and our actions. He argued that, as children, we start off with no self consciousness in terms of the ability to view ourselves as objects, and see ourselves as others see us both visually and socially. Through play, the child learns to take the attitude of various others, playing out the role of, for example, the doctor or the father. In this way the child learns how they are viewed by these distinct others. Following this, during games in the next stage of development, the child must not only take the attitude of distinct, singular others towards themselves, but must see themselves from the point of view of all the others involved in the game, and in terms of the rules of the game and their place within it. They must be able to predict how others might act in order that their activity can be organised in relation to them, and the game will proceed successfully. It is in this way, with others as a metaphorical mirror for the self, that the child attains full self-consciousness, being able to see themselves from the point of view of the 'generalised other'. They can then become an object of their own reflection and see themselves from the point of view of the community at large, with its attendant norms and values, and can thus organise their activity within this community accordingly.

This reflexive attitude is possible, according to Mead (1967), because of the internal dialogue of the mind. The moments in this dialogue are termed the 'I' and the 'me'. The 'me' involves socially derived attitudes, those handed down by parents and teachers which are taken for granted by the whole social community, and those which have been attained through individual biographical experience. The 'I' is the spontaneous, creative part of the individual which reacts to the 'me',

The 'I' is the response of the individual to the attitude of the community as this appears in his own experience. His response to that organised attitude in turn changes it.

(Mead 1967, 196)

The ability of the individual to take this reflexive attitude towards themselves and to see their actions from the point of view of the generalised other is what, for Mead, constituted a self. The individual has the ability, through the internal dialogue, to weigh up situations, attribute meaning to them in relation to previous experiences or present interests at hand, and to make a response that cannot always be predicted. All individuals do not, therefore, act in the same way given the same set of circumstances.

The spontaneous element of the self allows for creative and spontaneous actions on the part of the individual, whilst the socially derived aspect of the self enables us to see the interplay between the social and the individual. The internal dialogue illustrates the processual nature of the self in Mead's (1967) theory. However, Mead's (1967) work did not take account of the dynamics of interaction, misunderstandings, the way in which we attempt to deceive each other and manipulate the way in which interaction proceeds, or the ways in which we present our self to others and how this may be dependent on the situation, our goals and others who are present. Mead's (1967) ideas can be supplemented in this respect by those of another theorist from the same symbolic interactionist tradition, Erving Goffman.

### ***Goffman's theory of self presentation.***

Goffman (1959) analysed interaction in terms of how we manage the impressions of ourselves we give to others. The way in which he used the concept of self in his work has been the subject of much criticism, due to the fact that he uses many different terms relating to different aspects of the self, and that these differ between his various works. For instance, Dawe (1973) argued that,

...Goffman's position is far from clear, for his accounts of the self are constantly shifting.

(Dawe 1973, 250)

However, common strands can be drawn out of Goffman's work, and worked into a coherent theory of the self.

The self, for Goffman, is bound up in social life and interaction, and consists of an interplay between self-image and public-image. He expressed these two complementary facets as 'self-as-character',

...some kind of image, usually creditable which the individual on stage and in character effectively attempts to induce others to hold in regard to him.

(Goffman 1959, 224)

and 'self-as-performer',

The attributes of the individual qua performer are not merely a depicted effect of particular performances; they are psychobiological in nature, and yet they seem to arise out of intimate interaction with the contingencies of staging performances.

(Goffman 1959, 246)

The individual is concerned with the construction of impression during interaction in order to present the conception of self which is most appropriate to the context and performance being staged. However, within Goffman's framework there is also a consistent aspect of self, the self-as-performer, which prevails from one frame of action to the next (Goffman 1974).

Goffman talked of how the self is socially negotiated as the individual travels through social life and interacts with a variety of others. These others impute a self to him on the basis of what he appears to be, what they have seen of him before, or with reference to those he is seen, and identified, with. This negotiation of self occurs through the dynamic relationship between public-image and self-image. During interaction,

The individual stakes out a self, comments on having done so, and comments on his commenting, even while the others are taking the whole process into consideration in coming to their assessment of him, which consideration he then takes into consideration in revising his view of himself.

(Goffman 1972, 396)

Goffman, therefore, also conceptualised the self as a process, allowing that it will be continually negotiated throughout the life of the individual. Like Mead (1968), he emphasised the role of interaction in the formation of the self, but put more emphasis on the rules and contingencies of interaction which the individual encounters.

Mead (1967) and Goffman (1959, 1963, 1972, 1974) have provided us with theories that can be used in tandem for a study of self-identity change. Before addressing how such change might be analysed, it is necessary to consider one more theory of the self which adds depth to those already outlined.

### *The self as narrative.*

Glover (1989) discussed what we mean when we talk about persons. Who, he asked, is this 'I' to whom we refer? He concluded that it is the inner story we tell ourselves about ourselves, which refers to an interpretation of what we have been, and involves the hopes of what we can make of our lives, as well as involving considerations of the present. We are not merely caused by responding to our first order desires concerning the life we want and the sort of person we want to be. Glover argued that,

...it is an illusion to think that we are utterly malleable, submitting entirely to social moulding. This picture might fit people who had no inner story. They would have no conception of themselves apart from the conception other people had. They would lack desires and values in the light of which to criticise the demands made of them, and would have no independent views about how their story should continue. We are not such people.

(Glover 1989, 174-175)

Through the construction of an inner story we can create ourselves in interaction with the social world.

Freeman (1993) also referred to this self-narrative. In the first chapter of his book *Rewriting the Self*, he demonstrated that we are not merely determined by social forces. Although the social world is everything in terms of the acquisition of self-consciousness, as made clear by Mead (1967), we can gain enough distance from it to have a say in the way that we develop,

...the very fact that I can, on occasion, move in the direction of becoming conscious of the ways I am determined, suggests that there is a margin of freedom within which to think, act and be.

(Freeman 1993, 217)

This account fits in well with Mead's (1967) account of the reflexive attitude which we can have through the internal dialogue. The human self can be seen as a wilful agent, able to cast into question the stories thought to be 'given' in our culture, and construct new ones. Freeman (1993) argued that this leads to the transformation of the social landscape, again in agreement with Mead (1967). He termed our creative agency the narrative imagination, contending that without the telling of stories of what we have been and are, there would be no self at all,

...kill the imagination and you kill the self.

(Freeman 1993, 223)

He argued that during each individual's life, the self will be rewritten again and again, and due to the plenitude of meaning which exists through which to interpret the text of the self, the narrative imagination can continue to have free operation.

Throughout these various accounts of the self, a common theme emerges: that the self is constructed in a dialectical relationship between individual agency and the social world. As Freeman (1993) argued, we are neither wholly determined, nor stand apart from history. In the discussion that follows I will outline how the different components of this dialectical relationship might be used fruitfully to study the process of religious conversion in prison.

### *Changing self-identity through self-reflection.*

Mead (1967) demonstrated that the internal dialogue is an important concept to refer to when addressing changes in self-identity. It allows us to conceptualise the way in which the individual adopts a reflexive attitude towards himself, and in this way can make decisions about courses of action, the kind of self he will present to others and so on. It also gives us insight into how, through this dialogue, the internal story or narrative is constructed. This narrative allows events to be ordered, giving life a sense of continuity. It also allows self-identity to be constructed in line with current experiences. The internal dialogue is the mechanism through which events can be reordered, and the self-narrative rewritten as new events and situations occur.

The internal story, according to Glover (1989), enables us not only to make sense of the past and the present, but to project ourselves into the future. Part of the story involves the hope of what we might become. Upon imprisonment, especially when individuals are to serve long sentences, this projective aspect of the self-narrative may be shattered, any projections into the future consisting only of further life in prison. This aspect of imprisonment alone may give rise to appraisal of the self-narrative. In the case

of those people who have committed what Cohen and Taylor (1972) called 'situational crimes', which occur on the spur of the moment and are not linked to any previous courses of action, the individual may be confronted with a view of himself which was not previously incorporated into his narrative, and may be difficult to incorporate whilst maintaining a positive self-concept. Strauss (1959) stated that when an individual is faced with the knowledge that he has done something he never thought himself capable of, the self-identity he previously took for granted is rendered problematic,

... it brings him face to face with his potential as well as his actual self.

(Strauss 1959, 97)

Strauss (1959) argued that at turning points such as these, the individual may take stock and re-evaluate himself. Where a sense of continuity in the self-narrative cannot be maintained, or events cannot be fitted into the current framework through which the self is interpreted, substantial reflection may take place. The individual may seek a new framework through which to organise events, and within which new aspects of the self can be incorporated. A religious ideology may fulfil that function. As demonstrated in the work of, for example, Beckford (1978) and Staples and Mauss (1987), the way that self-identity and life events are accounted for, and the language used, are essential elements in the construction and maintenance of a revised self-narrative. In this research, then, I explore the way in which religious ideology is used to construct new narratives of the self, and the function of this process for those in prison.

Denzin (1989, 1989a) argued that it is important in research to study the self-stories of participants, this approach fits in with the theory outlined here and is used in this study. More will be said about the way in which this was done in the next chapter.

In addition to the intended self-creation involved in self-reflection and evaluation, Glover (1989) mentioned that changes in social situation may bring about unintended, or at least non-reflexively motivated, changes in the self. This has been demonstrated in the prison context (Clemmer 1970, Schmid and Jones 1991). In prison, the restrictive social situation limits those with whom the individual can interact, and some of these unintended changes take place as a result of the negotiation of self within this environment, the limited scope of different presentations of the self, and the particular imputations about self that are made in interaction. We will now turn to a consideration of the role of interactive processes in self change.

### *Self-identity change through interaction.*

Glover (1989) asserted that interaction is fundamental to self change due to our desire for recognition from others. We desire that others recognise us as fellow human beings, and are therefore responsive to their feedback regarding ourselves and our behaviour. He stated that,

Through mutual recognition, we can share the creation of our inner story with others.

(Glover 1989, 169)

He argued that often we can only see things clearly when we express them to others, and thus by sharing in telling each others story we simultaneously create ourselves and each other. Who we share this telling with can make a difference to the way in which we come to construe ourselves, and thus changes in social situation and those others with whom we interact may contribute to changes in self-identity. According to Strauss (1959), changes in self-concept can even occur as we go through different stages of a relationship with someone and come to see them, and ourselves, in a different light. Freeman (1993) argued that it is through conversation with others that we can come to achieve distance from those aspects of the world usually taken-for-granted. Through gaining this distance we can see how we are determined and jointly rewrite ourselves.

The research undertaken for this study addresses the extent to which it is interaction with those of a religious orientation, and the creation of ongoing relationships with them, which are important facets of the conversion process. Berger and Luckmann (1966) made reference to the nomic function of relationships in rendering a world view continually plausible, arguing that changes in world view necessitate changing those with whom we interact to those who share our orientation. They argued that without interaction with others who share our new world view, such change is impossible. It is in interaction with others that a new world view is rendered continually plausible,

The most important social condition is the availability of an effective plausibility structure... This plausibility structure will be mediated to the individual by means of significant others, with whom he must establish strongly affective identification. No radical transformation of subjective reality (including, of course, identity) is possible without such identification, which inevitably replicates childhood experiences of emotional dependency on significant others. These significant others are the guides into the new reality.

(Berger and Luckmann 1966, 177)

We may also come to see ourselves in a different way due to the way in which we are publicly defined. Strauss (1959) argued that being publicly assigned a status can change our self-concept. The prisoner has been assigned a status by the courts, but it is also a label taken on by the public to describe the individual and this renders it powerful. Scheff (1984) showed us how those in a stigmatised group may be labelled in such a way, being rendered powerless by the label so that it becomes the only basis from which to interact, and is internalised as part of the self-concept. Being identified with fellow prisoners may also have a detrimental effect on the self-concept, Shaw (1991) discussed how living with those with whom one is categorised and stigmatised has negative implications for the self. Self-identity must be re-evaluated but the individual is neither able to fully identify with those in the outside world, nor with the stigmatised group, who they still evaluate from an outside perspective and view as worse cases than themselves.

With reference to Goffman's (1959) theory of the presentation of self, the individual in prison is unlikely to be able to present, for acceptance by others, the self which he would like to present, and which he regards as creditable and consistent with his self image. In the eyes of those with whom he now shares the entirety of his life and activity, he cannot be anything other than one of them, a prisoner. He may be defined within the institution only with reference to aspects of himself that are relevant there, such as the nature of the crime he has committed, the length of his sentence and so on. He may have no one who will collude with him in the presentation of a different self. In addition to this, life in prison is not segmented in the way it is in the modern outside world<sup>4</sup>, he cannot keep aspects of his behaviour private, or restricted to one sector of life. Reports may be written on all aspects of his behaviour, and he cannot deny to others that he is the person that his actions show him to be. The self which is accepted by those with whom he interacts, and with regard to which they will organise their actions towards him, is the self of the institution that he shows himself to be in everyday institutional life. He cannot appeal to aspects of himself from before imprisonment, or who he wishes to be in the future. The historical and future-oriented aspects of the self-narrative may therefore be disrupted. Goffman (1961) provided an extensive analysis of the way in which the negotiation of self is limited by institutional life and as we have seen previously, negotiations may be achieved through secondary adjustments. This study assesses the role of religion in providing ways in which to present and sustain a more creditable self. I also consider how religion might allow a self-narrative with past and future dimensions to be successfully constructed.

Throughout the discussion there is an awareness that the construction of the self-narrative is a process which continues throughout the life-span of the individual, as do the effects of their relationships and interactions. Reference is therefore made to both the current situations of individuals, and take account of the way in which self-identity has been constructed over time. According to Strauss (1959),

When we interview persons we catch them during some temporal cross-section in the building or transforming of styles that link to history...  
(Strauss 1959, 169)

It is clear from the theoretical perspective I have outlined that although this study can be regarded as one involving change in an extreme situation, change in self-identity is something which should be regarded as ongoing and will therefore be theorised as such.

It can be seen, therefore, that the theories presented here are congruent with the assumptions embedded within the nature of this particular study. They also have value in the way we might proceed in an analysis of the stories of prison converts. By looking at the way in which the individual reflexively constructs a narrative of self, and the way in

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<sup>4</sup> Goffman (1961) talked about this in relation to institutional life in the mental hospital and Berger, Berger and Kellner (1973) referred to the way in which these spheres of life have become increasingly pluralised in contemporary society..

which interaction impinges upon this, we might obtain an analysis which allows us to see the full extent of the dialectical relationship between individual agency and social situation. Many studies focus on the role of interaction and the formation of affective bonds in conversion, and the role of the social situation in adjustment to prison. This study will add to these concerns an analysis of the role of self-reflection in the process of conversion in prison, thus adding a new dimension to research into both imprisonment and religious conversion.

The chosen theoretical perspective has implications for the way in which the study has been undertaken. This will be considered in greater detail in the following chapter as I now move onto a consideration of research methodology and methods.

## Chapter Two

### Doing the Research: Methodology and Methods.

In this chapter I will outline how the research for this project was conducted, giving consideration both to the practical and methodological issues arising from the research. I will begin with a discussion of the rationale for the methods that were chosen, moving onto the practical choice of research methods, with reference to a consideration of the way in which the context influences the methods that can be chosen. I will then consider the way in which interview schedules were designed prior to entry into the prison environment. This will be followed by a discussion of the process of gaining access to the research setting. The way in which the sample was chosen will be addressed, along with a discussion of the way in which I prepared for, and conducted the interviews with both prisoners and prison chaplains.

In the following sections I will also address some of the methodological issues that arose during the course of the research: the ethical issues that I had to deal with; the problems of interviewing people with religious beliefs; debates about researcher disclosure and the development of rapport in the interview situation; the interview as a social relationship; the effect of being a female researcher in a men's prison; the way in which I approached sensitive issues in the interviews; and taking sides in research.

I will also consider the way in which the data were analysed and the findings formulated. Throughout, I will discuss the way in which I prepared for the research, my expectations, and also how the research progressed in practice, considering both problems that came up in the course of the research, and instances in which it ran smoothly.

#### *Introductory Remarks.*

Before talking about the way in which a method was chosen for this research, I will briefly outline the philosophical debates that I found to be relevant in informing this choice. In choosing a method to use for this research I had to consider the ongoing debate between positivist and interpretivist research. Positivist research, that which concentrates on finding explanations for behaviour, usually through the use of large scale surveys and questionnaires, has been accused of trying to study the social world in much the same way as scientists would study the natural world. There are various texts which challenge this connection (see for example Winch 1958, Bhasker 1989 for a further discussion of this). The fundamental difference between the positivist and interpretive traditions in social research is that whilst the former deals with explanations of behaviour, looking at why humans behave in certain ways, the latter attempts to

understand the actions of individuals and collectivities with regard to the way in which they structure and interpret their own world and how this influences their actions..

The contention of those who advocate an interpretive stance is that humans attribute meaning to situations and their lives in relation to the world around them. This position was elucidated in greater detail in the previous chapter in relation to the way in which we might theorise change. In order to operationalise this particular theoretical perspective about humans and their relation to the social world, I needed to find a way of conducting research that took these factors into account. In the previous chapter, I discussed the need to address the way in which prison converts attribute meaning to their situations and the way in which they construct storied accounts of themselves and their experiences, I also stressed the need to consider the conversion experiences of these individuals in the context of their lives as a whole and those aspects of their lives that they regarded as providing a setting for their conversions. With these goals in mind, it was interpretivist methodology that appeared most appropriate for this project.

Blumer (1972) asserted that any social research should be designed so as to take account of the way in which humans construct meaning and interpret situations, and the emergent and changing nature of these interpretations. We should also take into account that two people will not necessarily interpret the same situation in an identical way. According to Schutz (1964, 1970, 1973), the way in which we interpret the world and organise our actions within society depends on our interests at hand, which stem not only from the current situation, but from biographical experience, previous interpretations we have made of situations and of ourselves, knowledge that is passed to us by family and friends, and shared cultural knowledge. Blumer (1972) therefore advocated studying human behaviour from the point of view of those people engaged in it.

The rationale of interpretive research is to make the actions of others intelligible by looking at them from their perspective, trying to understand the meaning they have for them and the way in which they interpret themselves, others and their options for action. We cannot do this from a detached position; trying to remain outside the world of those we are studying may prohibit real insight into their actions. We must allow individuals to construct stories about their actions from their own perspective, driven by the way in which they make connections between different aspects of reality and chains of events, rather than by the interests of the researcher.

Denzin (1989, 1989a) took up these themes, arguing that research should locate individuals within their particular historical and biographical contexts, and attempt to provide an analysis of the conceptual categories that people use in order to create meaningful experience. To do this, we must get them to tell us their own stories, so we can look at their experience from within<sup>5</sup>,

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<sup>5</sup> Of course we cannot ever completely enter the world of experience of another individual, we can only hope to enter what has been termed the 'hermeneutic circle' (Heidegger 1962), coming to increasingly understand their perspective as we continue to interact with them and their stories.

Meaning is anchored in the stories people tell about themselves.  
(Denzin 1989a, 62)

The method which Denzin (1989, 1989a) and others (cf. Clandinin and Connelly 1994, Faraday and Plummer 1979, Mandelbaum 1982, and Plummer 1983) have advocated is the study of life histories, locating the subject under investigation within lived experience and biography. Using this method, he argued, we can gain insight into the way in which reality is perceived by individuals, how certain social processes operate within their lives, and how they are organised and experienced. We must attempt to participate in the social world of the individuals we are studying in order to get the best picture of how the world is organised for them. This has also been the rationale of those who have conducted research through participant observation (for example, Whyte 1982).

Having justified my choice of the interpretive research paradigm, I will now turn to a consideration of the way in which the prison context influenced my choice of method.

### *Choosing a Method.*

It was not just philosophical and epistemological concerns that influenced my choice of a research method for this study. Of particular concern were the restrictions placed upon the that choice by the prison context.

In the light of the preceding discussion, I was attracted by methods such as the life history method and participant observation, since these seemed to fit well with the goals of my research and the type of knowledge I wanted to generate. Denzin (1989a) advocated both of these methods for obtaining stories through which we might come to understand the way in which individuals interpret and give meaning to the world.

Looking at the stories that people tell about themselves in everyday interaction can give us an idea of the way in which they wish to present themselves in various situations and thus what those situations mean to them. Through listening to such stories, and the way in which individuals relate previous events and experiences to their ongoing lives, we can also get an idea of the way in which the biographical narrative of the individual is constructed, and how this impacts upon their self-identity. Using biographical methods, which involve gathering various different 'self-stories' during a number of interviews, is attractive because it allows us to gain insight into the way in which various aspects of the individuals life history are connected through their story telling. We can look at these various stories in parallel to come to a better understanding of the way in which they view the world and themselves, and how this has evolved during the course of various life events. Faraday and Plummer (1979) argued that when individuals talk about their lives, they document the way that they understand, interpret and define the world around them. They also emphasised that locating the individual within the context of their whole life and socio-historical framework allows a fuller

understanding of the stages and critical periods in the process of their life, showing their choices and contingencies in context. This seemed appropriate for my research because of its focus upon critical moments in the lives of prison converts. Committing a crime, being sentenced and imprisoned, and experiencing a conversion can all be defined as critical incidents for the participants in this study, and I needed a method that would allow me to find out how such experiences were connected.

Whilst I recognised the strengths of these approaches, I realised that conducting research in the prison setting significantly decreased the choice of methods that were available. Participant observation in this context seems virtually impossible unless, like Cohen and Taylor (1972), a position which involves working with inmates on a regular basis becomes available. Otherwise, it would seem rather extreme for the researcher to commit a crime in an attempt to get imprisoned. Even if they did, there is no guarantee that they would get a custodial sentence. For instance, a community service order might be imposed and put pay to the research project completely. If the researcher was imprisoned, they would have no say in which prison they were sent to, would only get the chance to experience one or two prisons, and there would be no guarantee that they would find any individuals who had experienced a conversion in prison, or who were willing to talk to them about it. Perhaps they might be more wary of a fellow prisoner questioning them than an officially sanctioned researcher!

It is also difficult in this setting to conduct research in the tradition of the biographical or life history method. Those who advocate the use of this method (for example, Clandinin and Connelly 1994, Denzin 1989, 1989a, Faraday and Plummer 1979, Plummer 1983) specify that several interviews should be conducted with each individual, over a period of weeks, months or sometimes years. In the prison environment this is not an available option. Each prisoner who participated in my research had to get permission to be absent from their allocated job in the prison in order to be interviewed. Trying to get the same prisoners excused several times would have been disruptive to the prison regime, and most probably would not have been approved. It was necessary to be sensitive to the context of the research in order to ensure that the research could continue.

Aspects of the everyday life of the prison also prohibited the use of multiple interviews with each participant. It is not uncommon for individuals to be transferred to other prisons at very short notice. This makes it impossible to plan a long series of interviews with each individual, as does the fact that some individuals may be released part way through a series of interviews. If I had only interviewed those who were a long way from their release date, I would have missed out on some very interesting stories, and the perspectives of those who were nearing release. Trying to plan a sample in advance was impossible, I will come back to this point shortly.

The time that could be allocated for each interview was also important. Interviews in the biographical tradition often take place when there is plenty of time available. The interviewee is invited to talk about their life, and can do so for an unspecified length of time. If multiple interviews are being conducted, points regarded

as particularly important by the researcher can be considered in more detail at subsequent sessions. During the research for this project I found that there were considerable constraints on length of interview, imposed both by the regime of the prison, and by the chaplains who organised for prisoners to come to the chaplaincy to talk. In each prison the regime was very similar. There was a time before which inmates were not available, and there was a time, part way through the morning, when they had to report back to their cells for roll-check. In the afternoon the situation was the same, lunch ended at a specific time before which inmates could not leave their wings, and part way through the afternoon they had to return there. The chaplains often organised interviews with several prisoners during one day, shortening the time I could spend with each one. The methods used, therefore, had to be such that enough information could be gained about areas of interest, whilst still allowing participants to structure their narrative and make connections between different aspects of their biography and experience where it was meaningful for them to do so.

I decided upon the methods to be used for this research with these constraints in mind, and with the aim of incorporating appropriate aspects of the research traditions mentioned.

### **The Methods Used.**

The research design was developed using a combination of the methods already outlined, and the advice of Denzin (1989a) who recommended the use of in-depth, open ended interviews in situations where biographical or participant observation research cannot be conducted. Spending time in the prison environment, participating in chaplaincy activities, and in-depth interviews were employed as research methods. In the following sections I discuss the use of each of these methods and also the way in which I gained access to the prison environment.

### ***Designing the Interviews<sup>6</sup>.***

Although lengthy, multiple interviews were not possible, it was feasible to develop an interview composed of several sections, each relating to an aspect of the lives of those being interviewed. The interview began with some introductory questions relating to demographic characteristics and the prison career of participants. This enabled me to gain information about my sample, but also acted as a way of drawing them into the interview and putting them at ease. There was then a section on their religious background. One broad question was used in order to allow them to structure their story as they deemed appropriate, asking them to talk about their experience of, and attitudes towards, religion, from childhood to their experience of conversion. In practice, this was a good place to start because as they told this story they brought in other topics of interest, relating to subsequent questions, in a way that allowed me to see how different

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<sup>6</sup> The interview schedule used with prisoners can be found in Appendix 1.

experiences fitted together in individual lives. Their stories were rarely structured simply in terms of a narrow response to each question. Under each section I included prompts for myself so that, if particular areas of interest came up in their stories, I was able to probe further. Following the section on religion, there were four others relating to: the experience of sentencing and imprisonment; the experience of conversion; the experience of committing their crime; and their opinion about whether or not they had changed. In practice, I rarely needed to introduce all these sections, issues about the crime, conversion, and change were always brought up as the stories progressed, and I merely had to turn to the prompts in those sections for help in obtaining the richest information possible. I will discuss the interviews themselves in more detail shortly.

The interview schedule was designed through a process of brain-storming about the issues I wanted to address, and questions I wanted to ask. Following a review of the literature, and the objectives of the research, there were certain questions that I wanted to address. I listed all the questions I could think of over a period of time, and steadily grouped them into sections until I was left with broad sections, each containing a number of questions. During this process I was aware of the advice of Brannen (1988) and Lee (1993) who both stressed that the remit of the interview should not be defined too strictly if the meanings and interpretive schemes of the interviewee's world are to be discovered,

It is important not to pre-judge the research problem by labelling it or defining its boundaries too closely; respondents may thereby define the problem in their own terms.

(Brannen 1988, 553)

The culmination of this process was the formulation of one question for each section, which I thought might prompt story-telling, but so that I did not define the boundaries too rigidly. The prompts were refined from the list of narrower questions that I wished to address.

I then piloted the interview with the first two prisoners. As both these interviews ran smoothly, and elicited rich and relevant information, no changes to the format of the interview were made. The style of interviewing did evolve as the research process went on, I will consider how this occurred and its effect shortly.

The other part of the research design involved visits to the chaplaincy at each prison, participation in some of their events and conversation with chaplains and other prison staff. Part of this process was aimed at gaining access to prisons so that the interviews with inmates could take place. I will now describe the methods used to gain access to such a secure environment.

### ***Gaining Access to Prison.***

Since my research was concerned with religious conversion in prison, I decided to approach prison chaplains as a way of gaining access both to prisoners, and to the

environment of the prison chaplaincy which is important to those inmates who practice religion<sup>7</sup>. Lee (1993) suggested that when interviewing people who can be defined as 'sensitive subjects', those who are in positions where they have no power and might be wary of researchers, it is useful to be introduced to participants by someone who is known, respected and trusted by those that are the subjects of the research. For those who practice religion in prison, chaplains fit this definition exactly.

My first point of contact was with the Chaplain General who has overall responsibility for all prison chaplaincies. I wrote to him to ask for his approval in contacting individual chaplains. The reply was positive, giving me permission to contact individuals, and also stating that my letter had been forwarded to a number of chaplains in the local area.

I wrote to a number of chaplains, initially to ask if I could visit them to talk informally about my research, and how they might be able to help. After several positive responses I visited a number of prisons, about 6 months prior to beginning the interviews, in order to get some initial information about the prison system and how it might affect the research process. At this stage information was gathered about some of the differences between prisons in Britain, specifically the difference between 'local' and other prisons. Local prisons are those which house inmates on remand and at the beginning of sentences whilst they are waiting to be sent to the first of the prisons in which they will serve their sentence. A number of those I visited initially were local prisons, however, there were no local prisons among those in which I eventually conducted the research. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, the chaplains I contacted in local prisons had rarely seen inmates convert to religion. Secondly, the rate at which prisoners enter and leave such prisons is very fast, interviews could be arranged and have to be cancelled at short notice. Those who do convert to religion in the first stages of their sentence are perhaps sent to new prisons before such a conversion is made apparent. There is also little time for prisoners to develop relationships with chaplaincy staff.

I was also able, at this stage, to visit one maximum security establishment, where those prisoners defined as category A (those regarded as most dangerous), and those at the beginning of life sentences, were housed<sup>8</sup>. At this stage I came to realise that security issues would affect the research process. At this particular prison, although I was allowed access to the chaplaincy, there were distinct differences from the other prisons I visited: prison officers were present in the chaplaincy at all times; I was not allowed contact with any of the prisoners; and prisoners were not free to walk around the chaplaincy unaccompanied. I approached the subject of interviewing inmates with the chaplain and several issues emerged. Firstly, if I were to have contact with inmates, I

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<sup>7</sup> I must clarify at this point that although the name 'chaplaincy' brings to mind the Church of England with which prisons are linked historically, and the chaplain in charge is required to be ordained into the Church of England, the chaplaincy is important to all those individuals who practice religion, irrespective of their religious orientation. The prison chaplaincy is required to accommodate religious activities of all faiths. For more information on this see Beckford and Gilliat (1998).

<sup>8</sup> These prisons are known as 'dispersal' prisons.

would have to be accompanied by a prison officer. I was concerned about the effect that this might have on the information individuals would disclose, and how free they felt to speak. However, the second problem meant that I did not have to tackle this issue. The chaplain expressed doubts that I would be allowed to have contact with inmates, but agreed to apply to the Governor on my behalf. His fears were confirmed, however, when my application was declined.

I realised at this stage that there was no guarantee that I would be allowed to research in my chosen arena and that I had previously taken this for granted. I realised that, as researchers, we cannot take it for granted that we will be able to gain access to the contexts in which we wish to research. The reasons I was given for not being granted access to dispersal prisons were my own safety, and lack of available provisions for guaranteeing this during the interviews.

These initial visits provided me with valuable information about prisons. This information was important in ensuring the smooth running of the research process, and were therefore an invaluable part of it. In the light of this information, and because only one of the prisons I had visited was appropriate as a research site, I wrote letters to the chaplains at several prisons in categories B, C and D<sup>9</sup>. I selected these prisons by location, and because of recommendations from the chaplains to whom I had already spoken. They recommended other prisons either because they knew the chaplain and thought they would be helpful, or because they had knowledge of particular inmates there who had experienced religious conversions. The letters gave a brief description of my research, and requested an interview with each chaplain concerning their experiences of, and views upon religious conversion in prison.

### *Interviewing the Chaplains<sup>10</sup>.*

There were a number of reasons why I decided to conduct interviews with the chaplains. Obtaining their opinions gave me information about the issues regarded as important by those who had witnessed prison conversions. I used this information to reflect upon the questions I wanted to ask the inmates themselves. I was also able to ask questions about the organisation of the prison chaplaincy. This provided an insight into the context in which individuals converted, and allowed comparison between different chaplaincies, and the identification of similarities and differences which might have been significant in the experiences of inmates. The chaplains related stories of conversions that they had witnessed; gave their views on the purpose of the chaplaincy and religious activities organised for inmates; and also talked about how they would recognise someone who had converted. This latter point was particularly important given that the chaplains selected inmates for me to interview.

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<sup>9</sup> Of these, categories C and D are prisons with open conditions. Those prisoners in category D conditions often have jobs outside the prison.

<sup>10</sup> The interview schedule used with chaplains can be found in Appendix 2.

During these interviews I was also able to explain the purpose of my research; talk about ethical issues such as confidentiality; negotiate for the use of a tape recorder during the interviews (all had already agreed to be tape recorded themselves); and make them feel involved in the research process. I interviewed them on the basis that they were experts in the subject. Building up rapport with the chaplains in this way made it easier for me to ask for access to inmates; taking time to talk to each chaplain about their views and the purposes of the research seemed to make each of them interested in the project and happy to assist.

The interviews were done in two stages, not intentionally, but because I was unsure how many converts there would be in each prison, and how many would be willing to talk to me. During the first stage I interviewed four chaplains. This led to interviews with sixteen inmates. Once I had interviewed all the chaplains, and had started to interview the inmates, I wrote introductory letters to five more prisons. Two responded and I was able to interview both chaplains and an additional twenty inmates at these establishments.

It became obvious to me that the large numbers of conversions reported in the newspapers did not exist in the prisons I visited. This was not a new phenomenon that had 'broken out' in British prisons. Indeed, one of the chaplains I interviewed stated that the newspaper reports which mentioned his prison in connection with religious conversions had greatly exaggerated the number of inmates involved.

With this in mind I went to interview the chaplain who had been at the centre of many of the reports of 'mass conversion' in prison. I altered the interview questions so that I could concentrate on his experience at the time of these conversions, and his opinions about what had happened. I was also unsure of the amount of time he would give me as he had invited me only for 'a chat in the visitors centre', rather than applying for permission for me to visit the prison.

Rather than play down the number of conversions that had happened at his previous prison (the centre of all the reports), he focused on them in order to demonstrate his interpretation of the situation - that God was at work in British prisons. It was difficult to get answers to my questions, and I was left feeling that I didn't know much more about what went on during that period than before the interview. He had been interviewed, and asked to write articles on the subject, before and seemed to have a prepared account and stock of stories to tell. Here, I experienced an imbalance of power that did not occur in any of the other interviews. This chaplain believed himself to be in possession of privileged knowledge, and rather than treating the discussion as an interview situation, spent most of his time trying to convert me to his point of view and tell me how to conduct my research. Although it was a difficult encounter, the fact that I possessed a great deal of knowledge of the type of language used by those from within the charismatic branch of Christianity was extremely beneficial in being able to enter into dialogue with him at all. I will come back to some of these issues later in the chapter.

Each chaplain (with the exception of the individual mentioned above) approached inmates who they regarded as having experienced a conversion whilst in prison, and who regularly attended the chapel services and events in the chaplaincy. It is worth noting here that when several of the chaplains responded to my introductory letter, they stated that they knew of one or two inmates who would be willing to be interviewed. These numbers escalated once I had gained access to the chaplaincy and had started visiting. In one case, the chaplain himself agreed to be interviewed, but thought it might be difficult to arrange interviews with inmates. After I had interviewed him and interested him in the research, he contacted me to invite me to a chapel service and said that he had managed to find two individuals that I could interview. It appeared that an important research technique was that of 'selling' my research to those who might participate or act as gatekeepers. Also important was the development of rapport with those who were involved, I will consider this in greater detail shortly. The establishment of a positive relationship with chaplains was crucial to the success of this particular research and will be emphasised in the forthcoming discussion.

### **Interviewing the Inmates.**

#### ***The Sample.***

As I stated previously, the sample of inmates that I interviewed was chosen for me by the chaplains. In the prison context I was completely reliant on the chaplains for introductions to those individuals who were willing to be interviewed. This imposed limitations on the study as I was unable to obtain a cross section of the prison population for my sample. For instance, only one of the lifers I interviewed had committed crimes and been imprisoned on previous occasions. The fact that he was serving a life sentence for murder was an important aspect of his story, but so was his criminal history. The study would have benefited from interviews with others like him, in order that the experience of those in that category could be fully explored. As I was unable to visit all British prisons, the sample I was able to obtain was also contingent upon the inmates present at local prisons during the research period. I recognise that, had the research been conducted in different prison, or at a different time, the sample, and therefore the representation of different groups of prisoners would have been entirely different.

Other limitations were also imposed because of this method of sampling. Many of the chaplains approached all those individuals who attended chaplaincy events, and who they regarded as being serious about their commitment to religion. I, however, did not regard attendance at chaplaincy activities as an indication of conversion. In trying to ascertain who had experienced a conversion I concentrated on individuals' subjective views about themselves, whether they considered themselves to be a convert or not. Although the chaplains chose a sample of individuals who were serious about religion, not all of them defined themselves as prison converts. Some said that they had always had a religious faith, others said that they were just curious about religion or had not yet decided whether to make a commitment. One had experienced a conversion at home,

just prior to entering prison, and one had become involved because his father's dying wish was that he participated in religious activities.

My sample was also constrained by the religious faiths to which individuals in the prisons I visited had converted. Of those who were interviewed, only one of those who defined themselves as a prison convert had converted to Islam. All the others had converted to Christianity<sup>11</sup>. I could see distinct differences between the conversion narrative of the Muslim convert and those of the inmates who had converted to Christianity. Whilst it would have been interesting to have drawn comparisons between conversion to Islam and conversion to Christianity, I felt that with only one case to draw upon this would not be possible. It would be interesting in future research to compare the experiences of prison converts to a variety of religious traditions.

Thirty four individuals were interviewed in total, of these twenty five *defined themselves* as prison converts to Christianity. These were the interviews which were used for analysis. Of these, ten were serving life sentences, one was on remand, the others were all at various stages of fixed length sentences that ranged from three months to seven years in length. There was a wide variation in ages, the youngest was 18 and the oldest in his mid sixties. Inmates had been convicted of a variety of crimes, the following were represented in the sample: murder, manslaughter, rape, possession of drugs with intent to supply, malicious wounding, arson, armed robbery, kidnapping, theft, fraud.

All but three of those who were serving fixed length sentences had been in prison before, but only one of those serving life sentences had served previous sentences. This was a significant difference between these two groups. There appeared to be a variety of important differences between lifers and non-lifers, I go into more detail about these in the forthcoming chapters.

All the prisoners who were interviewed were male. I made a deliberate decision not to approach women's prisons for two reasons. Firstly, the reports in the media concerning prison conversions focused upon male prisons. Secondly, studies (for example Jose-Kampfner 1985, 1990, Zarson and Nelson 1984) have pointed to significant differences between the experiences of male and female prisoners. Much has been made of the effect of imprisonment on women with children, and the loss of the mother role during imprisonment. As a consequence of this, and other factors, women's adaptation to prison, and the problems that they face may be very different to those faced by men. I recognised the need to keep the remit of this study as narrow as possible and therefore decided not to enter into considerations of gender differences in conversion

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<sup>11</sup> Christianity, here, is used to denote the belief system to which prisoners had converted. During analysis I did not distinguish between the different denominations which make up the Christian faith. There are some significant differences between Christian denominations that might be explored in relation to conversion, but the remit of this study did not allow for this. One of the interviewees had joined the Roman Catholic Church, and one had joined the Pentecostal Church, the others did not make reference to denominational affiliation.

experiences. Again, future research could profitably explore whether such differences exist, and concentrate on the female experience of religion in prison.

I aimed to interview a minimum of 25 prisoners to get a good variety of accounts. In practice I did not have much power in deciding exactly how many people to interview. As I stated previously, the research was conducted in two stages because the number of interviewees in the first group of prisons did not reach my target. At the two additional prisons I visited, the number of inmates chosen by the chaplains, and willing to be interviewed took me to well over my target number. I felt that I had to conduct interviews with all those who had agreed to participate because I learned that inmates looked forward to the opportunity of talking to me, and the opportunity of doing something different from the normal prison regime.

Conducting all these interviews, however, was beneficial in the long run for two reasons. Firstly, as stated previously, eight of those who were interviewed did not define themselves as prison converts and one had converted to Islam rather than Christianity. The number that were left after they had been discounted was exactly the minimum number that I had hoped for. Secondly, several individuals who had agreed to be interviewed were unavailable at the scheduled time. At one prison, two inmates were working outside, and were released before arrangements to interview them could be made. At another, the chaplain's first comment to me was 'you've just missed a good one', he too had been released. In addition to this, I arrived one day with the intention of conducting two interviews to find that one of the inmates had been transferred to another prison, and the other had been sent to the segregation unit. One of those I interviewed should have been transferred to another prison but the transfer was cancelled, I therefore suddenly had the opportunity to interview someone I had not planned for.

Numbers also varied when prisoners were not transferred as expected and the chaplains added them to my list of interviewees. When prisons were not in the immediate locality, it was difficult to organise visits which coincided with days when prisoners were available to attend interviews. At one prison in particular, both of the inmates I had arranged to interview were released before I could make visiting arrangements. In an environment where the population is constantly changing, it appears to be profitable to arrange a greater number of interviews than required.

### ***Ethical Issues.***

There were several ethical concerns which I had to address both before and during the research process. The fact that the individuals I was interviewing were in prison influenced the process of recruiting them for the research. Persuading people outside prison to be interviewed could be difficult. They have their own lives to lead, and might not want to give up valuable free time to talk to a researcher. In prison, however, as we learn from those who have studied prison life, (e.g. Sykes 1958, Irwin 1970, Hefferman 1972), time passes very slowly and there is not much to occupy prisoners except the work that they are allocated, reading, watching TV, working out in

the gym and so on. The opportunity to organise their own lives and pursue leisure activities is very restricted. The chance to participate in any activity that is outside the normal regime of the prison might therefore appear attractive. In asking prisoners to participate in interviews, I was offering them the opportunity to engage in something different, to fill time, or even to get out of their daily prison work. Were they, therefore, able to give true informed consent to be part of the research? Did they weigh up the positives and negatives of participation in the same way as someone on the outside? If not, was I, in asking them to take part, exploiting them and taking advantage of their situation?

There were various ways I tried to get around this problem. Firstly, in asking the chaplains to make contact with each inmate on my behalf, I used the knowledge they had of each inmate to ensure that exploitation did not take place. Each chaplain made it clear to the prisoners what was involved (i.e. talking both about their conversion and their life as a whole), and gave them the opportunity to say no. Secondly, I drew up an agreement to give to each prisoner before the interview. This agreement had three parts: a brief description of the research; my agreement to keep everything they said confidential, and not to use any material from their interview that could identify them; and their agreement to be interviewed, tape recorded, and for interview material to be used in my thesis<sup>12</sup>. Each participant signed one of these agreements, and was given the chance to withdraw from the interview at any stage. At this point, the potential participant had already been excused from work, had been allowed to go to the chaplaincy, was with me in the interview room, and could have chatted informally without the tape recorder on. I was therefore confident that they had all chosen to participate in an informed and non-exploitative manner. All who were approached by the chaplains agreed to be interviewed. One declined at first but decided to participate later, and one requested that certain information he gave me was not included in the thesis because of the special nature of his case, and the possibility of his being identified.

An additional dilemma came about as a result of my commitment to maintain confidentiality. I anticipated that in the context in which I was interviewing, I might come into possession of information about previous crimes, or about events within the prison that were not known to prison authorities. I wondered if I had an obligation to disclose such information or whether, as a researcher, my commitment to the participants should be paramount. I found it easy to resolve this dilemma because of the fact that the interviews took place in the chaplaincy of each prison. In conversation with one of the chaplains, early in the research process, I asked if the chaplains had a commitment to confidentiality. As part their role involved counselling inmates, I assumed that sensitive information sometimes came to light, and wondered if their allegiance was to the inmates, or to the prison authorities to whom they were accountable. I was told that complete confidentiality is maintained unless there is a perceived danger to the inmate or others. I decided to follow the lead of the chaplains in this respect, especially as I was not accountable in any way to the prison authorities, and because it would put each individual at ease to guarantee the same degree of confidentiality they received from the chaplain. If I was given information that caused me concern, my relationship with the

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<sup>12</sup> A copy of this agreement can be found in Appendix 3.

chaplains as facilitators of the research, gave me a means of off-loading such information to someone who had experience of the prison environment<sup>13</sup>.

The effects of the interview on the emotions of participants also needed to be considered. Butt et al (1992) argued that the researcher must be aware of the potential for 'practising therapy without a licence' (p93). Researchers must take account of the situation of individuals and their emotional responses to 'telling their story'. It is important, after the interview, not to simply leave participants to deal alone with emotions that have been brought to the surface, and painful memories that have been revisited. Talking about their lives, their family relationships, and particularly their crimes was an emotional experience for many of those I interviewed.

Many inmates criticised the psychology departments in prison for making them repeatedly go through the details of their crimes, bringing painful emotions to the surface, and then sending them back to their wing with no support. I was aware that some of my questions might have the same effect and that, whilst I was not the most appropriate person to provide counselling and support, nor could I send them back to the wings in an emotional state. Here, the importance of the chaplains as gatekeepers, and of locating the interviews within the chaplaincy, was highlighted again. Of their own accord, the chaplains talked to each prisoner directly after I had interviewed them in order to gauge what the experience had been like. At this point they were able to provide support for any individuals who needed to talk about difficult issues. Several inmates became upset at some point during their interview, but after a short break they were all able to continue. Most had started to come to terms with aspects of their lives that they found painful, this process was assisted by conversion to Christianity.

The feedback I got from both inmates and chaplains was much more positive than I had anticipated. The most surprising element of this was that people had enjoyed the experience of being interviewed, and even found it helpful. Had such comments come solely from the inmates, during the interview situation, I might have thought they were just being polite, but much of it came from the chaplains on subsequent visits. For instance, I was told that one inmate had found the interview particularly helpful as it had allowed him to articulate things that he had previously not had occasion to. He found it useful to vocalise some of the issues that had been on his mind, and had told the chaplain that my questions allowed him to evaluate them and sort them out in his head. This comment came at an early stage in the research and gave me confidence that I was not exploiting the participants. Another chaplain also identified a prisoner who had particularly benefited from the interview, saying that not only was it good for him to have an arena in which to 'get things off his chest', but it was beneficial for him to see someone from outside, 'a human face'. Only in this one case, however, did the interview situation turn into a chance for the participant to 'get things off his chest'. Although I allowed the inmates to structure the stories they told me, I was keen not to let the

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<sup>13</sup> On only one occasion I felt that it was appropriate to talk to the chaplain about some of the problems an inmate was experiencing, which were brought up during the interview. The chaplain was already aware of these problems, but the incident demonstrated to him my commitment to the welfare of the inmates and further justified his decision to allow me access for the research.

interviews become an arena for the airing of current difficulties or complaints with the prison, and managed to successfully steer the conversation back onto the subjects in which I was interested.

A partnership between myself and the chaplains seemed to emerge as they facilitated the research, I conducted the interviews, and they followed up participants, addressing emotional issues, and providing me with feedback. I had to be careful, however, that whilst I participated in chaplaincy life on the days that I spent in each prison, I did not become regarded as someone who would assist in chaplaincy work.

A number of the chaplains mentioned that my presence in the chaplaincy was beneficial for inmates because I sat and talked to them, was accepting of them, and provided contact with the outside world. In two prisons I was asked by the chaplains to get involved in courses or counselling with inmates, and in all the prisons I visited I was asked by inmates to attend some of the groups run by the chaplaincy. At one prison I was encouraged to sit in on two counselling sessions with individuals who had not been involved in the interviews. I declined all the offers of involvement with counselling, therapeutic groups and general groups that were run in the chaplaincy, apart from attending one chapel service in each prison for which I had requested permission at the beginning of the research process. I had no formal training in counselling and also felt that, because those who had been interviewed were not involved, my participation would not have constituted 'giving something back to participants' as advocated, for example, by Oakley (1981).

When I had completed all the interviews I agreed to attend an activity organised by some of those I had interviewed in conjunction with a charity group. During my visits to the chaplaincy for research I had learnt about this activity, the purpose of which was to allow inmates to discuss their musical interests with young people from outside. As this coincided with my own interests and I could see how much it meant to those inmates who had organised it, I agreed to participate as a thank you for their help in the research.

My interaction with those I interviewed was influenced greatly by their status as prisoners; it was also influenced by their religious beliefs. I will now discuss the problems that I anticipated in researching individuals with religious beliefs, and the issues that actually arose.

### ***Interviewing People with Religious Beliefs.***

Ayella (1993), Barker (1984) and Wallis (1977) have, among others, discussed some of the problems that may be faced when researching those who hold strong religious beliefs. Based upon these accounts I anticipated various problems that may arise during the course of this research.

Those being interviewed may be concerned with how the integrity of their belief will be treated by the researcher, and in the material produced as a result of the research.

According to Lee (1993, 6), those with religious beliefs may 'stigmatise sociologists in particular as communists or atheists'. The 'worldly' knowledge that is pursued by researchers may be devalued by religious groups, and as a consequence they may be uninterested in participating in research. The pursuit of knowledge other than that seen by them as The Truth may be taken to signify a lack of acceptance of what they have to say (Wallis 1977). According to Wallis,

Those who believe they possess the truth... do not need a sociologist to tell them what is going on.'

(Wallis 1977, 149)

Apichella's (1996) study of prison conversion met with warm approval from both converts and chaplains, primarily perhaps because he wrote from a Christian perspective, and used the data he collected as evidence of a religious revival in prisons. Prior to my research I was wary that my concern with religious conversion as a social process, as opposed to 'an act of God', might mean that I would not be welcomed so readily into prison chaplaincies.

I was also aware that knowledge about the perspective from which I approached the study of conversion might affect the accounts given by interviewees. If they knew that I did not share their beliefs, their stories, rather than indicating how they interpreted the world, and how religion fitted into their lives, might instead reflect their attempts to present their beliefs and life stories in such a way as to prompt my own conversion.

These concerns forced me to consider how much to tell people about the perspective from which I approached the work, and how to describe my own personal attitudes to Christianity when questioned. This raised some interesting questions about researcher disclosure which I will consider in more detail shortly.

I also recognised that converts might provide accounts of their conversions that had become polished with frequent telling during, for example, the giving of testimonies (Barker 1984). I asked those I interviewed if they had ever been required to, had the chance to, or wanted to give their testimony in an official setting such as chapel services. Two had done this, each only once. It was also possible that their stories had become polished as a result of repeated reflection upon their conversion experience. The way in which such stories are constructed through reflective processes, and the accounts that follow, are the very accounts, however, which can shed light on the way in which the individual has interpreted their experiences and fitted them into their biographical narrative. Such stories are indicative of the way in which a religious frame of reference is used in order to interpret and structure experience of self and of the world, and as such constitute the subject matter upon which research of an interpretive nature is based.

In addition, I kept in mind the tendency for interviewees to provide official accounts of their actions (Beckford 1978, Jenkins 1992). Such narratives might more accurately reflect group ideology, and officially accredited religious experiences, than the way in which individuals interpret and come to take on a religious world view. As the

group ideology has been taken on by converts as a framework through which to interpret reality, we might expect to find elements of a received conversion narrative present in their accounts.

All those who were interviewed for this study had converted to Christianity. However, their accounts did not seem to be fixed by a rigid conversion narrative mediated from the group. There was no reference to a set of experiences that might constitute an appropriate or 'proper' conversion. Their stories indicated how Christian ideology had become enmeshed within their own biographical narrative, informing the way in which they talked about and were able to conceive of themselves and their lives. It was clear in what was said by these inmates how aspects of the Christian tradition had been taken on as meaningful in their own lives, influencing the way in which they were able to interpret their situation. Analysing converts accounts, then, enables us to study group ideology, and to see how that ideology is taken on and 'lived' by individual converts with their own interests, biographies and situations.

My experience of interviewing people with religious beliefs was positive. I was welcomed into the chaplaincies of all the prisons I visited, the motives for my research were not questioned, and I was not subject to any overt conversion attempts. But how did I make this happen? As I reflected upon the smooth way in which the research proceeded I was faced with the question of whether, in fact, this occurred because I was dishonest with both chaplains and inmates about my own stance towards religious conversion, and towards Christianity in general. This concern links to debates about how much researchers should disclose, how truthful we should be when asked direct questions about ourselves, and whether we should correct inaccurate impressions of ourselves which participants might form. The ethics of this seem similar to those involved in conducting covert participant observation.

In the following section I will address the issue of how much the researcher should disclose about themselves, and whether a certain amount of self-disclosure might facilitate the development of rapport and thus assist the research process.

### ***Researcher Disclosure and the Development of Rapport.***

Debates about researcher disclosure, for me, are centred on the way in which the researcher presents themselves within the research situation. What sort of person does the researcher *appear to be* to those who are participating in, or facilitating, the research? Researchers are constantly involved in what Goffman (1959) termed 'the art of impression management'.

Being presented to inmates by the chaplain gave them the impression that I was almost part of the chaplaincy, or at least that the chaplain approved of both me and my research. A number of people from outside prison participate in chapel services and arrange to visit prisoners through the chaplaincy. On a number of occasions, especially in the chaplaincy between interviews and when I attended chapel services, I was likened

to such individuals by inmates. On top of this, the chaplains tried to include me in chaplaincy activities, getting me to introduce myself at chapel services, allowing me to sit in the chaplaincy chatting informally to inmates, and taking me to lunch with other prison staff. This perceived connection with the chaplaincy seemed to put inmates at ease, facilitating the development of trust and rapport.

Most of the chaplains seemed to assume that my interest in conversion must stem from religious beliefs of my own. It was at this point that issues of disclosure, of telling the truth, and of whether to correct false assumptions about oneself became pertinent. The chaplains assumption that I had religious beliefs was probably mediated to the inmates I interviewed, perhaps giving them a favourable attitude towards me, and negating the need for them to attempt to convert me, or to make their stories seem particularly positive. I realised the potential of this assumed religiosity for the research, and did nothing to clarify my own attitudes unless asked directly.

Even when asked directly about my own religious history and beliefs, my response was not straightforward. I was brought up in a religious family and attended church regularly until my mid-twenties. At the time of the research I still attended church occasionally with family or friends. In addition to this, the majority of my friends have religious beliefs. When asked about my own situation directly, I was able to vary my answer according to how I thought it would be received, and was able to easily enter into the use of religious language in order to promote rapport with chaplains or inmates who tended to use such language. This was particularly important when talking to those of a more evangelical orientation. I was able to refer to my own experiences of church going, my parents' church, my friends churches and was able to comment on aspects of the Bible that were brought into the interviews, showing that I had knowledge of what the participants were saying. I used such disclosure to promote the development of rapport, as I felt it appropriate, during interviews with both chaplains and inmates. The effect of this was that even if I was not asked directly about my views, I conveyed the impression that I was sympathetic to their beliefs, on their side.

Other researchers (Luff 1999, Herman 1994) have also reflected on these issues. They have recognised the necessity of developing rapport with participants in order to gain their trust and obtain the best possible data for the research. Like me, they struggled with the idea that they might be deceiving their participants in order to do this. Herman (1994) rationalised this approach with reference to the necessity of keeping the research project going, and situated it somewhere between an overt and a covert method,

I was not engaging in covert research, but neither did I wish to jeopardise the project. I did not lie, but I did not tell the whole truth.

(Herman 1994, 14-15)

Debates about self-disclosure have occurred primarily in feminist literature on methodology (Oakley 1981, Reinharz 1992, Luff 1999). The impulse behind my self-disclosure, however, was purely pragmatic. It developed early on in the research process as part of my decision to engage in a flexible, semi-structured style of interviewing, a

'chatty' style that might put participants at ease and allow them to feel free to tell their stories. Using this style of interview, and the fact that the interviewees told me such personal details about their lives, it felt appropriate to give answers to personal questions they asked about me. Giving an answer that seemed appropriate to the situation, was better than not giving an answer at all, as I did not want to appear to be hiding anything from participants, or make them distrustful of me. As such impression management occurs regularly during interaction in everyday life, it did not appear to be unethical in the research situation.

Using this method, rapport with the interviewees did develop. The conversational, flexible style of the interviews was accompanied by general conversation both before and after the interview which put the participants at ease and added to the sense that I was genuinely interested in them and enjoyed talking to them. Others were put at ease prior to the interview by the comments of prisoners I had already interviewed. They seemed to talk among themselves about the interviews, and there was a general consensus that being interviewed was a positive and enjoyable experience,

*Well it's been nice having a chat, I mean at one time I think err, I don't think I could have actually gone ahead with something like this you know but now I feel, I don't know... it takes a lot of my chest you know just actually sitting there sharing with someone...*

Prisoner 16

The way in which I listened to their stories with interest and acceptance was mentioned by several of the participants, some of whom contrasted their interaction with me, and their willingness to give information, with their interactions with members of prison staff,

*I've felt more off you than what I have off one of them [psychologists], you know you seem genuinely want to know what happened in my life and what's happened to me and all that lot, them, they don't even want to know, it's a job, half of them are like that (looks at watch), yeah right when you finishing...*

Prisoner 22

The chance to have a 'normal' conversation was also valued,

*...I can't get a discussion I mean all we've got over there [wings] is the smack prices for the week you know sort of thing, in fact it's nice to see you to have a, have a talk. I mean I'm not a great, I can talk but I'm not, sometimes I feel uncomfortable you know...*

Prisoner 9

The fact that I was interviewing religious people, and the impression I gave about my own religiosity, became significant in an interview with an inmate of a particularly charismatic orientation. Towards the end of the interview he said that he had appreciated

talking to me, and that he had some words from God for me, predictions about my future. I had to decide on the spot how to react to the situation, and decided that because the interview was about my entering into his world view, trying to understand the way in which he saw the world, that I should do so by letting him speak, and accepting what he was saying as meaningful to him. I perceived his action as a way, from his perspective, of thanking me for the time I had spent listening to his story. I listened to his words and thanked him for them, making him feel that what he had to say was valued and appreciated. The situation did not stop there, however. At the end of the interview he told me that he would like to pray for me and my research. Although this felt slightly uncomfortable, again it did no harm and expressed my acceptance of him. I understood his desire to pray for both me, and the research, as his way of communicating his acceptance of me as a researcher and his approval of the research, indicating that a degree of rapport had been achieved. Such interaction with this particular individual would not have been possible if I had stated at the outset that the research was concerned with conversion as an example of a social process, or if I had declared that I had no religious beliefs myself.

In addition to the effect of self-disclosure and perceived religiosity on the development of rapport and the success of the interviews, there were other social characteristics that influenced interaction between myself and the participants. I will turn to a discussion of these now.

### ***The interview as a social relationship.***

The interview situation has been described as 'unnatural' (Measor 1985). For the purpose of research, interaction occurred between two individuals who may never have crossed paths in everyday life. Although this relationship is contrived, analysing the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee in the same way as we might analyse any social relationship is helpful in trying to understand the dynamics of the interviews conducted for this study.

The interview is a social relationship, and the social attributes of the individuals involved cannot be left outside the interview room. Schutz (1973) contended that in the natural attitude of everyday life we take it for granted that, at least to a certain extent, successful communication can be established. Denzin asserted that,

It is important to remember that a good interviewer is simply putting into practice what every good conversationalist knows how to do. An interview, this is, should be a conversation, a give-and-take between two persons.

(Denzin 1989a, 43)

We can communicate on certain levels with everyone, but when we are considering interviewing, and the way in which the relationship formed between interviewer and interviewee can affect the data, it is necessary to problematise the way in which such

successful interaction and mutual understanding comes about, taking into account the social characteristics of the individuals, the power dynamics that stem from them and the way in which each individual presents themselves to the other. According to Edwards,

...the class, race, sex, assumptions and beliefs of the researcher must be available for scrutiny and must be explicated in terms of their effects upon the research and upon analysis.

(Edwards 1993, 184)

I have already considered the role of religious belief in the establishment of successful communication and rapport, I will now consider the effect of demographic characteristics, roles and power and the way in which these manifested in the interviews for this study.

The role of power in interviews has been widely discussed, especially by those of a feminist persuasion (e.g. Oakley 1981, Ribbens 1989, Luff 1999). The power dynamics of an interview derive from status, roles and social characteristics in the same way as those in everyday interaction. Those writing from a feminist perspective have emphasised the power dynamics arising from the gender of the participants, and the potential for the researcher to have power over the participant, defining and controlling the situation, and thus the account that they can give. It cannot be assumed, however, that the researcher is experienced as powerful, or experiences themselves in this way, during an interview. Equally, gender is not the only social characteristic that might influence the dynamics of the interview and the data that results,

It also seems likely that much of what is said about gender can equally apply wherever the researcher has different ascribed social characteristics from the people being researched. Such social differences have major implications for *how* people talk to each other and *what* they say to each other as a result.

(Ribbens 1989, 579)

According to Ribbens, researchers should have a,

...sensitivity to the ways in which particular social characteristics will affect our research relations.

(Ribbens 1989, 581)

My initial reflections on this matter involved the status of the interviewees as prisoners. I took for granted that as a researcher I would have more power than those in prison, and took measures to ensure that I empowered my participants and made them feel at ease. Like Oakley,

...I did not regard it as reasonable to adopt a purely exploitative attitude to interviewees as sources of data.

(Oakley 1981, 48)

I took the advice of Scully (1990) who asserted that a conversational style and flexible approach to the interview helps to overcome differences between the individuals involved. At the outset I explained the format of the interview to inmates, stressing that it was informal, "just a chat really". I also stressed that I was interested in them and their lives; that I wanted them to tell me 'their story'; and that they were the experts in what they had to say, I was there to learn. I was able to give them a sense that someone was interested in their lives, and a feeling of autonomy in constructing their stories. The fact that I treated them as experts, and wanted the story from their point of view, was an immediate way of putting participants at ease, of reducing social distance between us, and of ensuring that they saw me in a positive light. The inmates responded positively to such a stance,

*... I respect you for coming in and doing this because there's enough people out there that are willing to comment on prisoners without actually asking them, so to me it goes a long way and to a lot of the guys you're going to see it goes a long way and they respect that.*

Prisoner 22

My interest in their lives and desire to hear their point of view gave inmates a satisfaction that increased their motivation to take part in the research.

These practical measures to try to reduce the social gap between myself and the participants were planned, others evolved during the interviews themselves. As the interview progressed and rapport developed between myself and interviewees, I found that I, often unconsciously, adjusted the way in which I presented myself. On listening to the tapes after the interviews I noticed that in interviews with the chaplains, and certain of the middle class, well educated inmates, I attempted to play down my accent and the use of regional dialect in an attempt, perhaps, to sound more professional and convincing as a researcher. However, in the interviews with inmates from working class backgrounds, who often used regional dialect and had broad accents, as the interview developed I adjusted to a presentation of myself which was more in line with the inmate themselves, that they would feel more comfortable with. My accent became gradually stronger and I started to use regional language that I might use with friends or family. It is difficult to say whether this was completely unconscious, a product of the interaction, or whether at some level I was engineering the encounter in order to get the best data. Whatever the reason for this change in self presentation, it certainly seemed to work. Inmates relaxed and chatted more openly as the social distance between us appeared to reduce. After a few interviews I also changed the way I presented myself visually. Whilst I regarded it as appropriate in the initial stages of the research to dress smartly, especially when interviewing chaplains and being introduced to members of prison staff, as I began to interview the prisoners I realised that it might be more appropriate to dress in a casual style. This too reduced the social distance between us.

One of the most important factors influencing the success of the interview is the way in which the researcher is identified by interviewees. According to Schutz (1973),

when we encounter someone new, our assessment of them is coloured by our previous experience of people like them. On this basis of this experience, we develop various typifications which help us to predict the likely behaviour of others. We all possess ideas about how a typical shopkeeper or policeman might behave, or about the typical behaviour of a close friend or family member. Our expectations of others, and the way we interact with them, are based upon such typifications. Interviewees, then, attribute characteristics to the researcher, and act towards them accordingly, until interaction gives them a more accurate impression of the individual.

This was demonstrated by the keenness of prisoners to ascertain that I was not associated with psychology, as a discipline or a prison department. Had I been a psychologist, they would have typified me on the basis of their previous (negative) experiences with the prison psychology department and would most probably have either refused to be interviewed, or have been very guarded in what they told me. None of those I interviewed had come across a sociologist before and so I was typified in terms of other roles and social characteristics. It seemed, however, that their attitude towards the psychology department in prison was such that as long as I wasn't a psychologist they didn't mind what I was!

As I have stated previously, my association with the chaplains meant that many of the inmates perceived me in the same way as others who came to visit them through the chaplaincy. Since all of those I spoke to had good experiences of such visitors it benefited me to have such an association made. Those in the chaplaincy, both staff and visitors from outside, not only seemed to treat the inmates as equals, something that did not occur in other parts of the prison, but also showed genuine interest in them as people and in their lives, as I was trying to do. Being identified in this way had a positive effect on rapport, and therefore on the amount of information inmates were willing to disclose.

In order to further reduce social distance between myself and the inmates, I played up my role as 'student' rather than 'researcher' as it sounded more informal. They thus attributed to me some of the characteristics that might be given to the typical student, asking me which night-clubs I went to, and what kind of music I liked to listen to. These questions, especially from those prisoners who were around the same age or younger than myself, assisted with rapport as they prompted general conversation about their social lives outside, the music they liked, and enabled some common ground between us to be identified. Many of those who were older, mainly life sentence prisoners, had done degrees or other qualifications, and had come from backgrounds with which I could more easily identify. These individuals had worked in professional jobs and had families who cared about them, rather than histories of bad relationships and drug abuse. Consequently, there were aspects of the lives of all those I interviewed with which I could identify, and aspects of my own situation that they found familiar.

The way I presented myself to inmates, the way in which they identified me with the chaplaincy, and the sort of interview that I had designed all contributed to the establishment of good research relationships. Interaction with this group of individuals was much less problematic than I had envisaged and all were friendly and open about

their lives. The accounts given by interviewees will always differ, however, depending on the characteristics of the researcher and the perceived purpose of the interview. As Beckford commented,

No doubt they would have given different accounts of their experiences to Michael Parkinson or the milkman.

(Beckford 1983, 85)

It is important, therefore, to make explicit those social characteristics that might have affected participants' accounts.

It is also necessary for researchers to think about the research relationship prior to the research, trying to identify potential problems and ways of making the process run smoothly. Only upon entering the social world of participants, however, can we see things from their perspective, using the categories and definitions from that particular social setting in order to ensure that interviews are successful. For instance, until I had entered the prison environment I did not know how strongly prisoners felt about psychologists, and how detrimental it would have been if I was one. In this respect a period of participant observation, in contexts where it is possible, might promote the most successful and well informed interviews.

### ***Being Female in a Men's' Prison.***

I have already commented that much feminist writing on methodology has been focused around the effect of gender on the research relationship. A large part of this work (e.g. Oakley 1981, Finch 1984, Ribbens 1989, Luff 1999) was concerned with the dynamics of women interviewing women, putting this forward as preferable to women being interviewed by men, where the research relationship might be hindered by the reproduction of patriarchal patterns of interaction occurring in society as a whole. Much less has been written about the process of women interviewing men. Where this has been mentioned (e.g. Smart 1984) there has been a focus on this relationship as an instance of 'interviewing up' the social hierarchy.

Smart (1984) conducted research with powerful, successful men, whilst I interviewed a group of men situated on the lowest rung of society. Regardless of my gender, I was therefore in a more powerful social position than them. In fact, being female in male prisons seemed to give me even more power than I had anticipated. The chaplains commented that it was nice to have a 'young female' around the chaplaincy, that it made a change for the inmates to be able to talk to a woman in such a male dominated environment. I was able to provide them with a female perspective on themselves, something which Sykes (1958) identified as one of the significant deprivations of the prison environment. Perhaps because of this, once I had been attending each prison for a while, inmates actually started approaching the chaplain to ask if they could talk to me!

I also got the impression during the interviews that it was a definite advantage to be female. I felt that more was disclosed to me than if I had been a man, and inmates allowed themselves to show emotion in a way that might not have seemed appropriate with a male interviewer. This aspect of gender difference in the interview situation would be an interesting area for further research.

Having considered the role of various social characteristics in the research process, I will now move onto a consideration of two more issues that arose during the research process: taking sides, and addressing sensitive issues.

### *Taking Sides?*

Becker (1971) discussed the issue of taking sides during research. Are we on the side of the participants we are representing in research? Or are we merely on our own side, trying to get the most out of individuals for purely selfish goals? This debate prompted me to consider who's side I had been on during the research, or at least who's side had I appeared to be on.

In the prison context, where we are not free to research as and when we like, it is necessary to present ourselves to those in authority as on their side, as part of mainstream society, and as officially accredited researchers. Research must not be seen to challenge the prison regime, to be too political, or controversial. As a researcher, even though every prison ran official checks on me, to establish if I was a security risk, I felt that I should continually present myself as an upstanding member of society, and as someone with very little power (a student) who would not present a challenge to the dominant ethos of the prison. When I first contacted the prison service, I asked my supervisor to write a letter, accompanying my own, showing that I had the backing of an official establishment, who also defined me as suitable to do research in the prison environment.

At the start of the research, I attended meetings with various members of prison staff which were arranged for me by some of the chaplains. I had not asked for such meetings to be arranged, but by attending them, whether I thought they would be useful or not, I demonstrated an interest in the prison regime. Allowing the chaplains to suggest, and arrange, such activities also allowed me to establish a good relationship with them, suggesting that they had the power, and I was a mere student who was extremely grateful for the chance to do my research. In fact all such meetings that I attended were very useful in helping me to build up a picture of the way the prisons operated. They gave me an insight into the world views of different prison departments such as psychology and probation, allowing me to see how prisoners are defined differently by each department within the prison<sup>14</sup>. I was also invited, on a number of occasions, to

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<sup>14</sup> Having gained a small insight into the way in which different departments within the prison service have different discourses pertaining to prisoners, rehabilitation and so on, I would be interested in future research that looked into these different ways of thinking. Such research might compare the different ways in which prisoners are defined by these groups, the extent to which each is helpful for rehabilitation, and the way in which different ways of conceptualising prisoners in different parts of the prison service might hinder the

have lunch with chaplains and other prison officials. This allowed me to present a certain self-image and definition of my research, and to continually reinforce the perspective that I was on the side of establishment.

The interesting part of this debate arises because at the same time as I was presenting myself as outlined above, I was presenting myself to inmates in a different way. In my interactions with prisoners during the interviews, in the chaplaincy between interviews, and at chapel services, I had to appear to be on their side, interested in them and their stories, and sympathetic to the problems they had in dealing with prison authorities. I had to adjust to an interest in, and sympathy with, the prisoner's perspective on prison life, putting aside information that I had gathered from those in charge in order to allow inmates to 'tell it their way', giving me a picture of how they viewed the prison regime and those in positions of power. If they asked whether I was aware of certain aspects of prison policy I said 'no' so that they could explain them from their perspective. This was especially important in allowing them to discuss their relationship with the chaplaincy and the psychology department<sup>15</sup>.

When inmates outlined problems they were having with the prison authorities I appeared sympathetic (in fact I often was). This approach allowed individuals to tell me their real views on the establishment, viewing me not as a threat to them and allied to the prison, but as someone who was interested in them and understood their problems. Here too, presenting myself as a student, and as a young person with little knowledge, greatly benefited me because prisoners gave me their view of the world, hoping that I might come to share their perspective.

During the course of the research, then, I had to simultaneously present myself as on the side of the prison, on the side of the chaplains, and on the side of the inmates. However, my concern with presenting myself in such a way as to get the most out of the research process underlines that despite how we appear to others and whichever side we think we are on at the time, we are ultimately on the side of doing the best research that we can.

### *Addressing Sensitive Issues.*

Prior to the interviews, while I was designing their format, I recognised that some of my questions related to sensitive issues which inmates might experience difficulty talking about. In particular, I anticipated difficulties in asking direct questions about the crimes that they had committed. I felt that it was important to ask questions about the crime as it might have had a profound effect on the self-identity of prisoners, especially if it was a first offence or a particularly violent crime<sup>16</sup>. However, I was concerned about how to broach the subject, and whether the inmates would be willing to tell me about it.

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establishment of a unified approach to the rehabilitation of prisoners. In this context it would be most interesting to compare the approaches of chaplaincy, psychology and probation.

<sup>15</sup> A discussion of the findings of this discussion is presented in Chapter 6.

<sup>16</sup> I did indeed find that this was the case. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

I wondered if they would want to withhold this information in an attempt to present a creditable image of themselves to me.

Following the advice of Lee (1993) I left the section that concerned the experience of committing the crime until the end of the interview. I hoped that this would allow time for rapport to develop, and for the participant to feel comfortable talking to me, with the interview situation, and with the tape recorder.

In practice, individuals did not feel uncomfortable or unwilling to talk to me about their crimes. The majority brought up the subject of their own accord earlier in the interview. During the course of telling their stories, their experience of committing the crime became relevant and I was able to turn to my prompts in order to follow up areas of interest. In this way I was able to avoid the uncomfortable feeling of asking direct questions about the crime without first ascertaining that the individual was comfortable talking about it.

When I reflected upon the first few interviews, I realised that because the crimes the individuals had committed were intimately connected to their status as prisoners, they were used to talking about them. The culture of the prison meant that not only were they accustomed to talking about their crime with solicitors and prison officials, but they were also required to give an account of what they have done, how long they were serving, and so on, to fellow inmates as part of the everyday life of the prison,

*...when you go into a pad with somebody, first two things once you've established one another's names, err is basically what you're in prison for...*

Prisoner 6

*[In prison] you get the usual questions, what are you in for, how long you doing, what did you do?*

Prisoner 24

My concern about bringing up this issue, therefore, probably said more about my own discomfort and awkwardness than about a concern with issues which might be sensitive for participants.

The flexibility and loose structure of the interview worked well in ensuring that individuals could bring up aspects of their lives when they felt ready, and as they connected to their stories. They were neither forced to address sensitive issues too soon, or constrained by an order of questions that I imposed. Whyte (1982) argued that this flexibility is a distinct advantage of qualitative interviewing. Whilst he asserted that individuals will not respond to a general request to speak, and therefore the interviewer must partially frame the starting point for the story, he pointed to the advantages of keeping the interview fairly unstructured. Once rapport begins to develop, he stated, the researcher can ask for clarification or give prompts concerning areas of interest which emerge. I would add to this that a degree of structure and a good set of prompts allow

the researcher to keep the research question in mind, and probe deeper into the stories that individuals tell, in order to get richer data and come to a deeper understanding of the world as experienced by the participant.

Flexibility and simplicity in the interview design also meant that the participants could tell their stories without any unnecessary interruptions from me. This led to a flow of information as inmates could follow their train of thought, and a genuine insight into the way in which events and issues were meaningful in relation to each other and to biography as a whole.

The relaxed atmosphere that was fostered by conducting the interviews in the chaplaincy, and the rapport that developed as a result of factors already outlined, meant that prisoners experienced the interview situation as an environment in which they could talk freely about themselves and their conversion. They also talked freely about their families, other prisoners, prison staff, aspects of prison life, and their lives in the prison chaplaincy. There was a balance of complaints and positive comments about prison life and participation in religious activities, and I felt that because of this it was likely that interviewees were giving an accurate representation of the world as experienced by them at the time of the interview. I do recognise, however, that if I had interviewed them 6 months, or even only one week later, then certain aspects of the way they saw the world, the things that they wished to complain about, and so on, would have been different. The stories that I drew from for this research were stories particular to those inmates at that time. There were, however, enough similarities between the accounts of different individuals, and enough common themes that could be identified, for me to be able to present an account of conversion in prison which encompasses factors experienced by most prison converts in greater or lesser degrees at different times.

I will now move onto a consideration of how the data from the interviews were analysed.

## **Analysing the Data.**

### ***Transcription.***

The interviews were all transcribed verbatim which was very time consuming but led to increased familiarity with the data.

Several problems came to light during the transcription process. Firstly, some of the practical problems associated with interviewing were revisited, and their full impact on the data was felt. For instance, when listening to tapes of the interviews I identified many points at which I should have interjected with further questioning, and where I had failed to pursue particular lines of enquiry. The stories told by the inmates were often far removed from my own experience, this made them extremely engaging and interesting. I realised that it was difficult to enter fully into the interview, becoming caught up in people's stories as I heard them for the first time, and at the same time remain detached

enough to allow reflection about what was being said, suitable prompts to use, and questions with which to interject.

The full effect of the problems with tape recording interviews were also encountered during transcription. I realised that where a side of tape had ended, or batteries had run down during an interview, the interviewee often lost their train of thought and important material may have been lost. Similarly, interviews were cut short, or interrupted, because of the particularities of the prison regime. During the process of transcription I realised how much data was not obtained because of this, and how difficult it was to restart interviews at exactly the point in the story where they had been stopped. Several of the interviews with chaplains had been done in two or more parts due to demands from work. Interestingly, however, inmates found it much more difficult to restart their stories than chaplains. This may have been because they were relating intensely personal stories rather than merely their views on conversion.

In the immediacy of the interview situation, during one to one interaction, I found it easy to talk to prisoners, bracketing out the crimes that they had committed. When they talked about their crimes, I was surprised that I did not respond in an emotional way, or have negative feelings towards them. When transcribing the interviews, however, and subsequently reading the material, their words and stories took on a different character, and their full impact hit me. Suddenly these individuals changed from friendly people, with whom I had enjoyed talking, into 'murderers', 'arsonists' and 'armed robbers'. It was only then that I had to struggle with negative feelings towards them and an overwhelming sense that I did not want to represent them and tell their stories in my research. I found it difficult to read the transcripts and difficult to construct an analysis of their lives.

A few writers have addressed this issue. Most recently Luff (1999) and Phoenix (1994) have discussed the impact of having negative feelings towards the interview material and interviewees. Phoenix (1994) argued that although researchers are quite likely to be sympathetic to the opinions or actions of interviewees objectionable,

...there are generally parts of their accounts with which researchers can feel in sympathy.

(Phoenix 1994, 57)

After a break from reading the accounts, I found that this was indeed the case. Focusing on prisoners' lives as a whole, and the interest that these had for the purposes of the research, rather than focusing on the minutiae of the offence, allowed me to continue with analysis. It is important to anticipate, and prepare for, the reactions we might have to research material. I had expected that it might be harrowing to hear accounts of some of the crimes that had been committed, but did not remain aware of the possibility of negative reactions to the interviews throughout the research process.

## *Analysis.*

Themes were drawn out of the data collected in the interviews. Thematic analysis seemed the most suitable way of analysing such a large quantity of qualitative data (cf. Kaufman 1994, Luborsky 1994, Whyte 1982, Bulmer 1979). Such analysis allows research to be an interactive process between data already collected, themes that start to emerge, the interviews in progress, the interview questions, and the research goals. Starting to draw themes out of participants accounts as the research progressed lessened one of the problems faced by qualitative researchers,

The problem with qualitative data... is a serious one; how does one transform thousands of pages of typed script, interviews, biographies... into a coherent, valid and analytically sound 'account'?

(Faraday and Plummer 1979, 786)

Whilst I did not have anywhere near thousands of pages of typed script, the amount of material collected was extremely large. Looking for themes as the research progressed allowed me to focus later interviews differently, paying particular attention to parts of individuals' stories which pertained to these themes.

The analysis of qualitative data can be seen as an interplay between data and conceptualisation (Bulmer 1979). Themes and concepts do not just form themselves from the data, as has been suggested by advocates of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1963). I must therefore note that although the themes reflect the stories and experiences of those who were interviewed, the way in which I analysed the data was also influenced by the theoretical perspective I outlined in Chapter 1.

Each interview was transcribed and was compared and contrasted with the others and various themes were identified as the interviews went on. This process revealed similarities and differences between the accounts of participants, and allowed the development of a rich account of religious conversion in prison, reflecting commonality of experience and fundamental differences between the experiences of different groups and individuals. As most of these themes were too large to write about as a whole, I then divided the data into sub-themes, and grouped these back together as they related to the research questions, and provided a way in which to clearly discuss the issues. The amount of data produced by the interviews was far too large for all of it to be included in the discussion, so only those themes and sub-themes most applicable to the research objectives have been included.

The forthcoming chapters present the findings of the research.

## Chapter Three

### Setting the Scene: Questioning Self-Identity.

The purpose of this chapter is to set the scene for theorising religious conversion in prison. Throughout Chapter 1 I asserted that researching this topic necessitates addressing not just life following imprisonment, or life following first contact with religion, but the lives of prisoners as a whole. I therefore asked them to describe aspects of their previous lives, their crimes, and the experience of being sentenced, that were meaningful for them in relation to their current experience. In Chapter 1 I outlined the way in which conversion might be regarded as a way of rebuilding a previously undermined self-identity. The stories told by prisoners demonstrated that all of those who converted to religion had experienced problems with their self-identity. This was not, however, universally or solely due to living their lives in the prison environment, and being defined as criminals. For each individual there was a set of events which acted in a cumulative manner to render their self-identity problematic. During this chapter I concentrate on some of the ways in which events prior to conversion affected the self-identity of prisoners.

The analysis in this chapter provides an introduction to the lives of those being studied. It locates them within their own biographies, the career of the prisoner, and within the social context in which their conversions took place. Looking at the lives of prison converts prior to their conversion allows us to assess the effect of their pre-prison lives, committing their crime, and living in prison, on their self-identity. This sets the scene for the analysis of conversion in the prison environment, and the function of religious belief with respect to the problems faced by prisoners.

I will consider events that took place in the lives of these individuals in the order in which they happened. Firstly, I will discuss aspects of life prior to the crime that were defined by prisoners as problematic, assessing their influence on self-identity. I will then look at the impact of committing crime, and of being sentenced, on individuals. Finally I will consider the experience of living in prison, the restrictions that the prison regime placed on inmates, and the way in which imprisonment was defined in different ways depending on the biographical experiences and varying interests of individuals. This provides an insight the social framework in which these conversions took place. During this analysis I will draw out factors which appear to have been the main influences on self-identity for these prisoners, using their stories as indicative of the experiences that they defined as important in the ongoing construction of their self-narrative.

## **Pre-Crime Influences on Self-Identity.**

As outlined in Chapter 1, Goffman (1961) demonstrated the way in which institutional life adversely affects self-identity. The individual is undermined by mortification processes, such as the removal of personal possessions, the use of surname instead of first name, removal of privacy, and the restrictions of institutional life. During his analysis, he also identified processes prior to admission to the institution that begin to attack self-identity. Goffman (1961) therefore recognised that the institution is not alone in making attacks on inmates' self-identity. Earlier situations also contribute to the way in which the inmate perceives themselves, and the self-identity which they can construct. The subjects of this study similarly suffered assaults on self-identity prior to their imprisonment.

Goffman (1961) identified a career of the pre-inmate. He contended that all had importantly similar experiences which started to undermine their self-identity<sup>17</sup>. Such common experiences can also be identified in the career of the pre-prisoner. All, for instance have committed a crime, and have been convicted and sentenced. The effect of these experiences on self-identity will be discussed later in this chapter<sup>18</sup>.

Goffman (1961) fails, however, to take into account the lives of individuals prior to the change in their behaviour, and the actions of relatives that lead to their first contact with the psychiatric profession. He, therefore, does not consider that self-identity may be assaulted in various ways throughout the lives of individuals, and that this might affect the way they react to admission to the institution.

There were many situations, throughout the lives of prisoners, that had undermined their self-identity. As a consequence, many already had a very negative conception of themselves when they committed their crime and were imprisoned. These events started, for some, in childhood and continued throughout their lives. For others they occurred in adult life, immediately prior to their crime. I will consider the experiences of these two groups in turn.

### **Lifelong Influences on Self-Identity.**

The way in which some individuals were able to define themselves had been problematic since childhood. In this section I will look at the way in which prisoners talked about their past lives, and what it can tell us about the way in which their self-identity was constructed.

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<sup>17</sup> The processes to which I refer here are the perceived betrayal of the pre-patient by family and friends, the perceived collusion between relations and medical personnel, and the feeling that the pre-patient has lost control of their own life.

<sup>18</sup> Although such features in themselves are common to all those who are imprisoned, as I will show later, it is by no means the case that they are perceived by all individuals in the same way and therefore are not uniform in their effects as Goffman seems to suggest.

A common theme amongst those who had a history of criminal activity and imprisonment was the use of drugs. It was this which often led to criminal activity,

*... when you're on drugs you don't even think of the consequences of what you're doing, I was staying round me brother's once and I nicked a tenner out of his err wallet and stuff, I've done all sorts of crazy things, nicked some money off him like and everything which isn't very nice at all, but all the time you don't think about the consequences of what you're doing, you just do it, just driven by the drug.*

Prisoner 18

*...drugs turned me into a violent and hard person you know what I mean.*

Prisoner 14

The use of drugs in itself can signal problems with self-identity, that the individual is in some way dissatisfied with themselves and their life,

*... it was just something in my life that I didn't like about myself that got me into taking drugs I suppose...*

Prisoner 18

Some inmates went into detail about why they had grown up with a negative perception of themselves. The majority of these accounts involved the relationship with their family. The family is one of the most important groups of significant others, with an important role in mediating definitions of self to the individual (Berger and Luckmann 1966, Mead 1967). It seems that the families of some of these prisoners mediated to them a negative self-definition which led to feelings of low self-worth. Prisoner 24 described an incident that he considered a defining moment for his sense of self-esteem,

*... during my life err, well when I was four year old my youngest brother died in an accident but I was told to look after him and my mother said if anything happens to him I'm going to kill you right so err, there was that I had to deal with but I had nobody to talk to about it err, I'd, I'd grown up that way, and I think it was basically that that made me withdraw into myself as time got on, the more I withdrew into myself so sentencing, being sent to jail wasn't any different, I mean I'd already lost my freedom anyway within myself because I'd locked myself in a prison...*

Prisoner 24

Others gave general descriptions of how family relationships had affected them,

*How I felt about myself before I was, I was worth nothing, I was a lying little toe-rag, an obnoxious little brat that'd just do anything he had to, to survive, because the way that I was brought up, me Dad was an alcoholic and a drug addict, I never saw me Mum, I ended up on the streets at the*

*age of nine, ten, eleven, sleeping rough, I've had the full lot, so like I had no self-worth...*

Prisoner 22

*... through me childhood and all that I've never really had any err, help you know what I mean, me childhood's been really bad really. I mean family, me Mum and Dad really didn't bother about me you know what I mean, they just let me get on with me own thing...*

Prisoner 14

The attitude that other people have towards us acts as a metaphorical mirror of the self, contributing to the self-identity that we can construct (Mead 1967). The prevailing message that these individuals received about themselves was negative, giving rise to lack of self-esteem. They also talked about feeling isolated, of having no others with whom to interact who might mediate to them a more creditable definition of themselves. They lacked identification with a group from which they could derive a sense of belonging akin to that which might usually be found in the family,

*I've never felt part of anything because I've always been on me own, all the way through life near enough you know me Mum and Dad didn't really want to know me...*

Prisoner 22

It is perhaps because of this isolation and lack of others with whom to identify, that many of those interviewed turned to drugs and crime. Embarking upon a criminal career was a way for some of these individuals to try to build a creditable self-identity in relation to a group of others who would evaluate them positively,

*Err, partly err, partly I just wanted to be like everybody else err. I was always locked inside this prison, err so I wouldn't get to know anybody. But everybody all around me was all into crime and... whether it was drugs err, guns err, just basically beating people up, err car thieving err, err some of them even had garages that they were getting to, that they were getting a stolen car in, a car that had been smashed up... and they were making plenty of money at it err, and there was me sitting in the house waiting for the giro to come and doing absolutely nothing err, so I felt I wanted to feel part of something err so the way I figured to do that was to go out and start committing crime... [in prison] the one thing I did have in common with everybody was that I'd committed a crime...*

Prisoner 24

Committing a violent crime can be a dramatic way of asserting self-identity (Cohen and Taylor 1976). Some of the inmates had attempted to resolve their identity problems in that way,

*... everybody was on me all the time, my parents was on me and all me other family calling me names, saying I was a drug addict and everything like that and I couldn't accept that. And I couldn't cope with it so in the end I, I committed a robbery and err I hurt somebody for that and they sentenced me to five years in prison for it...*

Prisoner 14

Others used their crimes as a way to try to escape from an intolerable situation. Having been rejected by his family in childhood, Prisoner 22 got seriously involved in criminal activity after he was also rejected by his wife and lost contact with his children,

*... and I says right, you know I've had enough, I just want to end life basically... So I ended up getting into armed robbery, and now my opinion on armed robbery was I'd go out and do it, if I got caught I got caught and if SO19 which is the armed response unit turn up, if they put a bullet between my eyes I'd be quite pleased for 'em to do it, right, I really didn't care.*

Prisoner 22

I have demonstrated here that the lives of many of those who subsequently converted to religion in prison were characterised by lack of self-esteem, and problems in constructing and sustaining a positive self-identity that went as far back as their childhood. A particularly good example of the way in which these processes operated was provided by Prisoner 16.

### ***Prisoner 16's Story.***

Whilst he was at school, Prisoner 16 was given a label to explain his bad behaviour. He regarded this as the starting point of his criminal career. He described how he felt about himself at that time,

*... when I as fourteen year old I was diagnosed as having a psychopathic disorder, emotionally disturbed and a personality disorder but like for twenty years no one would explain what that meant. You know and err I grew up labelled, labelling myself you know I started thinking and believing myself I was mad. Well I was just going through a few problems, presumably I just couldn't handle it you know and err, I think everyone's got a bit of a psychopathic disorder, everyone feels, like my way ... it's like getting labelled at fourteen year old and then having to carry that label all the way through your childhood and your teens and you know, I started believing I was going mad and that you know... I think err people give me, they give me a wide birth, they wouldn't cross me you know because you know I started doing mad things you know and, I dunno it's, it was just like I didn't have a care in the world for anything or anything what I did, I took everything for granted. I didn't err, err how*

*can I put it I didn't, I wasn't bothered if I hurt people you know it was like you know I've been hurt myself, so what you know, so, I had no feelings.*

Having not been given an explanation for his diagnosis, he relied on his own knowledge about what psychopathic meant, and other people's reactions towards him, in order to define himself. The negative content of these two forms of knowledge about himself led to self-labelling. The self-identity which he could present in interaction was limited by his label,<sup>19</sup> and he was left with limited options for action that resulted in him living up to his label, committing crime, and living a deviant lifestyle<sup>20</sup>. He mixed with deviant groups, lived on the streets and became an alcoholic and drug addict.

Throughout his story he demonstrated that he accepted the definitions of himself offered through the labels, cultural stereotypes and attitudes of others. He felt inferior to other people and lacked identification with them. This was particularly apparent when he talked about his initial attitude to religious people. The way he defined himself in relation to them demonstrated the way in which life events had left him with a very negative opinion of himself,

*I didn't go straight into it [religion] because I thought like you know it's, I thought you know, I thought even God would reject me you know and it's hard to explain and err, through all you life all you've had is rejection and you just, you don't want to put yourself in that position to be rejected again you know it's err, it's, and if, I know like if I was put in that position again and I got rejected I don't know what will happen you know...*

*...I thought they're good people it's that they're like a class of their own you know they were too good to be with people like me you know and so, I felt no resentment towards them, I felt that you know as long as I keep the other side of the fence I'm all right and err I just, I didn't put myself in the same league...*

Like others, Prisoner 16 derived his only sense of self-esteem from criminal activities and from a criminal code of conduct,

*... it was an honour, you felt really honoured in my mind, I've been to court ... times and I've never had a co-accused and that's, you see I don't know if that's pride or, I dunno I've never had a co-accused and I'm proud to say that but to some people they can't understand that you know I don't know if you can understand it yourself but to me it's, I feel, I do I feel good because I've never took anyone down so I'm getting out still with that bit of honour in us.*

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<sup>19</sup> For a detailed description of the way in which self-identity is affected by stigma see Goffman (1963).

<sup>20</sup> This was discussed by Scheff (1984) in his discussion of the way in which people with a psychiatric diagnosis can only interact successfully from within their labelled identity, and therefore internalise it and continue to act accordingly.

He still, however, remained isolated from others because of his past experiences of rejection and therefore did not form relationships from which he could derive a stable sense of self-identity,

*... it got to a stage, I wasn't one for communicating you know I couldn't communicate you know and, but it, truthfully ten month ago I couldn't be sat like this having a conversation you know I was, I mean me wife told me, I couldn't, she could but my part I'd built like a wall round me you know I felt like I was hurt that many times in the past I didn't want to be hurt again so I just switched everyone off you know and did me own thing...*

Prisoner 16's story illustrates the type of background from which many of those who had regularly been involved in crime came. Self-identity and self-esteem had been broken down, or perhaps had never been fully constructed. It was not until after they had committed their last crime, or after they had been imprisoned, though that they began to reflect upon themselves and their lifestyle.

Another group of inmates described situations during adult life that had detrimental effects on their self-identity. The following section considers their experiences.

### **Pre-Crime Situations and Self-Identity.**

Several of those who were interviewed said that their crimes were a direct result of intolerable situations in which they had been living. All such situations involved an undermining of their self-identity. For Prisoner 8, there was a discrepancy between his public identity and the way he felt about himself and his situation,

*...I didn't tell people things were going drastically wrong because I was too proud...I was trying to work a solution out, sadly it didn't get that far down the road because things turned in a nasty direction involving me little girl...*

Prisoner 8

He had to 'keep up appearances' by presenting a self in public that was not consistent with the situation in which he was living. These problems in trying to maintain a creditable self-identity, and his unwillingness to seek help from others, led to a point at which he attempted to resolve his problems by committing a crime.

Prisoner 6 also felt a discrepancy between his feelings about himself and the self that he presented in public. Financial problems made him feel that he had failed, but he could not share these feelings about himself with others. Like Prisoner 8, his fears about the way others might define him undermined his view of himself and led to crime and

imprisonment. These fears prohibited interaction which might have allowed him a more creditable view of himself,

*I suppose you've got to be honest is err, the fear of acknowledging or, or letting other people know that I'd, I'd sort of failed miserably and that I were struggling was the lead up of, to me getting here I suppose.*

Prisoner 6

Prisoner 1 told a similar story. He was unable to deal with his problems and turned to crime,

*I was a, a victim of my own weakness and I know that now because as life went on, various demands came up, new houses, new, you know this kind of thing, a lifestyle, and I simply provided it, what happened in the sort of close of the 1980s was that I was made redundant twice within twelve months, I then got involved with a business which crashed and absorbed an enormous, well it basically absorbed every scrap of, of liquid cash that was, that was left, and instead of, of as it were say right stop there I had an opportunity of getting into a pension fund, which I did which we lived off, so basically then when, when the money was no longer there legitimately to provide for the lifestyle we were leading, I then did it criminally err and that basically is, well that is what landed me in prison err, as I say I think I was a victim of my own weakness, for not saying no quickly enough.*

Prisoner 1

The way he was able to define himself was undermined by a variety of factors. Two redundancies and the failure of his business led him to believe that he was incapable of success in the workplace. These negative views about himself were exacerbated by his wife's demands upon him. She too made him feel that he had failed because they were unable to sustain a certain standard of living. Her attitude meant that his marriage no longer reinforced his view of reality and himself<sup>21</sup>. The negative view of himself which was mediated to him by others and events also led to feelings of guilt and his taking responsibility for everything that had happened,

*... as I've mentioned it once before and certainly it was one of the things one of the chaplains said to me, when I came into prison I was absolutely consumed with guilt, everything that was wrong with the marriage, everything that was wrong in our lives err, was, was, was my fault and I'd taken on all that guilt on myself err, without, without trying to resist it, if somebody said to me when I came into prison that something was my fault I would have, I would have without a doubt agreed with them you know.*

Prisoner 1

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<sup>21</sup> See Berger and Kellner (1977) for a discussion of the nomic function of marriage.

Prisoner 2's self identity had been undermined by two failed marriages, losing contact with his children from the first marriage, and comments made by his third wife about him, his second wife and his children. The main assaults on his self-identity came from his struggle to maintain contact with the children from his second marriage, and his third wife's claim that these children were not his,

*Now, err, she [third wife] was nagging me about not seeing the children, that I should give my affection to her and her daughter err, and ignore my children because she said [second wife], that's the previous wife, had probably been playing around and I wasn't the father of the children.*

Prisoner 2

These events led to the manslaughter of his third wife.

### ***Summary.***

A brief look at some of the pre-crime situations of these individuals shows that there were a variety of circumstances that led their self-identity to be undermined even before any crimes had been committed. Self-identity was usually undermined in family relationships. For some, the inability to construct a creditable self-identity had existed since childhood. For others, particular situations disrupted taken-for-granted reality and self-identity. Inconsistencies between self-image and public image, and comments about self made in interaction with significant others, destabilised self-identity and led to new self-evaluations which were predominantly negative. Although a great many crimes were committed in response to such situations, the act of committing a crime, for many, further undermined their self-identity. I will now turn to a discussion of how this occurred.

## **Crime and Self-Identity.**

I have shown that various circumstances prior to their crime had undermined the self-identity of prisoners. For most, the act of committing a crime added to this process, further undermining taken-for-granted notions about self. Those who were imprisoned for their first offence were affected by the mere fact of having committed a crime. Those who had committed crimes many times before described how they had been affected by their most recent crime, detailing ways in which it was different and gave rise to a new experience of themselves. Prisoners who experienced the effects of committing a crime on their self-identity most profoundly were those who had killed somebody, whether or not it was a first offence. I will consider this group first<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> All except one of those in this group were convicted of murder. The other one was convicted of manslaughter with diminished responsibility. All were serving life sentences.

## *The Experience of Killing.*

In relation to the discussion in this section is it useful to consider one of the categories into which crime was divided by Cohen and Taylor (1972). 'Situational crime', as they describe it, is the sort of crime that is committed without prior planning, prompted by the situation in which the individual finds themselves. Such crime may be committed by individuals who regularly engage in illegal activities, or those for whom it is a first offence. This latter group, according to Cohen and Taylor (1972), may view themselves as people who would never engage in such activity. As a result of this, when they do commit a crime, the way in which they define themselves must change. They are forced to reflect upon their self-identity, and to incorporate the ability to commit this crime into their biographical narrative.

The necessity of actively reconceptualising self-identity was demonstrated in the stories of all those who were serving life sentences for murder or manslaughter. For this group, the effects of committing their crime were devastating for self-identity<sup>23</sup>. Perhaps surprisingly, only one of the individuals in this category had been in prison before, for the others this was their first offence. These individuals had not expected to commit a crime, did not consider themselves capable of such action, and such capabilities were not congruent with their taken-for-granted and established self-identity. I will now consider the experiences of inmates who had killed, outlining the processes which rendered self-identity problematic.

### *Shock.*

The first effect that committing their crimes had on this group of individuals was shock,

*...I hated myself for what I did, for the first six months I was in prison I was virtually in shock err, hardly talked at all or anything.*

Prisoner 2

At first they were unable to think about themselves, their lives, or what they had done, and were unable to believe that it had really happened,

*I didn't think about anything at the time, I was hurting, and everything was numb inside, so I didn't want to think about anything, it was just a matter of getting through the day... I was an emotional wreck, the trauma of what I'd done basically... I could respond to everything on a mechanical, physical level, but without emotion, everything was cut off, was empty and drained and it was a while before I started thinking and feeling again, initiating rather than just responding...*

Prisoner 30

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<sup>23</sup> Although many people think that murder involves an element of prior planning, it is the intent to harm at the time of the offence that is important in convictions of murder. None of those who were convicted of this offence claimed to have planned their crime.

*I think you're in shock for four years, you cannot believe it...*

Prisoner 9

This inability to reflect represents a point of radical discontinuity between their lives and selves before and after their crime. What they had done seemed too great to comprehend and they were unable to connect it to any established ways of thinking about themselves. The continuity of their biographical narrative had been disrupted, and consequently they needed to find alternative ways to think about themselves. The radical departure between their actions and who they considered themselves to be gave rise to these feelings of shock and numbness. Action could not be initiated by Prisoner 30 because his usual ways of organising it and relating to others had been disrupted, and his self-identity undermined. These individuals could no longer reflect upon and isolate a self to present in interaction.

Accompanying this inability to reflect on themselves and their crime was a tendency for these individuals to re-live the crime in flashbacks and dreams. This demonstrates the trauma of the offence. Not until they had stopped reliving events could they start to think about themselves, their lives, their imprisonment and so on,

*... it was a year before the offence stopped waking me up at night and err, if I was reading a newspaper the page would disappear and I'd just see motion pictures of what had happened, so it was a year before that stopped intruding without consciously wanting it to, then there was another couple of years just adjusting to being in prison, it was a totally alien environment.*

Prisoner 30

Once these men had overcome the shock and trauma of the offence a process of self-reflection began. If shock represented the radical discontinuity in the self-identity and biographical narrative of these individuals, the period of reflection that followed represented the point at which they became conscious of this discontinuity and began to think about its consequences.

### ***Radical Questioning of Self-Identity.***

In committing their crime, these individuals had demonstrated aspects of self-identity that contradicted previously taken-for-granted information about themselves and thus the self-story they were able to tell. This led to confusion about self-identity. In Prisoner 7's case, he took for granted that he was not a violent person; the fact that he had killed someone directly contradicted this,

*This [coming to terms with being the sort of person who could do what he did] was a big problem with me err, you know even, I would say I'm not a violent person, obviously the crime I've committed shows otherwise, but err I was one that would rather walk away from the problem rather than err coming to blows err, you know so it was a big shock to the system err, that I should commit such a horrific crime.*

Prisoner 7

Inmates experienced confusion about whether they had ever been the person they, and others, thought they were. This completely undermined their previous self-identity as they were faced, not just with incorporating the ability to commit their crime into an established self-identity, but also with the necessity of reflecting upon whether they were previously deceiving themselves about who they were, and of therefore constructing a completely new biographical narrative,

*I was, in the past I think I was quite sort of satisfied that I knew who I was and, you know when somebody would say oh I think you're really good at that or we appreciate you for this or, and I'd say yeah, yeah OK you know, haven't got time for that really, let's just carry on, lets do something else, err and then all this happens, the big crash, everything lying in smithereens, and all of a sudden I'm thinking hang on a minute, the person who's responsible for this cannot have been the person who all those people were saying nice things about, because he wouldn't have done that, or he wouldn't be responsible for something like that. So that takes some resolving, err and again I think only, in the last probably two years, and more so, I mean in the last year there's been a significant change in the way that I look at the factors which were around at the time the offence was committed, err which has helped me to kind of understand how I can feel good about myself even though I'm the person who was there at the time.*

Prisoner 32

The way in which Prisoner 32 talked about himself and his crime demonstrates the way in which his self-narrative was fractured by the crime. He dissociated himself, or the person he was in prison, from the crime, saying 'at the time the offence was committed' rather than 'at the time I committed the offence', and 'even though I was the person that was there at the time' as though he was there as a mere bystander.

Once the crime had been committed it was impossible for these individuals to retain previously taken-for-granted notions about themselves. Every aspect of self-identity was made explicit and called into question. If we look at the social characteristics of these inmates we can further see how committing their crimes constituted a radical departure from the way they viewed themselves before.

This group of individuals came mainly from middle class backgrounds. They had professional jobs, for example, one was a teacher and one an optician. They had

children, owned their own homes, got on well with their families and so on. These were not the sort of people who regarded killing as an acceptable option or had contemplated committing crimes before. They regarded themselves as upstanding members of the community, people who would be intolerant of criminal activity. Committing any crime would have been a shock and raised questions about themselves, but killing someone was devastating for self-identity and self-worth,

*... if I kind of, if I sort of try and paint the picture, I was sort of pillar of society, I worked in law enforcement, I err, I was a director of studies at err, a Home Office training establishment, I taught police officers, yeah err, I err, I'd worked on that side of the law, within that, that kind of, and sort of my record, my standing if you like in the small community was very sort of high you know pillar of society, Mr reliable kind of thing, err and what happened to me as a result of my crime, which was a domestic incident, err, it was like an explosion because it was err, a kind of horrific realisation that something dreadful had happened which was my fault, although that didn't matter as much at the time, the fact that it had happened was the big issue, err and it had happened to me, and there had been a death err which resulted in well my whole life if you like, and the life of everyone around me kind of being blown to bits, and the feelings, the feeling that I remember most was of extreme pressure an almost physical pressure, you know you feel as if your head's going to burst...*

Prisoner 32

The fact that these individuals defined themselves as 'upstanding members of society', and identified with mainstream society rather than criminal codes, meant that they shared common assumptions about 'criminals', and a perception that killing was perhaps the worst crime that a person could commit. Sharing social attitudes towards criminals, and particularly towards killing, led to negative self-labelling following the crime. This is considered in the following section.

### ***Self-Labeling and Self-Hatred.***

Cultural attitudes towards deviance are mediated to us at an early age through childhood socialisation, and are reinforced in later life through conversation with others, the media, the structure of the criminal justice system and so on. Those who commit acts socially defined as deviant become labelled and stigmatised (Scheff 1984). According to Scheff (1984) those who are labelled may come to accept their label and its comments about their self-identity. The accounts of those prisoners who had committed murder or manslaughter demonstrated the power of cultural attitudes towards killing. They reflexively labelled themselves prior to, and aside from, any labelling by a judge, jury, or members of the public. They applied the same criteria to themselves that they used previously to evaluate and label others, attributing to themselves the negative qualities they might have attributed to any murderer. In the light of such self-evaluation, it was difficult for inmates to rebuild self-identity. This was acknowledged by Sapsford,

The public stereotype of the killer is not a sympathetic role and the fact of the action may well be very difficult to integrate into one's self-concept.  
(Sapsford 1983, 83)

Self-labelling was so powerful that it transcended any positive evaluations of self by friends and family,

*I mean up until fairly recently [after six years] I didn't really have many good things to say about myself because the bad things seemed to overshadow everything you know err, and yet you know I've got people, and I've had people, for a long time sort of saying well you do this and you do that and we love you for this and, and you're good at this and you're good at that, and I'd say yes but, yes but [I've killed someone].*

Prisoner 32

The fact of having killed someone became more important in self-reflection and self-definition than any other attributes of self that were identified or pointed out by others. Because of this, all inmates in this category talked of feelings of self-hatred,

*Well when I committed my, the crime and err at that time I hated myself really...*

Prisoner 10

Such self-hatred led to thoughts of, and attempts at, suicide. It also prompted a search for answers, not just about why the crime was committed, but about existence and the meaning of life,

*...you know you despise yourself so much that you contemplate doing yourself in, most lifers if they're honest have sat down and thought well, what am I doing, what's it all about, what's the point, and they either do or they get back and say well, for whatever reason, I've got to carry on...*

Prisoner 8

It was not just the fact of having taken a life that entered the mind of Prisoner 9 at this point. Reflection on the consequences of his action also led to a desire to give up on life,

*... because when you kill somebody it has a ripple effect right across, and it's only six seconds of madness sort of thing, acute jealousy sort of thing, and your children suffer, your daughters grow up without a mother, without a father... you bring shame on your mother and father, their family's in a terrible thing with... you've lost your house, you've lost your job, you've lost your wife, you've lost your friends, everything's gone... and you just give up and you're, I, I, I've cursed God, I thought well why, even though it was my fault, I thought why I mean I'd just packed in for me holidays you know that same night and you think what the hell is*

*happening I've lost everything and you've got no interest because you've lost everything you wanted, I mean you, you've killed a woman who you loved more than anything on earth, and it, it's just all gone, it's just gone like that, I just give up.*

Suicide attempts by those sentenced to murder are common and are therefore recognised in prison policy. All those who are on remand for murder are placed in the hospital wing of the prison, undergo psychiatric assessment, and are monitored to try to prevent self-injury. This experience was described by Prisoner 7,

*When I first went into prison, err, err how can I put it, err I was in the hospital wing on remand which err everybody that was on remand on a murder charge went into the hospital wing err, they gave me tablets to calm me down, tablets to lift me, tablets to make me sleep and tablets to wake me up in a morning, I was on about 15, 18 tablets a day, legitimately but you know I was just a zombie, it was getting me through, it was getting me through the days... I was in a bit of a state I'd had err, tried to commit suicide err because of what I'd done you know it was all part of the, part of the offence you know but err, I don't remember trying to commit suicide except I'd slashed me wrists...*

Prison policy does not, however, take into account the possibility that suicidal thoughts might become stronger later in the sentence when the inmate starts to reflect upon what he has done.

The destructive impact of their crime on self-identity forced these inmates to look for new ways of conceptualising themselves. The next section describes some of the ways in which they did this.

### ***Starting to Rebuild Self-Identity.***

The prime concern for these individuals, once they had overcome the shock of committing their crime, was to try to resolve some of the problems and questions surrounding their self-identity. Opportunities to do this and to construct a new, positive way of thinking about themselves were constrained by the prison environment and distance from everyday life.

These individuals sought answers to questions about how they could commit such crimes. Their stories showed that the process through which they did this was primarily reflective. It did not involve interaction with others, and most were withdrawn from prison life. They began by analysing the circumstances surrounding their offence, trying to find assurance that they would not be capable of such an act again. Part of this process involved dissociating themselves from their motivations and identity at the time of the crime. Their accounts demonstrate the break they perceived between the self that committed the crime and a self-in-process that existed subsequently,

*It [committing the crime] shocked me yeah, I wanted answers as to why I could do something like that, you know I mean jealousy, drunkenness, but they weren't enough really because you know there was a point where I was either evil or, whatever you want to call it, or, I needed a sort of answer, you know I thought I'd done something so terrible that I couldn't get me head round it you know, because it wasn't me, you know I mean it's just, I mean looking back you can see that all the things come together and all the pressures and all the factors and it'll never happen again but there's, the people are not around, the two people who were there, one's older and one's no longer with us, you know that sort of chemistry isn't there any more because you can see with wisdom and hindsight, you can see it now and think well, you know you just, you didn't do this, this and this, but at the time you know you're younger and, and as I say and sort of high profilish position sort of locally and you think you know.*

Prisoner 8

Analysing the situation in this way gave rise to information that could be used in constructing a coherent and continuous story about self and biography. They were able to conceive of themselves as different people when the crime was committed, as young, immature, or lacking in self-control; rather than as innately bad or evil. In addition to this, being able to understand how the situation came about, and to find ways to ensure that it didn't happen again, allowed these individuals to begin to think more positively about themselves in the present and the future. All of those in this group described how they had evaluated themselves, their lifestyle, and the circumstance of their crime, in order to try to come to terms with it,

*I hadn't, I don't, I hadn't seen myself as being capable of that at all because I'm usually a very easy-going person, err I think, well I have, I've lost my self control there which does take me, you know takes some doing in my case losing my self control, but I have completely lost it, so at the time I don't think I was, I wasn't really in full control of my faculties, and I don't think that's a situation that'll ever arise again with the intensity of feeling that was there, I think it's impossible for that to, to arise again, I don't think it could possibly recur.*

Prisoner 4

*The most painful experience in my life was committing murder, the consequences of it, the second most painful experience in my life was actually looking at myself, warts an' all, no illusions, no vanity, look at the person I am, what's wrong with me, why is it wrong, what can I do to change it? ... [this happened] when I'd settled down, we're talking perhaps three years after the offence... one of my pre-offence problems was over control, bottling everything up, and I thought I can't do that, that's a dangerous road to go down, I've proved that, so it wasn't a case of this is a bad thing I'll suppress it and this is a good thing, what it was,*

*was a case of this is a good quality that I want to enhance more so I'll practice it more, and this is a quality that I don't want so I'll let it atrophy through lack of use if possible rather than suppress it, but don't deny it's there because it's still part of me, and that's how the changes have taken place over the years you know slowly, have evolved, and sometimes I make a conscious effort of the direction I want to go...*

Prisoner 30

Many life sentence prisoners seemed to comfort themselves with the thought that, even though they had committed a terrible crime, they were different in some way from the rest of the prison population. They often continued to stigmatise those who had committed other crimes,

*I still hate myself for what I did, I can't get away from that, err let us say I mean, I hope I'm not what you would consider a typical convict, I'm not a person who's been in crime all my life...*

Prisoner 2

Prisoner 2 believed that he would never fully lose the self-hatred resulting from his crime, but consoled himself that at least he was not like other prisoners. The way in which these individuals reflected upon, and evaluated, themselves enabled them to overcome identification with the category 'criminal' that was inferred by their presence in prison. Maybe because they needed to separate themselves from the prison population in general, and because they shared a particular common experience, those serving life sentences tended to distance themselves from other prisoners and associate primarily with each other.

It is necessary, at the close of this section, to acknowledge that there is another group of life sentence prisoners, those for whom the crime for which they are imprisoned is not their first offence, and who have perhaps served previous sentences. Only one of those in this sample fell into this category. It is interesting to note that the most powerful attack on his self-identity also came from the fact of having killed someone, even though he had been imprisoned for violent offences before.

Rather than the act of committing his crime representing a radical departure from his previous definition of self, it served to reinforce, and make explicit, that he was a violent and dangerous person. Having to face this belief about himself seemed to be even more difficult than trying to rebuild a positive identity that accounted for, and incorporated, the crime. Prior to his conversion he lived up to the label he had given himself, and blocked out the significance of his actions for self-identity with the use of alcohol and drugs,

*I believe the traumatic experience as far as coming into prison was when I killed [name], that started me thinking you know just how violent and evil I really was, so to block out the thoughts of that I used to get drunk and stoned and I went through a long time when I was using drugs on the*

*outside anyhow, this was in a much, much bigger way, I wasn't caring about myself, my appearance wasn't that much, I didn't worry about things, I didn't worry about what people thought of me or anything, if someone said anything you know I'd just batter 'em, you know that was the sort of attitude I had. So all of these things are very, very deep and ingrained in me...*

Prisoner 5

The difference between Prisoner 5's career and the careers of the other life sentence prisoners meant that he could not analyse his situation and himself in the same way, accounting for his crime and assuring himself that it would not happen again. Faced with the fact that he might be an innately bad person, before his conversion he was unable to find any methods through which to start to resolve his problems.

### **Summary.**

In this section I have looked at the stories of prisoners serving life sentences for murder or manslaughter. These stories told primarily of the effects of killing on self-identity. The act of committing their crimes led to confusion about self-identity, and a disjunction in the story that they could tell about themselves and the progression of their lives. Faced with new information about themselves and their potential, they could no longer be to themselves the person they took for granted they were (cf. Cohen and Taylor 1972, Strauss 1959). These individuals were forced into radical re-evaluation of themselves and their lives, and were faced with the task of incorporating the capability of killing into their self-identity. The biographical narrative which was interrupted by this new information needed to be reconstructed in a way which presented them and their actions in a plausible, continuous and ultimately creditable way, enabling them to overcome the negative way in which they defined and labelled themselves. Several of those who were interviewed were still having problems overcoming the negative implications of their crimes for self-identity even after between 15 and 25 years in prison.

We can conceptualise self-identity as experienced by these individuals as consisting of three phases: the self that was taken-for-granted prior to the crime; the self involved in the crime which represented a radical departure from the previous phase, or made explicit negative aspects of self; and a self-in-process that involved reflection and analysis of self, and never seemed to become taken-for-granted. Although, as I said in Chapter 1, self-identity is always in a state of becoming and open to change, it is not usually experienced as such. For these individuals, even after many years new conceptions of self had not attained the status of taken-for-granted knowledge. They appeared to be continually seeking new information through which to evaluate themselves and construct a stable, positive self-identity. In the forthcoming chapters I consider ways in which these individuals appropriated religious knowledge for this purpose. For now, I will move onto a consideration of the impact of committing crime on the self-identity of those serving determinate length sentences.

## *The Experience of Other Crimes.*

Those who had not killed did not talk about their crimes to such an extent. The crimes committed by this group included fraud, armed robbery, arson, kidnapping, rape and drug related offences. For some of these individuals crime was a way of life, they had been in prison before and their crimes had not made them stop and think about themselves or their lives. Several of these individuals gave reasons why their last crime had prompted such reflection, and had an impact upon the way they defined themselves. For others, the crime for which they were imprisoned was their first offence. The following sections consider the processes through which committing crime called into question established ways of thinking and acting, and conceptions of self, for both these groups.

### *First-Time Offenders: Self-labelling, Guilt and Stigma.*

Like the lifers discussed earlier, individuals who were in prison for their first offence described the way in which committing a crime prompted a re-evaluation of self-identity. The self-identity represented by their actions constituted a radical departure from the conception of self that was previously taken-for-granted as part of their biographical narrative.

Prisoner 6 did not tell anyone about his crime at first, and as a consequence felt a split in self-identity. The information he had about himself was incompatible with the self that he continued to present in interaction and led to a questioning of self-identity. This was particularly problematic with regard to his role in the church<sup>24</sup>,

*...I couldn't live with it then err, I were stood basically telling children about t' grace o' God and getting involved wi' t' church and yet I'd committed a crime...*

Prisoner 6

Others described the sense of guilt that came from acting in a way that was inconsistent with self-conceptions,

*I think I was pretty, pretty chewed up with guilt about every, about my whole life when I came to prison*

Prisoner 1

The experience of committing crime for the first time not only led to difficulties in self-presentation, and felt inconsistencies in self-identity, but also to negative evaluations of self resulting from attempts to explain how their crimes came about,

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<sup>24</sup> Although Prisoner 6 was involved with his local church youth group prior to imprisonment, he did not define himself as a Christian and had not had a conversion experience.

*I know that I was a victim of my own weakness, for not saying no quickly enough.*

Prisoner 1

*you know I'm supposed to be t'provider for t'family and I'd done a lousy job for t'last nine years sort of thing... I suppose you've got to be honest is err, the fear of acknowledging or, or letting other people know that I'd, I'd sort of failed miserably and that I were struggling was the lead up of, to me getting here I suppose.*

Prisoner 6

The way in which self-identity was re-evaluated following their crimes was supplemented by knowledge of social attitudes towards criminals, as it was for those who committed murder. In the same way as Prisoner 6 had to manage information about himself before he admitted to his crime, people who have been convicted of crimes must manage information about themselves for the rest of their lives in order that their stigma does not become known (Goffman 1963). There was a realisation that stigma, and the necessity of information management, might lead to an experience of enduring inconsistencies in self-identity,

*... the fact is that I am a criminal, whatever happens now I'll carry a criminal sentence for t' next, you know a criminal status for t' next twenty years, I still, what I did was wrong, I know it was wrong but I still don't feel like a criminal you know...*

Prisoner 6

### ***Career Criminals: Reflections, Re-evaluation and Fear.***

Those individuals who had committed crimes many times before, and had served previous prison sentences, were forced to re-evaluate themselves and their lives for different reasons to those discussed above. For this group, sudden re-evaluation was prompted by particular features of their most recent crimes.

For some, the fact that someone had been injured during their last crime prompted re-evaluation of themselves and their lifestyle,

*I haven't been a, really aggressive... a violent person on the out, but like err, I have committed err violence... and looking back I thought I don't know what I did that for you know what I mean and err, and I feel really sorry for that person you know what I mean, what I did the, and like looking back I think, I'm never going to do that again.*

Prisoner 14

For others, it was a realisation that their lifestyle was dangerous, and a fear of what might happen in the future. For example, Prisoner 16 realised that he might die, or do

something that he later regretted, if he continued with current courses of action and ways of thinking,

*I know when I first got locked up for this, there was all sorts of feelings going through us, I felt that, for once I felt relieved that I was like, because it was just a matter of time before I was getting buried and you know that's how bad I was I think. You know that's the only time I felt you know I hadn't to cause mass destruction, fight at the police stations or you know want to go out and burn the house down of probation err, I wanted to blow the police station up you know mad crazy thoughts and that you know, nowt would have come of them but it was just if you start thinking things like that it was a sign of madness itself isn't it, I don't know this time you know but I think that was, something happened then and I thought you know you've got to do something [name] you know, if you start to think things like that God knows what's going to happen.*

Prisoner 16

This reflection on, and fear about, the future undermined taken-for-granted conceptions of self, established recipes for action, and the way in which these individuals could project their self-narrative into the future. The future element, according to Giddens (1991), is an important constituent of the construction of a plausible and stable self-identity,

... reflexive construction of self-identity depends as much on preparing for the future as on interpreting the past...

(Giddens 1991, 85)

### **Summary.**

Those individuals who had committed crimes other than murder or manslaughter made less reference to the effect of their crimes on their self-identity than those who had killed. Nevertheless, what they did say demonstrates that committing a crime, whatever it's nature, can have detrimental effects on self-identity, depending on the meaning that such actions have for individuals.

Those who had never engaged in criminal activity before experienced a split between their felt identity - the identity that they wished to present in interaction - and their identity as someone who had committed a crime. They also experienced feelings of guilt, defined themselves negatively, and the projection of their self-narrative into the future involved stigmatisation and managing information about themselves.

Those who had been involved in criminal careers talked about particular features of their last crime that made them re-evaluate themselves and their established recipes for action. Common reasons for this re-evaluation included: aspects of their last crime that made it radically different to previous crimes, such as injuring someone during a

robbery; and features of their current lifestyle and ways of thinking that involved an unsatisfactory projection of self-identity into the future. Such re-evaluation prompted decisions among these individuals to change themselves and their lives. This decision will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter.

Those who were interviewed also re-evaluated their lives, and the future dimension of their previous lifestyles, because of their experience of being sentenced and imprisoned. We must also take into consideration that once in prison, the way in which self-identity could be constructed was constrained by the prison environment. I will now turn to a discussion of the problems and meaning of sentencing to these individuals, and to the experience and constraints of imprisonment.

## **The Experience of Sentencing and Imprisonment.**

Since the prison is where all the individuals who were interviewed for this study experienced their conversions, we might expect the fact of their imprisonment to have some sort of effect on their decision to accept the world view of Christianity. It is therefore important to isolate aspects of the experience of being sentenced, and the experience of living in prison, which influenced the way these individuals saw themselves and the world. It is also necessary to consider how imprisonment constrained the way in which self-identity could be constructed and maintained. Some of these experiences acted as defining moments in the progression towards conversion. This discussion sets the scene for the chapters that follow, and allows us an insight into why converting to religion might be meaningful for prisoners.

### **Being Sentenced.**

#### ***The First Time.***

Individuals who had not been to prison before primarily experienced a feeling of shock as they were given a custodial sentence. This shock was often coupled with feelings of injustice, and a fear of what prison might be like. Both Prisoner 1 and Prisoner 6 had not expected to receive custodial sentences, and had no previous experience on which to base their expectations of prison life,

*...the sentence which I received was two and a half years meaning that I've served fifteen month which I suppose I now have to say seemed a little bit on the top side for a first offence but, it obviously is a shock and the first reaction you've got is, well how are you going to cope with it, what's it going to be like...*

Prisoner 1

*...we'd gone into, into court and just before we'd walked in they'd said you know, you're going to be coming home (laughs), you know it's going to be community service, that were at ten o' clock and at three minutes past ten I were actually downstairs, I'd been sentenced to four months imprisonment. Err, completely rocked me, I mean there's no two ways about it, I can't explain that feeling, it was just, it's, well t'nearest thing I can think of to the end of a life, it just stopped. Err, and I were left in t'cells downstairs err, and everything were going through me mind, we're not on t'phone at home so I couldn't get in touch with [wife] ... everything pointed out to the fact that I should have been, err or, or at least what t'legal people had told me, err and then when they transferred me to [Prison] that were it, the pain, me body felt like it was physically groaning, actually feels like it was physically groaning, I've never ever been so upset, totally lost, totally lost...*

Prisoner 6

Prisoner 6 felt sure that in the prison environment it was beneficial to have had previous experience of imprisonment. The fact that he observed people who seemed to know what they were doing, and yet everything was so foreign to him, exacerbated his fear and undermined his self-confidence,

*I spent all day in t'magistrates cells downstairs until half past three, took us over to [prison], you've got to go through reception and everything and err ... get shouted at an awful lot err and you're in with a, you're in a, a room with masses of other prisoners waiting to go on to t'wing err, and that's frightening in itself, just frightening in itself because it seems that a lot of 'em all know one another, oh what're you doing here again you know blardy, blardy, blardy blah and I sat in a corner quivering you know err, and it, it is frightening, it really is frightening to experience it, it's frightening.*

Prisoner 6

We might expect many prisoners to feel that they should not be in prison. In practice, very few of those who were interviewed expressed such sentiments. It was mainly those for whom this was their first offence, and whose crimes did not carry a mandatory custodial sentence who felt that their imprisonment was unjust. Their sense of bewilderment and injustice was coupled with a perception that because they had been given a custodial sentence rather than, for example, community service, the way in which they could define themselves, and be defined by others, was different. Although the crime itself remained the same, serving a custodial sentence was experienced as commenting upon them more negatively than alternative forms of punishment,

*I've spoken to other people as well I think they think the same, first offenders sort of think that a lot of their offences are, they're negotiable whether they should be in prison or not for them err, I mean t'law*

*obviously says that they are but some of the stories I've heard myself while I've been in here, there's a lot of them that there's no way that they should have been sentenced to a, to a prison sentence you know err ... you feel different because you don't feel like a criminal, the fact is that I am a criminal, whatever happens now I'll carry a criminal sentence for t'next, you know a criminal status for t'next twenty years, I still, what I did was wrong, I know it was wrong but I still don't feel like a criminal you know err.*

Prisoner 6

For those who had not offended before, the shock of the sentence, fear of the prison environment, and receiving a custodial sentence in itself, undermined self-identity. For those who had been in prison before, or who were sentenced to life imprisonment, it was the length of the sentence that had the most impact upon them.

### ***The Length of the Sentence.***

Two aspects of the length of sentence, and how it affected them, were identified by inmates as important: the way in which it defined them; and the fear of progression to successively longer sentences over time.

The major shock for those who had been in prison before came from being given a much longer sentence than they has previously served,

*...at first when I got sentenced to five years it really shook me you know what I mean, really took the wind out of me...*

Prisoner 14

Prisoner 13 described his experience of being sentenced. As the length of the sentence was discussed in the court room, so was the way in which he was defined by the judge and jury. Their rationale for giving him a longer sentence than he had served before was that they perceived him as dangerous. The crime he had committed redefined him as a dangerous person, but it was the comments of the jury and the length of sentence that forced him to take on board this conception of himself, making him re-evaluate himself and his lifestyle,

*...I had to ask the question, am I really a dangerous man?*

Prisoner 13

Some prisoners had witnessed their sentences becoming gradually longer with each new offence. This realisation forced them to consider whether they would be able to withstand future sentences which followed this pattern,

*I was thinking to myself, I said I can handle this five years but I can't handle another prison sentence so err, I've just got to stop, I'm not going to come back to prison no more, not to serve another five years, or longer... I don't fancy coming back to prison for ten years next time.*

Prisoner 14

A fear of the life sentence seemed to lie beneath many of these sentiments as individuals realised that their crimes were getting successively more serious, and that they were not in control of the way in which the charges brought against them were framed,

*... if the charges had been brought differently it could have been life, it could be life next time...*

Prisoner 13

These fears about the future prompted a re-evaluation of established courses of action and ways of living. For Prisoner 14 the length of the sentence he received, and his fears about returning to prison for longer sentences in the future, led to a decision to change for the better,

*... what made me change and stop and go on the right track? I think it was err the length of the sentence...*

Prisoner 14

The longer the sentence that was given, the more inmates felt that they could not preserve the sense of self that they had outside. The period of time they spent inside the prison would be too long for stable reference points and props for identity on the outside to endure<sup>25</sup>. Certain individuals, therefore, interpreted their sentences as much more than just a time removed from the outside world, or a punishment. Prisoner 23 summed up this attitude,

*I've always said what, when the judge sentenced me to six years what he should have done is when he sat there and said I sentence you to six years, he should have turned round and said I also sentence you to losing your home, to losing your girlfriend, to losing your child, to losing your self-respect, err to losing everything you've ever worked for, I'm going to take everything, every single thing away from you, and that's what I sentence you to...*

Prisoner 23

The self-identity, and life, that prisoners had prior to their imprisonment could not just be put on hold for such a long period, and they were faced with the fact that life would never be the same again<sup>26</sup>. It seemed that in this regard inmates found sentences of 5 years and

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<sup>25</sup> This fear was also mentioned by Bettelheim (1960) in relation to concentration camp victims.

<sup>26</sup> Schmid and Jones (1991) argued that many inmates spend time trying to find ways of remaining the same as they were outside so that they can leave the prison unchanged, as I have shown, however, many inmates are aware that this is a fruitless enterprise.

above particularly difficult to deal with.

Being given a life sentence holds some of the same fears as longer determinate length sentences, but also has very particular features (cf. Sapsford 1978, 1983). I will turn to some of these now.

### *Being Sentenced to Life.*

Those individuals who received life sentences, even though many of them knew prior to their trial that this was the most likely outcome<sup>27</sup>, also went through a period of shock as they tried to come to terms with the enormity of such a sentence,

*I'd been told to expect a ... err a murder verdict, so I was expecting it, I was expecting life, but when the judge said he sentenced me to life err, I was really gutted and err I say when I was sentenced I went down into the cells err, it was a dungeon and I was really upset err, you know it really got at me that I'd been sentenced to life...*

Prisoner 7

The experience of being convicted and sentenced brought into focus the course of events that led them to prison, the real meaning of both of the crime and the life sentence, and the full impact that their actions had on others,

*... life sentences, very difficult thing to accept, suddenly you hear the judge say you're sentenced to life, now I was expecting life, I wanted to plead guilty to murder, but my barrister said no, plead not guilty, we'll go for a manslaughter charge, and so I was expecting a life sentence and I ended up getting life, but when I went downstairs after being sentenced I was in tears because of all the people I'd let down and all the people I'd hurt.*

Prisoner 5

*... utter despair, utter depression, terrible, terrible sort of, well it just like having a hole punched into you really, err, I think it, I think it was a case of me becoming upset at what people might think of me, of, of everything that had happened...*

Prisoner 32

Although, as I said, most of these individuals expected a life sentence, before sentencing they seemed to hold out some sort of hope that they would not be found guilty. When they were sentenced, it represented the point at which they were no longer able to hold onto the hope that their situation might be different, or that things might change for the better,

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<sup>27</sup> Being convicted of murder carries a mandatory life sentence.

*...when I actually got convicted it was a different experience, it was I suppose that pulling away of that last strand of hope that maybe it was all a bad dream, maybe you know things would be all right, maybe all the things that everyone has been saying to you it'll be all right, it'll be all right, were true, as hard as I was trying to sort of believe them but not build my hopes up and try and sort of understand some of the kind of non-verbals that were coming from my legal advisors and things, and I'm trying to desperately say look am I, am I going to lose, am I going to be given a life sentence here.*

Prisoner 32

They then realised the full extent of what the life sentence means, and how it would define them for the rest of their life,

*...it's a big, big smack in the nose isn't it, yeah, you know what does life mean, most people think life means ten years, it doesn't it means ninety nine years and one day, now the day is to make sure that when you're dead that you are dead, they do a post mortem on you. But that's what it is ninety nine years and one day, it's not ten years, it's not fifteen, a life sentence means life. Some of us may get out but we're on license for the rest of our life...*

Prisoner 5

Those who were sentenced to life imprisonment, in common with those serving shorter sentences, experienced their sentence as defining them in a certain way. Many had trouble coming to terms with the way in which the life sentence, in particular, defines a person as a murderer, with all the connotations that come with that label. At the beginning of their sentence, prior to the start of the period of self-reflection that I referred to earlier, a common emotion seemed to be anger, at themselves for what they had done, at the people who had assisted in their conviction, and at the way in which they felt they would always be regarded by the rest of society. This anger, for some individuals, manifested as violent behaviour. Such behaviour was also used as a way of justifying why they had been given a life sentence. When felt identity did not seem compatible with their identity as a life sentence prisoner, inmates started to live up to their label, engaging in behaviour that justified the sentence they had received,

*...it made me angry for quite a long time I think, it made me angry, and that's why I reacted you know, got put down the block a lot, I was angry at myself err, I was angry with the police, I was angry with the press for their sort of destruction of me...*

Prisoner 8

*I thought what's happening here, this shouldn't be happening, I shouldn't be here, and every time I got nicked I pleaded not guilty, shouldn't be in jail, shouldn't be in jail, shouldn't be in jail, and it took me, I'd say that it*

*took, like I say it took four or five years for me to get my head sorted out, I was like a raging bull... I wanted to justify why it was life you know.*

Prisoner 33

### **Summary.**

I have shown here that prisoners who received very different sentences, and were at different stages in their criminal careers, all experienced the process of being given a sentence as shocking, as a powerful force in defining them as individuals, and as an impetus for self-evaluation. The sentence added to, and brought into focus, the effects of committing their crime.

For those who had not offended before, the fact of being given a custodial sentence, and the way that it defined them more negatively than other available punishments, was the most important factor. Those who had been in prison before were shocked by being given a much longer sentence on this occasion. The length of their sentence led to fear about the life course they were on, about future crimes they might commit, about progressively longer prison sentences in the future, and emphasised the way in which they were defined by others. Sentences in excess of five years appeared to define prisoners in a certain way, for example, as dangerous. Such sentences were experienced as an enforced break with self and life prior to imprisonment, as their length meant that stable reference points and relationships on the outside might not endure. The props for their established self-identity were removed, not just for the duration of the sentence, but permanently.

Those sentenced to life imprisonment were also shocked by their sentences, even though they were expected. They also experienced them as powerful forces in the way they could define themselves and would be defined by others. Life sentences were also experienced as symbolising a loss of hope, and acted to bring into focus aspects of their crime which, as we saw in the section on committing murder, may be particularly difficult to come to terms with. Individuals who were given a life sentence were also faced with the fact that they would never be ex-lifers. Although they might be released, they would always be on license, and could be taken back into prison at any time. This, and the fact that life sentences prisoners never know if or when they will be released, are features that make the situations of these prisoners different from those with determinate length sentences. This difference will be discussed in more detail throughout the forthcoming chapters.

After being sentenced these individuals had to adjust to the particular features that constitute prison life. I will now look at how these were described by inmates, addressing the constraints they placed on the self-identity that individuals could construct, and the way in which they could organise their lives.

## **Living in Prison.**

In the sections that follow I will discuss the themes which emerged in inmates' accounts of prison life. Since it was in prison that these individuals faced questions about their self-identity and subsequently converted to religion, it is of prime importance to discuss the constraints and particularities of the prison environment. Addressing the way in which living in prison is experienced by individuals, and is given meaning by them, allows us to consider how this environment frames the way that self-identity can be constructed and maintained, and the way in which we can understand the adoption of a religious world view by these particular inmates.

Following the work of Goffman (1961) and Sykes (1958, 1970), amongst others, we might expect prisoners to describe prison life in predominantly negative terms, accentuating the constraints that were placed upon them, and the differences between imprisonment and outside life. Accounts of the 'pains of imprisonment' were given, but a number of themes also emerged that described the prison experience in more positive terms. The meaning that imprisonment had for many individuals meant that positive features of prison life were described. This finding emphasises the need for researchers to take account of the meaning of situations for individuals rather than concentrating on the meaning that we might expect prison life to have, or the way in which such features might be experienced by us. I will consider the more negative features of prison life first, moving on to a discussion of the way in which, in some cases, features of imprisonment were defined more positively by inmates.

### ***Loss of Autonomy and Control.***

Many of the aspects of prison life that caused difficulties for inmates were related to the fact that life in prison was regimented and fixed. The rules that inmates must abide by, and the routine that they had to follow each day gave rise to a loss of individual choice in the way that life was conducted. This routine denied inmates autonomy in making decisions about their everyday lives, in direct contrast to the multiple possibilities for action and decision making in the outside world. Although they might become used to the everyday routine of the prison, and to a certain extent it becomes taken-for-granted<sup>28</sup>, it perhaps never becomes taken-for-granted in the same way as a routine in the outside world because it is imposed upon them. Although, in everyday life, we construct routines that we may not change for years, we always have the possibility of changing them. It is this possibility that was lacking for prison inmates. Even in open conditions where inmates could work outside the prison, the regime was still enforced and underlined for inmates by a lack of opportunity to influence the course of their own lives,

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<sup>28</sup> I drew this conclusion on the basis that whilst conducting the research I became used to the way in which the prison was organised. For instance, I took for granted that prisoners had to return to their cells at certain times, and also became used to the amount of time spent locking and unlocking doors and gates as I walked through the prisons.

*...when I first came here I went on a town visit and err the lifers unit here were saying that there wasn't any jobs and that you know that sort of thing, when I used to go into town I used to go looking for a job like and I had an offer from four different places and err when I went to the lifers unit they wouldn't let me go because it was at, they were not the one who found the job, because I went and found it myself...*

Prisoner 10

Prisoners also experienced a lack of control over their lives with regard to moving (or not moving) between different prisons. Prison life did not give them the sense of existing in a stable and predictable environment because, even though the rules and regime were predictable, they never knew if, or when, they might be transferred to another prison,

*...when they say you move, you move, you can be moved like these lads, these lads was moved within half an hours notice, which is wrong in a way because they should give you twenty four hours notice but they err, that's, they just got moved out, nothing they can do about it.*

Prisoner 34

This meant that prisoners could not plan their lives within the prison and lost the ability to project themselves into the future. When moves were organised and anticipated they could be cancelled at short notice, without reason. Therefore, even if inmates did plan for a move, such planning was often futile,

*I've started on a few occasions going to Bible study but err I packed that up when I thought I was going off to [open prison], but now I'm not going to [open prison] so I don't know where I am, I'm frustrated, very frustrated I just don't know what I can do... I was told I was going down to [open prison] ...and err I was just told two days ago that I'm not so I'm back in the vacuum again.*

Prisoner 2

Prisoners also talked about experiencing a loss of control over what happened in their family life whilst they were removed from that environment. Several of those who were interviewed described feelings of impotence, and a sense that they had lost their role in their families. This constituted the loss of an importance facet of self-identity,

*...[my wife] writes to me when she's down err, err, and I can't do a damn thing while I'm here, you just sit here and it eats you away you know ...we're not on t'phone at home err everything's done by letter, and the difficulty is if [wife] is having a bad time of it at home err I can't instantly reply to her and it happened err a few week ago, I got a particularly bad letter, [wife] was totally depressed, [son] had had a bad time at school ... there's things like that that do they really upset you because you're so powerless to do anything about it ... it's the fact that you can't actually do*

*anything and all I want to do is get hold of me little boy and give him a hug, it's same wi' [wife] it's, it's, it's that part that I really, really struggle with err, struggling with now to be honest with you...*

Prisoner 6

### **Time.**

As the phrase 'doing time' suggests, time is experienced differently in prison because it represents something to be 'done', to get through, rather than something to be lived, as it is in the outside world. The different way in which time was interpreted by prisoners meant that it was not taken-for-granted as it might be on the outside. Time was reflected upon, and days of sentences were counted off. As a consequence of this, and the fixed and unchanging nature of the prison regime, time did not pass quickly and unproblematically, but hung heavily for prisoners. This led, for some, to feelings of stagnation and futility as they compared the progression of their life with the changing lives of those they knew on the outside,

*Err, in here, I'd describe prison as, as err, the time like really stands still for you, nothing's moving at all, I mean out there everything's moving and everything's changing, in here you're, it's always the same because you follow the same routine every day, it's like while you're in here like all my friends have gone to university or you know stuff like that err, you know and I'm still stuck in here doing exactly the same thing every day it's horrible... You don't get used to it, it's just a case of, it's just a case of having to do it and accepting it, I can't see, well in my position anyway I can never get used to prison, I hate it.*

Prisoner 18

There were very few ways in which inmates could mark progress through their sentence. For those serving long sentences, moves to lower category prisons constituted such markers, but these did not always occur, and a sense of stagnation took over,

*...I've been very much banged on the head again because I've been banged on the head for the last eighteen months and not made any progress and just when it looked as though I was going to get a move err that's got banged on the head.*

Prisoner 2

The regime of the prison also limited the choice of activities that could be used to mark time throughout the day (Calkins 1970). Such markers are used by us all in everyday life to give a sense of the progression of time. They also give us the ability to divide up the day into different realms such as work, relaxation and so on. In the prison environment the opportunity for the division of the day into such different realms was extremely limited, the official day being divided up into periods of work within the prison, and periods during which the inmates were locked in their cells or confined to the

wings. As a consequence of this, activities which, on the outside, might seem insignificant came to attain great significance and meaning as markers of time and as activities in which pleasure could be taken,

*... it's an odd thing every day, I mean sometimes you can, you can have a little high, you get highs over such tiny little things err, (laughs) it's just that we look forward to, to err, Sunday, Sunday afternoon teas because there's an apple crumble there (laughs) you know and you set yourself, I mean in [name of prison] you set yourself goals like when it's days for getting these brew packs or whatever you know or err, when they have association you're allowed to have a shower you know err, really, really silly things that don't matter outside do when you're in prison.*

Prisoner 6

Inmates knew how such activities would be defined on the outside and, as a consequence, the more they derived pleasure from them, and looked forward to them, the more futile and insignificant they and their lives seemed to become,

*I do think about the outside, I think about it every single day, I try not to think about prison because it's so monotonous, it's really, you look forward to having a cup of tea and stuff like that, you know exactly what time you're going to have a cup of tea, what time you're going to make it, the whole aspect of it is really enjoyable and then you think afterwards what the fuck am I doing? It's crazy.*

Prisoner 18

The words 'silly' and 'crazy' were used by inmates to describe their activities. This demonstrates that they viewed their lives as very trivial compared with the lives they led on the outside. Reflection on such aspects of prison life reinforced that they were separated from society, regarded as different from those on the outside, and that they were not productive members of their families or of society. This constrained the self-identity they were able to construct.

### ***Making Friends in the Prison Environment.***

Sykes (1958, 1970) identified the difficulty in forming affective bonds with other prisoners as one of the 'pains of imprisonment'. Mead (1967) and Berger and Luckmann (1966), amongst others, have asserted that significant friendships, and relationships with family, are important in the construction and maintenance of self-identity. Being removed from a family group, or a reference group with which the individual particularly identified, and within which they had a role, plays a part in rendering the previous identity of the inmate open to question. In addition, the institutional environment does not provide the opportunity for such props of identity (Goffman 1961) to become re-established. Self-identity is undermined because of the lack of individuals with whom

the individual can identify and to whom the individual can present themselves in the way that they would like.

Many of those who were interviewed experienced difficulties in forming friendships and in finding individuals in the prison with whom they could replace some of their lost, identity confirming relationships. Here again, the frequency with which inmates were transferred in and out of prisons was important. Friendships that were made could not be regarded as associations that would last,

*... my pad mate, he got shipped out last Thursday... there's only about two of us left off our wing what's been, well been here as long as me, I've been here ten months and err, the bloke before me's [who was interviewed before him] been here like a year and we're about like the original two left out of them because you know people get shipped out, that's what prison is you know...*

Prisoner 34

Those who had never been in prison before, and who had not previously associated with people involved in criminal activity, lacked identification with other inmates,

*In prison you can't really got to know anyone because you know they're all tossers basically most of 'em. Err so you can't really get, get into a really good friendship with someone in prison...*

Prisoner 18

Many also found it difficult to trust others in the prison environment,

*I think you become less trustful of people, much less trustful of people because many prisoners are not trustworthy (laughs), there is no such thing, many people say there is, honour amongst thieves, there's no such thing whatsoever, no.*

Prisoner 4

In many cases, close associations with other inmates only served to remind individuals of their marginal and stigmatised position (cf. Shaw 1991).

In the light of difficulties in forming close, lasting friendships, there were times during each individual's sentence when they found themselves without anyone with whom to start a friendship, or who they knew from the past. Inmates recognised that this had a role in providing time alone for self-reflection,

*...there's always going to be a time, even if it's only for one day, when you're on your own, and it's when you're on your own you start reflecting about yourself and life...*

Prisoner 29

There are many ways that self-reflection was precipitated for those in prison. As I have already shown, the crime, the length of sentence, and the prison environment play parts in this process. The role of self-reflection in prison conversions will be considered in greater detail in Chapter 4.

### *Noise and Lack of Privacy.*

Goffman (1961) mentioned that lack of privacy is one of the major constraints of the institutional environment. This was borne out in prisoners' stories. Their freedom was restricted, not only by the rules and regulations of the prison, but also by having little private time or space,

*...you shut the door and that's it, five seconds later a knock on the door, even, even when I'm working in the laundry there's knocking on the door.*

Prisoner 18

*... there are so many people in here and ... you are thrust on top of each other...*

Prisoner 1

In addition, the intrusion of constant noise into the living environment of the individual, took away the option of quiet thought, reading or relaxation,

*... they're very, very noisy places err, you go through these long periods of silence but then all you can hear is doors slamming all the time and even down to a set of keys jingling, everything stops and you look at the door because, are they coming for us you know and then chink, chink, chink they walk past and you settle down again you know and you're permanently living on your nerves it's like when the, when you go out for dinner or for breakfast they don't shut a door quietly it's a whopping great slam behind you and it actually physically rocks you...*

Prisoner 6

*... what does tend to happen here is that the doors of the, the dormitories, the rooms which they are rather than being cells, are constantly opening and people are in and out and the problem here at [X] is, is an almost total lack for the majority of people of anywhere they can go and be quiet.*

Prisoner 1

Inmates were unable to present different aspects of self in different contexts, as they might on the outside, interacting variously as father, husband, work colleague, boss, member of the gym and so on (Goffman 1961). In an environment where nowhere is private, they were also unable to keep aspects of themselves hidden or limited to

particular spheres of interaction. They therefore lost the various layers which make up self-identity, being limited to a single presentation and way of conceiving of self.

Lack of privacy and constant noise also meant that individuals lacked back regions (Goffman 1961) in which to evaluate or plan actions. Thus, whilst self-reflection seemed to be a most important feature of the lives of these individuals, and prison gave them the time to engage in such activity, the conditions were not ideally suited to such reflective thought.

### *Interaction with Prison Staff.*

The restrictions of the prison environment were reinforced, for inmates, through their interactions with prison staff. It seemed likely that this would be a common experience since staff are present in order to make sure rules are followed. The way that many staff acted in relation to inmates confirmed and intensified the way in which they felt defined by the authorities, and by society in general. The rules of the prison were made clear to them as soon as they entered prison, and the fact that they were powerless, and had no control over their lives from that point on, was reinforced by the way they were expected to address prison staff,

*...I said excuse me, excuse me and this guy opened the door and said what did you say, excuse me, he says you call me boss, if you want anything doing in this prison you call me boss, and I says oh right so I just shut door myself and I went for three days without drinking any tea (laughs), I was drinking hot water from Thursday 'till Sunday, no Thursday 'till Monday morning drinking hot water and he let me do it but you know, eventually I called him boss so I could get me brew pack ... they leave you with nil self esteem you know...*

Prisoner 6

With the exception of prisoners at one particular establishment, almost all of those who were interviewed gave examples of incidents which demonstrated that staff defined them as inferior and worthless. Many of these stories involved violent behaviour,

*...that prison was (laughs), seemingly staffed by a load of thugs in uniform you know err, there were lots of atrocities, lots of violence committed by prison officers err... some of the attitudes of staff was terrible...*

Prisoner 32

The behaviour of prison staff made it difficult for inmates to maintain a sense of self-worth, and to construct a stable and positive self-identity.

## *Summary.*

Throughout the preceding sections I have discussed the ways in which inmates described the constraints of the prison environment. Many of the features of institutional life delineated by Goffman (1961) and Sykes (1958, 1970), such as loss of autonomy, feelings of impotence, loss of outside roles, difficulty in making and maintaining friendships, lack of privacy, and the experience of time, did indeed have negative effects on inmates, limiting the way in which they were able to think about themselves and organise their lives.

However, not all experienced imprisonment in such a negative way. The prison environment had different meaning for individuals depending on their biographies and current interests. In the forthcoming sections more positive descriptions of imprisonment are discussed. This provides a fuller picture of the prison environment, allowing a more thorough analysis of prison conversion.

## *Just an Inconvenience.*

Imprisonment had different meanings for inmates depending on their life experiences, and where it fitted into how they organised their lives. For those who had never been involved in crime before, both committing their crime and imprisonment were not congruent with the way in which they had previously defined themselves, and the plans that they had made for their lives. Going to prison was therefore experienced as a shock, something for which they had not prepared, and as a direct comment on themselves as people. In contrast to this was the attitude of those who had been in prison before, and who regarded imprisonment as merely an inconvenient and unfortunate part of their criminal careers; something to be expected every so often. Prisoner 24's life had been made up of successive crimes and prison sentences. He regarded imprisonment as an inconvenience to the usual course of life, which would resume as soon as he was released,

*[I was] getting in and out of trouble all the time err, car theft, shop thieving, house breaking, all sorts err, my last sentence was eighteen month for attacking somebody with a baseball bat because he owed me money err, this sentence was err arson because somebody had went to the police... and got me involved with the police again, so I set his house on fire and ended up in here. Err, wasn'tee really caring about it, five year time I'll be back out the gates again and on the rules that I was on outside which was nay rules.*

Prisoner 24

This attitude demonstrates that theories such as Goffman's (1961), which concentrated on inmates having a stigmatised identity forced upon them, are not sufficient to describe the situation of everybody in the institutional environment. The lifestyle and reference group that individuals had on the outside influenced how the prisoner role was defined by

them, how they experienced imprisonment, and therefore its effects upon them. Imprisonment is unlikely to have the same effects on an individual who's taken-for-granted view of the world includes a stigmatising perception of imprisonment as on an inmate who labels and stigmatises themselves. In this respect, identification with a criminal group, or a career of successive prison sentences, appear to act as powerful antidotes to 'the pains of imprisonment'. This is acknowledged by Irwin (1970) in his discussion of the 'thief subculture', where criminal identity remains strong throughout imprisonment, prison sentences are regarded as an integral part of that lifestyle, and contact with like-minded individuals is sought during imprisonment as future crimes are planned. Even on the first sentence of a criminal career, if individuals had mixed with criminal groups on the outside, they soon found familiar faces to tell them about prison life and help them adjust to it,

*[On the first sentence] it took a bit of time to get used to the prison where I was but I seen a few people who I knew like to help me out...*

Prisoner 14

The lifestyle that some individuals had been leading on the outside was not changed dramatically by imprisonment. As a consequence, being in prison was not difficult to adjust to, and did not constitute a real break with everyday life,

*... so I was always, I was unemployed, was going down to the job centre, signing on, going back up to the house, shutting the door and waiting 'till Friday, the giro was posted, go down the shops, cash it, get my messages, so down to my drug dealers, get my drugs, go down to the off license, get a couple of bottles of Budweiser or whatever, back up, lock the door up and that's me for the next fortnight until I got, got to go back down and sign on again. So, err, I was constantly within a prison anyway so it made nay difference err, I actually looked on it, being in the jail was actually better because I don't need to go and sign on to get my money, all I have to do is just laze about... and then wait for my money to come to me, then all I'd got to do is just ten steps across the road and I'm I the shop that I want to go to, get my tobacco and that from there...*

Prisoner 24

For others, the opportunity for a break with everyday life was appreciated, prison representing a safe haven from everyday life.

### ***The Safe Haven.***

For those who had been in difficult situations on the outside, prison represented a safe haven, a way to avoid life and pressures in the outside world,

*I got put into the care of the local authority which err came at the age of sixteen... I got into heavier drugs which really upset my life like, and I*

*started my first prison sentence at seventeen... Err, I came out err, my life was still upside down with the drugs and that and it was only a case of two months I was out then I was back in prison again... what it was basically it was a case of committing more offences to get me into prison because I couldn't cope with anything outside with me family and that, and it was really hard you know what I mean like, I was getting into fights and I couldn't control, I wasn't in control of myself, and then I got out again and I committed another offence...*

Prisoner 14

Some individuals began to regard prison as more of a home than the outside world. They met some of the same people on each sentence and, as they had no family on the outside, started to view prison as the place in which they felt most comfortable,

*It was like a family, it just was, I started to make a family in prison you know because I didn't much have a family to be in out there you know so, I think I started to think, I started to think I was institutionalised you know I started liking prison you know, I was having a bit of a laugh in there sometimes you know and err, and at [prison] for instance we had some times, right laughs you know and err New Years Eve and that and, used to all make a hooch and that and get drunk and you know celebrate New Years Eve...*

Prisoner 16

*...I was at a stage in me life I thought I'm not bothered if they let me out of prison you know I've got nothing out there, I had no home to go to, no wife to go home to, no, I had nothing, all I had was a set of criminals and for that like I'm better off in prison so I used to lie and think of ways to lose time you know and thinking if I assault one of the staff I might get a bit longer you know all that sort of things was going through me head... I fitted in [in prison], I did I felt, I felt you know err, you know I felt, sometimes I felt relieved that I'd actually been caught doing something you know and I can go back home then, it were me home...*

Prisoner 16

The relationships that these inmates had in prison were regarded more highly than relationships with family and friends on the outside. Most of these men, like Prisoner 14 and Prisoner 16, had either been in care or had very negative experiences of family life (as outlined at the beginning of this chapter).

The chance to get away from the problems and pressures of their lives outside and to form relationships where they were held in higher regard than in mainstream society, also meant that these inmates were able to derive a more positive self-identity from within the prison environment than they could do in the outside world,

*So as the years went by I felt err, err secure [in prison], I started feeling secure and that and err, err I had a bit of respect, you know I got on with a lot of guys and that, it was funny like you know, like every time I was coming in I was meeting the same guy who I met before and I was thinking like you know you must be as bad as me out there (laughs) you know so you build friendships over the years I think, this guy who I met like and err, and he keep coming back every time I come back you know...*

Prisoner 16

*... it was a long time before I got off the A list and so you know, as an A man I was shown a little bit of respect because I was an A man err, so that made life a bit easier.*

Prisoner 5

Even some of those who were first-time offenders, and had no contacts in prison, interpreted imprisonment in positive terms. Individuals who had been in intolerable situations on the outside saw it as a relief, and representative of the end of such circumstances,

*I have to say again that for myself a sense of calm actually came very quickly err with almost within a matter of hours which may have had something to do, obviously it was a sense of relief that at least the whole situation which I was in before I was sentenced which was pretty intolerable in any way that it could ever be looked at was at an end err...*

Prisoner 1

This discussion once again demonstrates the importance of considering the experience of imprisonment within the context of the biographies of prisoners. Previous experiences, and ways in which self-identity had been undermined, led some inmates to define imprisonment in such a way that it was not a negative event. Only through considering these previous experiences can we fully appreciate the meaning that imprisonment had for individuals, and therefore the different ways in which they adapted to it.

### ***Providing Opportunities.***

Prison was also construed, by some, as a place that offered them the opportunity to participate in activities that had not been available to them on the outside. Being removed from everyday pressures, and from having to work full time, gave these inmates the opportunity to pursue educational qualifications. Most of those who were interviewed had, at some time, been involved in education. At least three had been awarded degree level qualifications whilst in prison. Prisoner 10 explained that his attitude to prison as an educational opportunity meant that he had not felt the need to use drugs as a means of escape from prison life,

*I haven't done anything about drugs or haven't had any need of drugs in the prison system err... I haven't had any trouble err, studies wise I've done about 53 different City and Guilds courses, passed all of them, the last I did my electronics degree course when I was at [prison] and I finished that one as well so I've been quite happy.*

Prisoner 10

Education gave inmates a sense of purpose in their prison lives, and a sense of control over the prison environment in that they were using their imprisonment to their own ends. Imprisonment could be re-construed as playing a part in an overall plan for life, allowing them to plan for life beyond their sentence whilst remaining tolerant of their lives in prison,

*... while I'm doing my studies, my Open University studies, I'm using this prison in general as, prison as a university so it's, and I'm not hankering after parole until I've finished the course I'm doing...*

Prisoner 4

A number of inmates had plans for work or further study after their sentences which involved qualifications gained or interests started whilst in prison,

*I think I've got a fair chance of getting a job because I've chosen something that is, is highly vocational, so I think I do have a good chance of getting a job...*

Prisoner 4

*I'm interested in cookery now, well I've been on a course for two weeks, and I've enquired at ... University to do a cookery class...*

Prisoner 9

### ***Different Prisons, Different Careers.***

Throughout the preceding sections I have discussed some of the constraints of the prison environment, and also some of the ways in which prison may be interpreted more positively by inmates. It is also important to recognise, however, that there is no one 'prison experience'. Previous studies of the institutional environment (e.g. Goffman 1961, Sykes 1958, 1970, Sykes and Messinger 1970, Irwin 1970, Heffernan 1972, Wheeler 1961), have drawn conclusions about inmate adaptation, and the constraints of the institutional environment, without due consideration of the different experiences that might result from differences in the regimes of different prisons, and from the time at which inmates were imprisoned. Theories drawn about prison life must be regarded as temporally and geographically specific.

Conditions in British prisons seem to have improved during the last twenty years. The accounts of prisoners who had been in prison for that length of time detailed conditions which are not found today,

*... at that time in the '80s there were about six, seven people in a small cell and err if you were lucky you'd get one bath a week or shower a week, and err the wages at that time were only about one pound thirty five a week ...*

Prisoner 10

Today's conditions, although restrictive cannot be regarded as so degrading for prisoners as those that existed in the past.

There are also considerable variations in conditions, regimes and opportunities between different prisons throughout the country, not just in terms of the difference in security, whether the prison is open or closed and so on, but also between prisons listed as the same category. Some prisoners actually described the conditions in various higher security prisons as better than those in particular open prisons,

*... even though [name of prison] is a high security prison but the facilities inside is very good for inmates but err you've got your own cooking facilities, you've got your own err, your own clothes and everything, yeah it's a very civilised place, I would say it's even better than this Cat C prison here so, because err you can order any food what you like from the canteen down there, they get you, on the wings there's a cooker on each landing and most of the people they get in three or fours and cook their own meals like err... and err when you went in the visits room there it's got the cameras and all that but it's nothing like a visits room because everyone, even the inmates are in civilian clothes in there... it's a lot better in there than I've found down here in this one.*

Prisoner 10

One prison in particular seemed different from the rest of those that I visited. Prisoners were called by their first names, and officers ate meals with prisoners on the wings<sup>29</sup>. A number of inmates at this prison reflected on these differences and the impact they had on self-identity,

*... this prison is not like any prison that I've ever been to in my life, I mean this is so modern and you know you feel human, you're called by your first name, it frightened the life out of me...*

Prisoner 23

These subtle changes in prison regime could have a significant effect on the way in which the experience of imprisonment affects self-identity. Goffman (1961) and Sykes (1958, 1970) pointed to the detrimental effects on self-identity of being identified by a

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<sup>29</sup> It was particularly commented on by prisoners at this establishment that officers ate the same food as them. This signified to them that the food was of a better standard than in most prisons.

number or surname, because the first name is one of the most important ways of identifying self. It would be interesting in further study to consider whether such differences in regimes lead to different experiences of self-identity for prisoners.

### ***Summary.***

The preceding sections have demonstrated the various ways in which the prison experience was interpreted by inmates, depending on their backgrounds, their previous experiences, their lifestyles prior to imprisonment, and their current interests. The stories of these inmates show that imprisonment is not merely made up of constraints that must be adapted to, and pains that must be dealt with. It can represent a chance to have a break from intolerable situations outside, to feel comfortable and gain a sense of camaraderie with fellow inmates, or to pursue activities that would not have been pursued on the outside. It might also be merely an inconvenient part of a criminal career, or a place in which to continue a familiar lifestyle.

I have also noted that when conducting research into the prison environment we must not take for granted that each prison regime is the same. Although there are similarities between prisons; differences over time and geographically, whether major or subtle, can affect the prison experience.

### ***Conclusion to Chapter 3.***

The purpose of this chapter was to set the scene for an analysis of religious conversion in prison. This was done by outlining some of the key features of the prison environment, and some of the defining experiences in the lives of prisoners. During the discussion I have concentrated on the way in which experiences have, at various stages in the lives of these individuals, called self-identity into question. Several themes relating to such experiences were drawn out of the interviews, and discussed in the order that they might occur in the lives of individuals. Most of those interviewed described problems relating to at least two of these themes, although none had experienced all of them.

Firstly I considered the role of family relationships during childhood, concluding that relationships with parents in general, and specific events in family life, led, for some, to low self-esteem and lack of identification with a group of others. Being defined in negative terms by others, and not identifying with a group from which identity could be derived led to problems with self-identity, often leading to drug use and crime. Secondly, I considered situations or relationships later in life that called identity into question. Many individuals had been in situations where they experienced contradictions between the way in which they wished to present themselves in interaction, and the self that they were imputed by others. Many committed their crimes either in an attempt to resolve difficult situations, or as a reaction to the stress caused by them.

Thirdly, I discussed the impact of committing a crime on self-identity. It seems that any crime can have an impact on the way a person is able to conceive of themselves, depending on the way in which such activity is defined. Self-identity was called into question most radically through the act of killing another person. Those for whom their crime was a first offence were forced to incorporate this new behaviour into the way they defined themselves. Even many of those who had committed crimes before were forced to re-evaluate themselves and their lifestyle. This occurred as a result of certain, new features of their most recent crime, such as injuring someone, and predictions about the crimes they might commit in the future if their lifestyle remained the same. Throughout this discussion I identified some key processes in the way that crime questioned self-identity such as self-labelling, guilt, shock, and an inability to sustain a coherent biographical narrative either with respect to the way in which self-identity could be linked to the past, or the way in which it could be projected into the future.

I also considered the effect of sentencing on individuals, showing that aspects of the sentencing process can also have effects on the way in which the individual is able to define themselves. I demonstrated that sentencing represented a loss of hope, brought the effects of the crime into sharper focus, and underlined the way in which individuals were defined by mainstream society. Longer sentences often gave rise to a realisation that successive crimes were becoming more serious, leading to a fear of even longer sentences in the future. They also represented a radical break with the outside world and the permanent loss of familiar reference points on the outside.

Lastly, I outlined elements of the prison environment, and the experience of imprisonment, which were defined as important by those who were interviewed. I looked at the constraints that the prison regime placed on the self-identity that could be constructed and presented. Loss of autonomy, changes in the experience of time, lack of choice in everyday life, lack of privacy and silence, and difficulties in interaction with both other inmates, and with prison staff, were considered. These aspects of imprisonment will be kept in mind throughout the forthcoming chapters as they framed the everyday lives of individuals, and thus the conversions that they experienced.

I noted, however, that not all inmates defined imprisonment as a negative experience. Prison may be an environment in which self-identity is undermined and questioned, but its meaning to specific individuals has an impact on their experience of its constraints, and their adaptation to them. This is something that is largely ignored by previous studies of imprisonment. I also acknowledged that individual prisons often have different conditions and regimes. These differences can also contribute to the different ways in which imprisonment is defined and experienced by prisoners. More research is needed on this subject to ascertain the nature of these differences, the effects that they have on individuals, and their relationship to prison policy.

Having looked at what might be called the mundane experience of prisoners prior to their conversions, several general conclusions can be drawn and taken forward into a discussion of religious conversion in the prison context. During the introduction to this study, and in Chapter 1, one of the questions raised was whether imprisonment might

have an impact on the self-identity of prisoners, rendering them open to beliefs that provide new ways to think about themselves and their lives. Inmates were affected by some of the destructive features of the institutional environment outlined by Goffman (1961) and Sykes (1958, 1970). However, the self-identity of these inmates was called into question by a much more complex set of experiences. Existing literature does not tell us enough about these experiences. The findings outlined in this chapter demonstrate that constraints on the way in which self-identity can be constructed stemming from life experiences as far back as childhood, situations and relationships prior to the crime, the action of committing the crime, and being sentenced, are all just as important as the effects of imprisonment itself on the individual.

I have demonstrated throughout this discussion the importance of the reflexive construction and evaluation of identity in the lives of these individuals. The stories told by prisoners demonstrate that all these identity-questioning experiences gave rise to reflexive evaluation of self, biography and lifestyle. For each individual, self-reflection was precipitated by one or more of these experiences. The interpretive approach taken in this research generated accounts that shed light on the way that inmates reflected upon and attributed meaning to events, demonstrating the importance of considering the role of such reflection during imprisonment. A discussion of this reflexive attitude is lacking in existing literature on both imprisonment and religious conversion. Throughout the forthcoming chapters it will be a key element of the discussion.

A combination of life experiences that called self-identity into question for each individual must therefore be considered as the context for religious conversion. As self-identity is questioned and reflexive evaluation occurs, these individuals perhaps become open to new ways of conceiving of themselves, and new frameworks through which to construct narratives about self and through which to interpret life, as they realise that old methods of identity maintenance and old recipes for life were unsatisfactory. With this in mind I will now turn to a consideration of the process of religious conversion in prison.

## Chapter Four

### The Process of Conversion.

In this chapter I will outline some of the key elements of the process of conversion by considering the similarities and differences in the stories told by prison converts. The first section considers the experience of, and attitudes towards religion prior to imprisonment. The purpose of this section is locate the stories of these individuals within their lives as a whole, assessing whether there is any evidence that prior religious experience renders individuals more likely to convert in prison.

I then consider the elements of the conversion process that were observed in the stories told by converts. Firstly, I discuss the reflective processes that led to conversion. I address the role of religious ideas for those who were looking for a means of support at the beginning of their prison sentence; those who were struggling to come to terms with the questions about themselves and about life that became significant as a result of their crime; those who found they had time on their hands to think about and evaluate their lives; and those who were trying to make sense of their repeated convictions and what the future might hold for them. Secondly, I look at the way in which conversion was assisted by interactive processes. I describe the various ways in which prisoners first became involved in the prison chaplaincy, and the way in which, once involved, interaction with the chaplain, Christian inmates, and visitors from churches, made Christianity seem attractive to them.

#### Previous Experience of, and attitudes towards, religion.

A pertinent question to ask when considering the stories of prison converts is whether their conversions represented a move towards something familiar, something of which they may have positive memories from childhood, a return to a set of beliefs with which they were comfortable. Is religion perhaps something which provides comfort because of good memories? Is it natural that people should turn to beliefs and concepts with which they are familiar in times of crisis, for instance, appealing to notions of God which they have grown up with?

It was clear from the stories of inmates that previous experiences of, and attitudes towards, religion varied considerably from person to person. There was certainly no uniform 'return to Christian belief' that could be identified. Positive experiences and attitudes towards religion were found in the stories of some individuals, but so were a whole range of other attitudes. Some viewed religion as neither positive or negative and it had very little impact on their lives, others had no experience of religion at all, and a few had very negative attitudes towards it. Two individuals had undergone what they

defined as 'religious experiences' prior to imprisonment, but had not developed any commitment to religion. I will now briefly consider the range of experiences that were described.

### ***Positive Attitudes Towards Religion.***

A few of the inmates talked about their previous experiences of religion in particularly positive terms. Many had come into contact with Christianity in school assemblies, and it is interesting to note that where such experiences had been positive, having contact with religion in times of difficulty reminded individuals of a time when they felt secure and happy, providing a sense of comfort,

*I think I've always believed in God, while I was at school and that I used to like things to do with God you know like the assemblies and, every morning they used to always read a passage of the Bible to you, you know, so that's always stuck with me. Err, when I was in, in '84, I was in prison then, I used to go to the chapel then which I enjoyed err... I suppose really when it, when I think back to me school days and that we used to have services and that then, in the morning and that, I suppose it was like going back in your childhood to something that was nice at that time you know, err, yeah it was good, I enjoyed it there [chapel in prison].*

Prisoner 25

Religious ideas were also described as helpful during times of bereavement, providing comfort and answers to questions,

*Now my father died when, when I was nine and when he was only forty four, I found at that point I mean I think it's probably true to say that one of two things would happen then in, in perhaps in general in that it can either bring you to questioning your faith probably with a good deal of resentment attached to it, or one then finds that one does believe and that, and that the idea of God becomes a comfort, which is certainly what happened to me in that I found that I, I experienced no sense of resentment as it were against God for taking my father away and beyond that, the idea that there was a God I found a great personal strength err on top of the fact that, of believing that that's where the soul of the person would go.*

Prisoner 1

It seems that many children encounter religious ideas when there is a death in the family. In this country Christian concepts like that of heaven are often used to provide easy answers to children's questions, whether other members of the family have those beliefs or not.

### ***Neutral Attitudes.***

Significantly more inmates attended church as children but did not really develop either a positive or negative attitude towards it. It did not seem to have much, if any, meaning for their lives. Many of those who were interviewed attended Sunday School, but as they got older and life gained momentum, church activities were seen as less exciting than other options,

*... as I grew older, as I was having more fun getting into trouble I drifted away from the church... if they wanted to go that was up to them, I mean I didn't ridicule people for going to church and I didn't ridicule 'em for not going to church, I thought just live your life the way you want to live it sort of thing, but the thought of church was always there in me head, I used to always drift in every now and again...*

Prisoner 33

*As a child I did Sunday school and the boy scouts for a time and then never again unless it was a wedding or a funeral.*

Prisoner 30

Although they had not developed any particularly negative attitudes towards religion, it had no interest for them and many stopped attending church activities as soon as they were old enough,

*...I never been like one to go to church, so when I was young my Mum and Dad used to drag me along to the church and they had to make me sit there and err, 'til the end. And when I got further on in age I stopped going you know what I mean to church cos then I thought this is not for me and err I first started getting into trouble with loads of friends of mine...*

Prisoner 14

After childhood, reasons for continued or renewed involvement with the church were primarily social. For teenagers, church was attractive because of the recreational facilities provided. Attendance had no religious meaning for individuals, however, and therefore did not continue once other priorities took over,

*...when I was fifteen I joined, I switched back to church, St. George's, because it had snooker tables and that you know and, but I've always been, me family's religious, me father's an American, he lives in America, and me mother's died now but I've always gone to church but then I got into the fast lane and err you know the rest is history, I married a striptease artist sort of thing and I, I was in night-clubs most of me life, Christ went out of the window.*

Prisoner 9

Some of the inmates had continued to attend church during adulthood. This was also for social reasons, perhaps because it was a family activity, or because it seemed the 'respectable' thing to do, but it did not affect the way in which life was conducted,

*I was brought up in a Christian household, err I used to attend church regularly, I was a choirboy many years ago and up to coming into prison I used to attend church regularly... and it was only since I've been in prison that I realised I was never a Christian, I was just a churchgoer.*

Prisoner 7

*When I say conversion, I don't know err, whether it was a conversion or, or not, I think it was more of a realisation err, I've always been a churchgoer you see before I came into prison from, from a child you know, I mean I was made to go to church as a kid, I was in the church choir and I mean I had to go to church three times on a Sunday... my wife and kids would go to church, very often I would go with them but I think I was just kind of doing the done thing... I just went because it seemed like the right thing to do you know sort of the respectable thing to do as a family man...*

Prisoner 32

One of the reasons that religion did not make any particular impact on individuals seemed to be a lack of understanding of what it was really about,

*I'd been to church when I was younger but I couldn't understand it...*

Prisoner 13

*... when I think, when I look back, I spent all those hours and hours and hours sort of immersed in all this religion, and I didn't really understand what it was all about, I don't really remember Jesus getting a mention when I was a kid, I don't think he was fashionable then, you know...*

Prisoner 32

Others did not develop a particularly positive or negative attitude towards religion early in life because they did not have any real experience of it. It was not until adulthood that many had their first contact with religion,

*Right err, as a child it didn't exist, maybe went to church once in a blue moon you know, something like that. Mum and Dad never talked about it, never experienced it, didn't know anything about it right. I then ended up, err I'd have ended up in the army then, so in the army you get a little bit you know the Padre comes round and all that lot, but I still didn't know anything about religion, and then I ended up going into the army jails like where I got the little Gideon's Bible... and then my ex-common-law wife,*

*she was a backslidden born-again Christian so I, she explained a little bit about it...*

Prisoner 22

*[At school] I wasn't interested in the slightest you know, didn't take anything in at all. Err, it was not until I got a little bit older that I, I decided to check it out in a way, only because my brother was a Christian, he'd met up with some Christian people...*

Prisoner 18

*We weren't a religious family, weren't anti-religious, just a case of live and let live, people believe in that then why not as long as it doesn't affect anyone else...*

Prisoner 4

These accounts show that many of those who were interviewed had very little experience of religion prior to imprisonment. Even those who did have substantial contact with the Church did not regard Christianity as something that affected their everyday lives, as it did not have any particular personal meaning to them. Attending church was a purely social activity. As a consequence, the majority did not develop either a positive or a negative attitude towards religion. Some inmates, however, had experiences of religion in childhood, and beyond, which gave them a negative attitude towards it. I will now consider some of these stories.

### ***Negative Attitudes.***

Like those above, Prisoner 17 did not have any personal experience of religion as a child. However, instead of this being due to lack of interest from his family, and giving rise to a 'live and let live' attitude, it was because his father was very much against all forms of religion. He therefore came to view it in the same way,

*...I was brought up in a tough world err, where religion was not even in the picture. So err, God help 'em if they came to me door because me Dad would tell 'em what to do.*

Prisoner 17

Others developed negative attitudes towards religion, and those who practised it, because they were forced to attend church and regarded religion as irrelevant and incompatible with their way of life,

*...well for as far back as I can remember, I was about four or five, err my, my mother and father were'nee religious in any way, they weren't interested in the church, my grandmother was and every Sunday she would drag us off to church you know, but it was boring, it was seriously boring... I never enjoyed it, I always dreaded going to the church err, as I*

*grew up err, the, I became to hate the church more and more err, because it was a totally different life from what I was leading and the life I was leading wasn't a very good life either.*

Prisoner 24

*I was born Jewish, Orthodox Jewish, my parents called it Orthodox but to my mind they were very much show Jews, they certainly hadn't got any deep faith err, they encouraged me, well more than encouraged me, to go to the Haida, that's the religious instruction school err from a very early age and I used to hate it, the chappy that took err, that took the babies class as it was then err was a very foreign Rabbi, very old and you could hardly understand what he said... and I couldn't see the purpose in learning Hebrew and all that sort of thing err at that early age, and it was also irksome to go twice a week after school... and also Saturday mornings supposedly and on Sundays as well for instruction. So all along I was not impressed with err, the process and certainly my parents though they said do this, do that and do the other they didn't themselves... even when I was going to classes and so on I very often played truant because I didn't like it, I'd never played truant at school or anything like that but I used to miss this place... because I really didn't like it at all and I didn't get anything from it in any way whatsoever...*

Prisoner 2

From an early age, Prisoner 2 saw contradictions between the way of life of his parents, and others in the Jewish community, and the way of life advocated by the Jewish faith. As a consequence, he was not interested in pursuing the Jewish way of life,

*...I fought against it generally speaking and successfully and err... I came to think that the whole community in [town] where I come from err was a load of hypocrites...*

Prisoner 2

Prisoner 5 also developed a negative attitude to Christianity, and even took positive steps to turn his back on it,

*I used to go to Sunday school and I thought it was all right I suppose err, it was something that you done. I didn't like religious studies at school I thought it was a fallacy err, and as far as I was concerned religion was all right for those that wanted religion. By the time I was fourteen I was into the occult and I'd gone away from Christianity or the thoughts of Christianity into the occult. By the time I reached twenty one I was a warlock, err yeah so I'd gone the complete circle, I'd actually gone the complete, complete circle, err and religion to me was just a farcical, it was a set of man made ideas, the concept of... of man made rules which you could never keep anyway. And err that's how I saw religion, I just saw it as a political rather than a religious thing, it actually had become a*

*political environment as far as I was concerned, and then as a political agent they weren't that very, that good neither because you know they just weren't being listened to.*

Prisoner 5

For the majority of individuals, the development of negative attitudes towards religion was linked to a general perception they had of church, religious ideas, or people that practised it. However, some developed negative attitudes as a result of specific incidents during which they came into contact with the church,

*...quite strange is my upbringing really, I was err, brought up Roman Catholic and communionised, err confirmed as a Catholic err even a choir boy at St. Patrick's, used to play for t'football team and everything err, and basically had a, had a good sort of spiritual upbringing, both me parents were great believers... Err, but when I got into me teens basically I was, you get to that stage where you're finding yourself that bit even though I was still going to church. Err, then I met [wife] err, and of course [she] wasn't Catholic err, our own parish wouldn't marry us, err which really stuck in my throat, it's, more than anything else it were like taking me bat and ball and saying oh, that's it you know, I'm off err, and as it happened we got married in a Methodist church err... and I felt like I'd just had a right good slap in t'face basically for not, you know, err anyway we told the Methodist minister why we wanted to get married in a church and err he married us basically, err from there I went into this, this period of err, again I were really disgruntled about what Catholic faith had done to us really err and went away from church for a while...*

Prisoner 6

### ***Previous Religious Experiences.***

Finally, it is necessary to mention the two individuals in the sample who had religious experiences prior to their conversions in prison. Prisoner 22 had what he considered to be an experience of God the first time a vicar visited his house to talk to his wife,

*...now he's talking an I just ain't hearing a word of what he's saying because in this house there was never peace, there was always an agro, tension and all that lot, and then err, there was just this peace, now I've never ever felt peace in my life never, I've never known peace, so this was like just totally alien from me and I'm like, I'm flipping out big time thinking what is this, and I've done, I've done drink, I've done drugs, I've experienced life to the max. and there is nothing like it, and there's this peace... it was like waves of peace just washing over me... and that's*

*when I cried out to God, says yeah, you're real you know I believe you, I believe you after that.*

Prisoner 22

He felt, however, that when he attended church he did not fit in and when his wife left him, and he lost his children and his home, he decided that there was no point in him being religious,

*...and I says right, you know I've had enough, I just want to end life basically, I believe in you God and I believe in everything you said to me but at the moment I don't want to know you, I don't want to know the Devil, I just want to be left alone in between.*

Prisoner 22

Prisoner 18 also had an emotional experience which turned him towards religion for a time but other activities and groups of friends eventually took precedence again,

*I started going with [brother] yeah, I mean he was a, a pretty sort of you know, a radical Christian in a way, so we used to go to really cool events and that with live music and that, and I've been to a place, the first real, real good experience I had was when I went to Soul Survivor... yeah I went to that and there was six thousand people went and err playing live music and that and I dunno, something happened like that was like a swoop and everyone fell over literally... and it was really weird and I felt, I just went wow, I don't know what it was it was really strange, and that was when I really became a Christian and I got baptised... There was definitely something there, I wasn't, it was too much of a coincidence for everyone to just go over, and the feelings I had, I dunno it's really hard to explain, it's like it's from in your chest and it sort of goes out... it's really, really strange but really good you know it makes you feel a whole lot better for ages and ages, but it was err, I got into a lot of drugs and stuff, and that's how I fell away from it all, yeah, what got me into prison.*

Prisoner 18

It seems then, that neither childhood church attendance, nor emotional experiences defined as religious, were enough to engender commitment to religion.

I have shown throughout the preceding sections that no common experience of religion could be identified among those that were interviewed for this study. We cannot predict who might convert from a simple consideration of previous experiences of religion. The process of conversion did not merely involve a return to beliefs and activities that were viewed positively in childhood, and became a comfort in prison, although this was a factor which prompted attendance at prison chapel services for some. Some prisoners came from other faiths or had no religious background at all. And yet all of those who participated in this study came to define Christianity in a positive way at

some point during their imprisonment, and many appealed to God for help at some point prior to their conversions<sup>30</sup>. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I consider the processes through which individuals came to define Christianity in a positive way, and which precipitated religious commitment in a way that previous experiences had not.

## Reflective Processes in Conversion.

### *The Only Alternative?*

It is arguable that people will carry on with taken-for-granted ways of acting and living without questioning them, as long as they prove successful. (Schutz 1973) Only when something happens which cannot be dealt with through existing 'recipes' for action will they be evaluated, and alternatives explored. This seemed to be the case for many of those who found themselves in prison for the first time, or who had committed crimes they found difficult to cope with. Removed from their normal supports and in a situation which was not covered by their normal problem solving knowledge, or faced with the fact that previous orientations or ways of organising life had failed, individuals found themselves in, what might be defined as, a crisis situation. The experience of crisis as a precursor to religious conversion has been stressed in a number of previous studies (e.g. Rambo 1993, Kox, Meeus and Hart 1991, Lofland and Stark 1965). It seems that such experiences can give rise to a sense of desperation and an openness to religious ideas as the only alternative to which they can turn for help. Several inmates acknowledged that in prison, religion often appeared attractive because of the specific needs that it seemed able to meet,

*The people that change are the ones that have got that need to change at that particular time, what happened with me was I'd never read the Bible before at all but when I, I, it could almost have been magnetic, you know it could almost have been clamped to my hands you know it was there, that, err, the opening few words of Genesis, hooked, only the first two or*

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<sup>30</sup> This perhaps points to the fact that for many belief in God is assumed, part of the tacit, taken-for-granted knowledge which they have carried with them throughout their lives (Schutz 1964, 1970, 1973). Inmates talked of practical involvement with religion, of views towards its rules and ways of life, but never about whether or not God actually exists. Perhaps what all these individuals held in common is that they were brought up in a country where belief in God is still part of the taken-for-granted stock of knowledge, handed down from generation to generation and through other avenues such as the media and education. Participation in religious activities may have decreased in contemporary society, but the majority of individuals have a notion of a God, which is usually derived from Christian theology (Davie 2000, Percy 2000a). It is perhaps taken-for-granted that there is, or at least might be, a God to appeal to in times of crisis. This does not constitute belief or religiosity, but rather points to aspects of taken-for-granted cultural knowledge. Perhaps then, appeals to God at certain times during the life course, rather than being puzzled over, should be expected. Although this is a subject that cannot be dealt with in detail here, it is interesting to note that this debate exists, and might provide a profitable point of departure for further research on religious conversion in Britain.

*three lines and I knew, it was that powerful a feeling, I'm hooked... it seems to be that when you have the need you're open to the circumstances that err feed that need.*

Prisoner 30

Although the experience of crisis could come at any time during a prison sentence, a great many individuals had, what they define as crisis experiences, right at the beginning. This was when the gap between their former and present lives appeared most marked. The problems described in this context were some of those identified in the last chapter as the difficulties of living in prison.

The following appeared to be particularly marked at the beginning of a sentence: a sense of having no method with which to deal with the situation of imprisonment; fear; realisation that inmates had been removed from their family; and a sense of impotence and loss of control over the situation. At this point, with nothing else to turn to and reflecting on what they had lost, many appealed to religious ideas. Prisoner 6 gave a good account of some of the feelings experienced by first time offenders during their first few nights in prison,

*I were frightened, might as well have had first time in prison tattooed on t'front of me head because everybody seemed to know it were me first time. I didn't even have to say anything to them. Err, so basically I got down on me knees in middle o' me cell and, and prayed... and asked basically for him to look after me, I'm totally in your hands, I'd got nothing left, absolutely nothing left, err and his presence were as, as, as real as you're sat next to me, it really, really was, I mean I'm not saying it you know, it really was there err and he's been with me ever since...*

Prisoner 6

*... they leave you with nil self esteem you know err, and I, at the time once we'd got in and they'd locked us into this cell and that were it, I'd had an hour or so just sat on this bed, I hadn't even made it or anything it were just, looked like a house brick and I were thinking about [wife] and [son] because they'd, I didn't know whether they'd got any idea where I wa', whether they'd been told or not and it were a, it were just unbelievably painful, that were it, I didn't give it any thought as such, it were just natural to get down and pray.*

Prisoner 6

Most of those who described their first time in prison felt that, because they had been removed from everything that was familiar, there was no other direction in which they could turn. All other avenues of dealing with the situation, and the feelings they experienced, seemed closed off,

*... it were, it were basically err the realisation that, as I was saying, as far as I were concerned err the only person that I could turn to err and he were there for me.*

Prisoner 6

*... once you get into prison you've got nothing else at all and when you hit rock bottom it's then that you, it's then that you'll turn to religion or you'll turn to something because you need it you know, without it you just crack up completely.*

Prisoner 18

In addition to feelings of desperation and needing somewhere to turn, prisoners also needed some framework through which to start to interpret their experiences. The following quote demonstrates that in such crisis situations it was better to have a belief in something than in nothing. Faced with the possibility that the God he had appealed to might not be there, and that there was therefore nowhere else to turn to for help, Prisoner 32's feelings of desperation were exacerbated. He dealt with this experience by reinstating and reinforcing his belief in God. Once he had done this he started to find comfort through recourse to a religious perspective,

*So what happened to me was, I was desperate, I was charged with murder, first time ever in prison err, my whole life had kind of exploded really, it was lying in pieces all around me, err I didn't know whether I wanted to live or die, I just, I think I would have preferred to have died err, I contemplated suicide, couldn't do that, err, perhaps I wasn't brave enough I don't know, but I, I was deeply, deeply, and I was praying, praying more than I was, had ever prayed before in my life you know, err because I really needed some help, and err nothing seemed to be happening you know in a really kind of, in a desperate situation you want an answer and you want it now, no answer. So I thought there was no answer, and what happened to me was, I kind of started err, giving God a ticking off I suppose, you know I, I kind of, in my course of a prayer I suppose I prayed something like look you know you, you know you want me to pray, you, I believe that you should pray, I do believe that you're there you know, why aren't you helping me? And the experience I had was, at the time that I was actually, I don't know whether I said it or thought it, or prayed it, but after I'd said it, if I did say it, I felt as though I'd gone down the deepest black hole ever, err and all I could think about, all I could think of is to apologise for kind of scolding God, because it was, honestly when I thought about it sort of in the moments afterwards I worked out in my own mind, rightly or wrongly, that I was saying to God why aren't you helping me, and God's response to me was, well if you think I'm not helping you, let me just sort of let go of you for a moment and then you'll know what it's really like, that's what it felt like, and I kind of, when I was sorry for doubting that God was helping me it felt*

*much better, and I think that was the sort of major experience which has stayed with me... that was the defining moment for me in my faith.*

Prisoner 32

Turning to religion acted as a support for prisoners as they dealt with their problems in the absence of their usual supports, such as friends and family. It also restored a sense that they had some control over the situation. By praying they felt that they were doing something to help themselves; and in appealing to God they were enlisting the help of someone they defined as all powerful, more powerful than the prison regime, and able to intervene in the situation on their behalf. They were also appealing to a whole framework of ideas which acted to help them begin to interpret, and come to terms with, their situation. I will come back to the effects of appealing to God, and interpreting the situation from a religious perspective, in more detail in the next chapter.

### ***Time and Space to Think.***

Not surprisingly, many prisoners found that they had time on their hands in prison, and were removed from the everyday world to such a degree that they could stop and reflect on life. In the everyday world where we are busy and engaged in mundane activity, we do not have the time or inclination to reflect upon what we are doing (Musgrove 1977), and we do not generally consider alternative religious orientations. For some inmates, it was simply time away from the demands and activity of everyday life that was key in their beginning to consider religious ideas and ways of viewing the world. Time away from the routine and speed of everyday life was important, as was time away from an environment where things are, on the whole, able to run smoothly without much planning or reflection. Such time allowed individuals to evaluate themselves and consider alternative ways of thinking about, and organising, their lives,

*...you're never at rest, you race in from work, you take no notice of your kids, you're back out at seven o' clock, you, you fall back in at two o' clock in the morning, you need speed on the morning to get you back to normal, to get back at work, nobody's thinking, the pair of you aren't thinking and that, and I was living, and I needed, I found out that I had to go to the doctors to get pills to slow down what was speeding up you know taking in the morning, what I needed was to sit back and look at it... now I've changed the way I look at the world, you need solitary confinement for five years you know to get things into perspective.*

Prisoner 9

As well as the time that prison provided for reflection, it provided space, perhaps confinement in a cell, alone or with only one other person, but certainly distance from the world taken-for-granted, a world where everything is familiar. Being removed from everyday life, and being faced with spare time in which to think, according to these individuals, had the effect of making them re-evaluate their lives. They asked themselves questions about the way they had been living and who they had become. For some, this

process of reflection and evaluation led to a consideration of the meaning of religion, and its appropriateness for them,

*I've said this to other people before, you always seem to come back to God when you're desperate, when you're bouncing and buzzing it tends to get a bit more hard to remember... whilst things are going well you're less likely to say thank you and just carry on and think oh yeah I've done this and I've done that and I've done that and then, then you start getting into bother err, something not right, you go other ways and then you're back thinking oh God help me you know because this has happened err, and I mean literally once I got into that [prison] cell as low as I'd ever been I could, I just, just, I can't explain that feeling at all, I think everybody, everybody should have one day in jail, in a cat B or a cat A prison, it would change their outlook on life totally...*

Prisoner 6

This was also the case for Prisoner 23, who was trying to think of ways in which to improve his life in prison,

*... when you're in a cell you do, you spend a lot of time thinking to yourself because you've got nothing else to do and it came to me, I thought well OK if there is a God let's give him a chance, lets see if there is one you know, I'll give you a chance, if you give me a chance, I'll give you one, but it's got to be a bargain... I was sat there and thought well, if there is a God, all I want is somebody to write to, all I want is a friend, I just want a friend, I don't want a miracle I just want a friend.*

Prisoner 23

Time to think was also important for those that had prior knowledge of religious ideas. Earlier in this chapter, I noted that many individuals had not understood the religious ideas they heard at school or in Church, or had not stopped to consider their meaning. For inmates with such backgrounds, prison was an environment in which they had time and space to consider the meaning of religion for them,

*I've always had a religious faith although I've never, would never have called myself a church-goer, so I suppose what's, what's, what has happened is that since coming to prison obviously one's got a lot more time to think about these things err and started going to church and probably the whole thing has come, has been brought into much sharper focus by, by being in prison, speaking for myself yeah.*

Prisoner 1

During this time of reflection, inmates were able to come to a better understanding of Christian ideas,

*I've had fourteen months of, of thinking greatly about what Christianity actually means and what Christianity actually says and what's in the Bible and what's being taught, and possibly trying, you know trying to get rid of one's preconceptions and one's lack of understanding before.*

Prisoner 1

Self-reflection took a religious form for Prisoner 18 who had previous experience and knowledge of Christianity. Another aspect of the prison environment assisted with this reflection. The difficulty in making friends in prison that was mentioned in the last chapter, meant for some that they would not be pressured in taking drugs as they had been on the outside. This gave them a clear mind which allowed reflection to occur. The following was Prisoner 18's reply to my questions about why he had started thinking about religion in prison,

*Well there's no drugs in prison so there's no influence on that, well there is drugs in prison, only if you go looking for it you know, drugs are more available when you get out there, they're easier, there's more influences because nine times out of ten you're gonna know someone who's taking drugs that you know really well. In prison you can't really get to know anyone... you can't really get into a really good friendship with someone in prison so therefore there's, there's no need to get into drugs because you're not in a, in a type of culture where you're going to be influenced by anyone... it [prison] gave me time to think about what I was doing you know and I, I kind of had like some sort of calling from God I think it was err you know persuading me to get back into it and to sort out my life... I could see a picture of, of him saying to me you know get your life sorted out basically, isn't it about time you sorted it out?*

Prisoner 18

Following initial reflection upon religion, either further reflection about the appropriateness of religious ideas, or specific events that happened to individuals, convinced inmates of the existence of God. In the case of Prisoner 23, he was introduced to someone who operated a pen-friend scheme for prisoners, and got the friend that he had asked for. From then on he was convinced that God could intervene in his life, and in the lives of others,

*I've always found since then that if you ask for something God might say jump into somebody's mind and say here's an address for you write to this person, he will probably have a piece of paper there with a name and address on and somebody will collect it and say well I'll write to this person...*

Prisoner 23

Once Prisoner 1 had decided to take religion seriously, had attended chaplaincy services and gave more thought to what he believed. He began to interpret reality from a religious perspective which served to reinforce the beliefs he had adopted. When I asked him

about the main reason for his conversion, his answer demonstrated the importance of both the amount of time for reflection in prison and the necessity of starting to interpret experience from a religious perspective,

*Well I think possibly here just more time to think about it, I mean I'm, you, you could I mean I think one could talk an awful lot about this I mean I personally found, have found that throughout the majority of, of the sentence, the experience of being locked up and being here having all these restrictions placed on your liberty that, that I've remained calm and philosophical about the whole thing and found that I've felt, you know obviously one does meet people in prison and things do happen in prison, pressures are put on you by officers and by other inmates, and I've found almost without exception that I've had no problem in dealing with that, so why no, one has remained and felt very strong as it's gone on, is that something finite, is that strength coming from somewhere? Now I am quite convinced that, that this happened, that that strength came from God, from nowhere else...*

Prisoner 1

Reflection, as demonstrated throughout this chapter, seemed to be something that was particularly important for life-sentence prisoners. For lifers, the starting point for conversion involved an interaction between the existence of time and space in prison, and experiences which had the effect of making them stop and reflect upon themselves and their lives,

*...as I grew up I didn't give much thought about religion or anything until I got into the trouble and I had a lot of time on my own thinking about it.*

*...somebody wouldn't realise what they're missing in their life until the whole load of trouble falls onto them, that's err, that's the time when their eyes will open up and they'll look at their lives and say what am I doing there?*

Prisoner 10

*Spiritually I was looking for something, I didn't know it at the time... looking back I was looking because I've been through, I've been through err, Muslim faiths, Buddhist faiths, New Age philosophies, err I've done a lot of reading round, I've done a lot of existentialist stuff, I thought no that doesn't do really for you know, I'd been reading, I realised that I'd been looking but life caught me up and took me, I was too busy then to, through the working phase of me life, to have any time really to stop and think about matters spiritual, I think it's only when something sort of stops you dead that you, and causes you a lot of pain, or vice versa, that you stop and think about things like that.*

Prisoner 8

As a consequence, this group of prisoners seemed to be particularly attracted to religion, and constituted a large proportion of those who attended chapel services. This attraction was apparent in the reasons that life sentence prisoners gave for both their own, and fellow lifers', interest in religion:-

*Because they have come to realise what they've done in their life and how helpful it [religion] has been, only last Sunday morning at the service here there were twelve or fourteen and out of them ten of them were lifers... lifers have been through the stages of their life sentence after doing such a long time you get such an amount of time that, to think your life over, err if you were out there you wouldn't get anything like that to think what you can do and what you're capable of doing and err, you start taking life very seriously...*

Prisoner 10

Lifers not only took life seriously but sought answers to the existential questions that arose as a consequence of their crime. I will now consider this seeking process, and the role that religion played in it.

### ***Seeking Answers.***

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, those who had killed others had problems coming to terms with their actions. They started to try to resolve these problems through reflection upon themselves and their crime. The crime brought to the fore, in a very particular way, fundamental questions about life, death, meaning, and the individual's place in the world. Not only did they seek a framework through which to interpret and attribute meaning to the events they had experienced; they also sought one which would provide answers to their questions, and give them ways to move forward and construct a new, positive life and self-identity. In addition to this, the specific nature of the life sentence (the uncertainties surrounding its length and the time of release) meant that this new framework must also allow life to continue successfully within the prison environment, taking such uncertainties into account without losing sight of the outside world and thoughts of release completely. The first of these challenges, that of trying to answer the questions prompted by the crime, led, for all the lifers who were interviewed, to a consideration of religion. The way in which this occurred will be outlined in this section. The role of religion in meeting the other needs outlined above will be considered in the next chapter.

It is not just the experience of killing that can give rise to a consideration of questions about life, death and existence. During everyday life, various events can stop us short and give rise to contemplation of this kind<sup>31</sup>. In particular, illness and death prompt us to consider such questions and it seems that a natural response, certainly in this culture, is to consider religious responses to them. Death in the family and, in particular, the death of young people may prompt us to reflect upon religious doctrine

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<sup>31</sup> Giddens (1991) gave examples of situations that might give rise to such existential anxiety and reflection.

and questions about the existence of God<sup>32</sup>. Prisoner 25 had experienced this tendency prior to his crime or imprisonment,

*...both me parents are dead, me Dad died when I was sixteen, just as I was leaving school, ten years later me Mum died of cancer, and four years ago me brother died, but it's a, he died of motor neurone disease but, so, he was only, he was only a couple of years older than me so that really did me head in a bit, I liked to think that I'd go on for ever you know what I mean, and err like I'd read about the kingdom of heaven and all that and like I want a place in it do you know what I mean.*

Prisoner 25

For those that had caused the death of others, these questions could not be bracketed out again after a while as everyday life continued. They needed to be answered, and answered in such a way that the individual's role in their crime could be rationalised, allowing them to emerge with a sustainable sense of self. Questions about the crime, focusing on their ability to commit such an act led, for most, to a consideration of the meaning and purpose of life. These questions could be answered successfully with reference to Christian ideas,

*I wanted to know how I could have done such a thing first of all, and I wanted to know what it was all about, what happens when you kill somebody, why you know, is there any purpose to life... and I came to the conclusion that there's more than the intellectual life, that there is a soul for want of a better term, spiritual centre and that it's man's purpose in life to return to God and be one with God...*

Prisoner 30

*...I was coming to terms with the fact that I'd taken a life, I was a bit scared that I could do something like that... the fact that I could sort of get to that situation and lose control of things... and I felt this sort of, sort of, well remorse I suppose the word is that people use,, sort of dark, really sort of self-hatred you know for all the pain I'd caused everybody because it was me own family and that, because I killed me wife, and err, I think that was the point at which I started looking spiritually for want of a better word... I'm asking myself these sort of questions like why and who, you know, how can you do it, and I sort of came to a realisation that there's evil and good and dark and light and all these sorts of concepts flying about and... and I think I just had all those big questions out there and that was the starting point to it, they made me think intellectually.*

Prisoner 8

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<sup>32</sup> For example, Davie (2000) identified periods of mass church attendance at the time of the death of Princess Diana and during war time.

*...after I was convicted I kind of, I wasn't bothered about much other than the fact that I'd been convicted and you know trying to work out what it all meant, because I was still, I very quickly started to search for meaning in everything that had happened, because it's very confusing to find yourself in those circumstances, I mean you know courts are kind of told sterile facts about, oh he did this, and this is what happened, and this is why he should go to prison, and you think well all right, that's all very well, but why you know err, why did this all happen, and I quickly kind of started, I quickly started to talk about, to talk myself through it and try to find some meaning*

Prisoner 32

Some inmates also wanted answers to questions that were more particular to their personal circumstances. In Prisoner 8's case, at the forefront of his mind was how friends and family could still love him when he could no longer love himself. A Christian perspective provided an explanation, giving rise to a belief in God,

*The fact that people still loved me after what I considered you know the most evil possible thing in a way that I could have done, and that was, I think that was a point of conversion in a sense because it turned me round err into a different direction...*

*...a lot of friends have been great, I mean I found out that a lot of friends who I thought were friends turned out not to be friends, and the friends who I'd never realised were friends still keep in touch and visit me... it's very touching and if you don't believe in God after that lot well, because why, human nature being human nature, it's contrary to human nature to hold your hand out expecting nothing in return, and it's been very moving.*

Prisoner 8

All these questions were tackled by a process of reflective thought and an attempt to find answers for themselves, rather than by approaching others for help. Religious ideas were not necessarily considered straight away, and were often addressed alongside other ways of interpreting themselves that were defined as potentially useful. These other ways of looking at themselves and their crimes, however, were not as plausible and meaningful to them as explanations derived from Christianity,

*...initially it was a case of me trying to come to terms with it internally, and err that involved for me reading, fringe reading, not the Bible, metaphysics and mysticism, not mysticism err, the clairvoyants, mystics kind of thing you know and err trying to make some sense out of life and death and err the purpose of it all, and err in that way, in my own time and my own way, I came to the conclusion that err God existed and that he was the creator of all things...*

Prisoner 30

*It wasn't a religion thing, it was a personal quest if you like, a journey, it was just, I've read Freud, I've read Jung, I've you know, aspects of all of that, some of them made sense, some of the Freudian stuff was rubbish to be, personally... and I realised that I'd got to look at everything that was available basically, so that's how I came round to, you know, to sort of God and, sort of monotheistic aspects of religion, you know the sort of other ones were, for me personally were non-starters, although there are a lot of aspects of Buddhist meditation which are very useful, things like that, it wasn't enough, it didn't sort of, really sort of explain what I was looking for.*

Prisoner 8

In looking for meaning in what they had done, and adopting new ways of thinking about their lives, individuals found more positive ways to look at themselves. For Prisoner 32, this involved reinterpreting, from a Christian perspective, why he had made mistakes in his life. He came to the conclusion that it was because he had not appealed to God before. This allowed him to view himself in a more positive light than if he had interpreted the mistakes he had made as being the result of some flaw, or innate badness, in himself,

*...I quickly started to talk about, to talk myself through it and try to find some meaning and, strange as it may seem I felt that err, I was kind of bowling along in my life, everything was fine you know, I had a good job, everything was comfortable, holidays, and family life was smashing, err and I didn't kind of need God, although I don't think I actually ever consciously thought that or said it at the time, when I look back I was kind of saying look you know I'm all right, I'll give you a shout when I need you, which I did, later, and maybe err God in his infinite wisdom said right, OK, err, the next thing I find myself with my face in the dirt and no longer bowling along, I'm sort of flat out err, and it's a case of how do you like that then, now do you need me, and that's how it felt, you know I felt almost, well I did fell apologetic, it was if, yeah I know I shouldn't have been running along thinking I could just win this race on my own...*

Prisoner 32

The Christian perspective also provided answers to inmate's questions about the meaning of life. Here too, a more positive way of interpreting self could be found. I asked Prisoner 32 what it was that gave him back a sense of self worth,

*... it is feeling I must be here for a reason, and I look at the whole meaning of life, that question you know, why are we here, what we're doing, err there's no reasonable explanation in earthly terms for mankind even being here, I think you know I don't really know what all this is about you know, unless we are part of some incredible plan by some you know superhuman figure, I think well yes, that has to be it then, because there's certainly no earthly explanation, because we've had long enough to try*

*and come up with one and we're no nearer now than we've ever been, err despite all these kind of biological and sort of scientific theories, I just can't accept them. So if God wants me to even exist, then he must want me to sit here today, err for me to sit here today I've had to be in prison for the last six years following the commission of that crime. Now as much as I don't understand that really, err there must be a reason, that's not to say I blame God for it all, I'm not saying that, I'm, I'm, I know that I have free will within constraints of where I live and who I am and where I was born and my upbringing and so on, but I think well there has to be a reason, and I sit down sometimes and I think well you know, if I hadn't come along this path, I wouldn't be able to do the things I do, I mean my own personal ministry is through music... I couldn't play a musical instrument before I came into prison... I'm involved in the drama group, we put on shows for the rest of the prison. So, I mean that's just the, those are just examples of aspects of my life in here, and none of that would have happened, that is all context specific.*

Prisoner 32

Most lifers who converted to Christianity had a conversion process that was precipitated by reflection upon themselves, the reasons for their crime, and questions about existence more generally. This was often, but not necessarily, followed by gradual involvement in chaplaincy activities which further reinforced their new perspective and allowed them to find additional answers to their questions. For some, a decision to convert was, in fact, not be made until after they had explored Christianity further through participation,

*When I started thinking about God and the maker, divine being or whatever you care to call him, not in any relig, not in any Jewish form whatsoever but as a supreme deity, and I suddenly released that well I'm not going anywhere so I started going to chapel and joining the various other groups that they had and I got on pretty well with them there... I was toying with the idea of becoming a Christian then.*

Prisoner 2

Participation and interaction were also important parts of the conversion process, particularly for those who were serving one of a long line of prison sentences. Before I address the role of such processes, it is necessary to note that reflection also played a part in the conversions of that group. Such reflection, however, did not necessarily take a religious form straight away.

### ***Non-Religious Reflection - Decisions to Change.***

In the last chapter I outlined several reasons why those in prison might start to reflect on themselves and their lives. Some, even though they had not killed, had shocked themselves with the nature of their crime, and thoughts of what they might do in

the future. Some had been given a much longer sentence than previously, suddenly realised the direction that their life had taken, and saw the possibility of a career of longer and longer sentences. Faced with time on their hands, and without drugs, they realised that they did not like the life they had been leading, or the person they had become. Several inmates had, prior to their involvement with religion, made active decisions to change their lives and themselves as a result of such reflection. The following are examples of such decisions,

*I knew I needed to be a better person.*

Prisoner 31

*I thought there's no point being in prison unless you get yourself sorted out...*

Prisoner 2

*...you start off with little fines like, car thefts, when you've had enough of them... wounding with intent, you know on to the bigger charges, up to life... one day you're going to flip and be like what have I done... I've done three years in prison and I don't want to do no more.*

Prisoner 13

*I think every time I used to talk to people I used to talk to them rather err aggressive, aggressive behaviour towards people you know what I mean, I wasn't interested in what they were saying or anything like that, and then I thought to myself well I can't go round speaking to people like this, I've got to change like and I've changed that for over two year, about two year now you know what I mean.*

Prisoner 14

These decisions did not initially take a religious form. Before they could start to see religion as a vehicle through which they could achieve the change they desire, events must had to occur that brought them into contact with the chaplain, Christian inmates, or the chaplaincy. Only as a result of such interaction were religious ideas encountered.

Although reflection had a role in the conversions of this group of individuals, participation in chaplaincy activities, and interaction with religious people, were just as important. In the forthcoming section I discuss the ways in which inmates came into contact with religious individuals and first began to participate in chaplaincy activities. I also consider the interactive processes that led them to take Christianity seriously as they defined it as meaningful and appropriate for themselves.

## **Interactive Processes in Conversion.**

Interaction with members of the religious group and participation in group activities have been defined as important in the conversion process by almost all who have previously theorised conversion (e.g. Greil and Rudy 1983, 1984, Long and Hadden 1983, Snow and Phillips 1980, Thumma 1991). Participation in chaplaincy activities, and interaction with those who were already Christians, can also be identified as important aspects of the conversion process for those who converted whilst in prison. Whilst reflection upon themselves, and upon possible answers to their questions, was paramount for those serving life sentences, participation and interaction with Christians were key to conversion for many of those serving shorter, determinate length sentences. This was particularly the case for those who were involved in criminal careers and who had experienced life long problems with self-identity (as discussed at the beginning of Chapter 3). In the following sections I consider the ways in which such individuals became involved in chaplaincy life, and processes through which a religious perspective was made plausible for them. I also discuss the role of interaction for those who had already started the conversion process through reflective thought, and who began to participate in chaplaincy activities because of their developing religious faith.

### **Reasons for Participation.**

There were various reasons why prisoners first started to attend chaplaincy activities. All were aware of the existence of the chaplaincy as every prisoner had to be interviewed briefly by a member of chaplaincy staff when they first entered the prison<sup>33</sup>. These interviews took place primarily to ascertain how prisoners wished to register themselves in terms of religious orientation, and whether they had any immediate needs that could be met by the chaplain. It was at this point that chaplains could refer prisoners to representatives of their own faith (Beckford and Gilliat 1998). Those who were already practising a particular religion, therefore, became involved with the chaplaincy straight away. Individuals who had spent time reflecting upon themselves, and upon religious responses to their questions, eventually sought out participation in chaplaincy life. Others did not sample chaplaincy activities until later on in their sentences. The reasons for this sampling were often completely unconnected to religion itself.

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<sup>33</sup> During the interviews that were conducted with prison chaplains, all made reference to the reception interview, at which inmates first come into contact with the chaplaincy. They made reference to some interesting debates about the role of the chaplain at this point in the prisoners career, stating that because there are so many inmates to see, chaplains cannot properly attend to needs that prisoners may have. At this point they also cannot fully introduce the chaplaincy to inmates as they do not have time to go through the activities that it provides for them. It is completely up to inmates themselves to seek out participation in chaplaincy life, or to request to see a chaplain. The chaplains also gave their views on why inmates might be interested in religion and chaplaincy life. Unfortunately there is not space here to even start to unpack all the debates that were brought up. I hope to be able to use this data as part of further research about the role of the prison chaplain, particularly the ways in which different chaplains see their roles and thus facilitate prisoners' participation in religious activities.

## ***Filling Time.***

In Chapter three I described how time was experienced differently in prison to outside. Inmates talked of time going slowly, almost seeming to stand still, as those on the outside progressed with their lives whilst the routine and ways of structuring time in prison remained limited and unchanging. It is not surprising, then, that inmates looked for different ways in which to fill their time, trying out the limited array of activities that the prison did have to offer. Because of this limited choice, individuals who might never have attended church on the outside gave chapel services a try. Attending religious activities was at least different from the other activities available<sup>34</sup>.

Some prisoners, therefore, first attended chapel services, or activities organised by the chaplaincy, merely to fill up their time and to provide a diversion from the usual mundane prison routine,

*... it seemed to me that being here and essentially having nothing better to do, that it made a great deal of sense to start going to the services which I did across the board going to both the Roman Catholic service and the Church of England service...*

Prisoner 1

*... one of me friends was saying, who really wasn't a believer which is what makes it so funny, he was saying come on lets just go for a laugh, you know lets just go for a laugh, it's boring on the wing and you get a cup of coffee and you get a biscuit, so I says oh come on then because I like singing anyway, and that's what attracted me to start off with and I went and I just got hooked, and me friend after one week he never came no more...*

Prisoner 33

Going to chaplaincy activities provided something to do in the otherwise unstructured evenings. It was also something which could be chosen and enjoyed without the distractions of prison life such as noise and interruptions from other prisoners,

*... what most people imagine is that you've got all this time on your hands which to a certain point, extent you have, but when it comes to actually perhaps getting a piece of paper and sitting down and writing a letter or picking up a book, you find there are constant virtually twelve hour a day distractions and this is also a working prison, so from eight o' clock in the*

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<sup>34</sup> The range of activities available in prison is restricted to those put on by the chaplaincy; educational activities; going to the gym or perhaps playing sport (depending on the security category of the prison); playing pool or watching TV on the wings; and reading. The chance to engage in such activities varies according to how many hours prisoners must be restricted to their cells per day. All of those who were interviewed for this study were living in conditions where they had at least some free time each day and therefore could choose between the various activities available. It is impossible to comment on those in conditions where they are locked up for 23 hours a day.

*morning until say four o' clock in the afternoon bar a lunch break you know you're found some sort of essentially pointless work to do, but nonetheless you know you, you're actually doing something and it, and it is up to a point a structured like it is outside in as much as one gets up and goes somewhere in the prison that is a place of work, has a lunch break and then goes back in the afternoon, so there is err, the time does pass, for myself it's actually passed quite quickly. Now there are things happening in the evening... I mean I have got very involved with the other activities that the chapel promotes sort of three evenings, two evenings a week other than the two services. Err again one of the effects of this is to make the time pass. So here perhaps for myself the time hasn't perhaps hung quite as heavily as you think it might do...*

Prisoner 1

The evening activities provided by the chaplaincy helped to structure time in prison in a way that it might be structured on the outside. In some prisons structure was already provided during the day by the allocation of jobs. Attending a social activity on one or more evenings a week gave inmates the feeling of having a social life, especially since such activities were voluntary. The impact of this on individuals will be considered in more detail in the next chapter.

Attending chapel to fill up time does not, however, necessarily lead to conversion. For example, the friend that began to go to chapel with Prisoner 33 did not continue to attend. Those who attended because they had first reflected upon religion, and found it a plausible framework through which to interpret their lives, had reasons to continue to attend chapel after the novelty had worn off. Their decision to convert to Christianity can be understood as primarily driven by reflective processes. So why might people who initially attended chapel to fill time, with no regard for the religious beliefs that were involved, have continued to attend? How did they come to take Christianity so seriously that they converted to it? The stories of this group of prisoners showed that it was primarily interaction with those in the prison chaplaincy that, for them, precipitated conversion. I will consider the processes through which this occurred shortly.

### ***Looking for Support.***

Another reason that prisoners became involved with the chaplaincy was a need for support, either at the beginning of their sentence to cope with the experience of imprisonment and loss of their usual support network, or at some point during the sentence because of events that precipitated a crisis situation. When individuals were looking for support and other avenues were closed to them, they became open to involvement with the chaplaincy. This seemed to be the case regardless of religious background. In a time of crisis Prisoner 10 did not give up searching for a source of support when people from his own religious and cultural background rejected him. He continued to look for people to support him, with whom he could communicate

regardless of cultural differences. He found that the Christians with whom he came into contact fulfilled this function, as did communication with God,

*...I found when I was in prison that err I couldn't communicate with anybody really, I was all on my own, err so I contacted some religious people from my own background, Hindu Gujarati people and the, nobody wanted to know anything...people on the outside, nobody wanted to know anything like... and err I needed something to depend on like. Err one day I was in the teaching department at [prison] ... we were talking about religion and all that and her [teacher's] husband used to be chaplain outside and she taught me and she leant me some books and all that like, and err I started going to the Sunday services and err, and err after about six months I was enjoying it and looking forward to going to the Sunday services because they've got people down there you can talk to ...*

*Well really it was because I found that I needed somebody to rely on and something to hold onto to get me through the sentence like, err that was the first thing and err once I started getting into the religion and err... what I've gone through, getting into the religion has been a tremendous help I can't really explain it in the words because err especially when I wasn't getting any visits or any letters or anything and err all I was depending on was my hopes really and err I seen the Lord got me through a very difficult time...*

Prisoner 10

Inmates who had not previously thought about becoming involved with religion also turned to the chaplain for support when crisis situations occurred. Such crises could occur at any point in an individual's sentence,

*...I got this bad letter off [wife] saying she had err, she'd been in hospital with a nervous breakdown and err while she was in hospital err the house got burgled and that... me hands were tied and there was nothing I could do... I was worried about what I could have done because I've attempted suicide in the past like you know, well I don't know if it was an attempt or a cry for help you know but err I was frightened what I might have done... so I come over and I talked to [chaplain] and like err I poured me heart out...*

Prisoner 16

It is interesting to consider why inmates chose the chaplain as someone to turn to for support. In the prison environment there was a very limited selection of officials who could provide such support. In addition, those from other departments in the prison were defined by inmates as inappropriate or unable to give personal support,

*...I've always been a bit wary of probation you know because like, not all probation officers but some, if you tell them something and that and, you know err they'll, I don't know they'll try and understand you and sympathise with you or whatever but you know a lot of them, to them you're just a client you know, and there's no emotional attachment or nothing and at the end of the day they're going to go home and forget you, you know, so I thought I don't want to go through all that. So I come over and talked to someone who I thought at least you know they'd give a bit of compassion you know and a bit of understanding...*

Prisoner 16

The chaplain, contrary to officials in other prison departments, was defined in a positive way in relation to his ability to provide support to inmates. In an environment where it was also difficult to form close friendships with other prisoners, the chaplain was perhaps the only person defined by prisoners as suitable to approach for support in a crisis. I will consider the way in which the chaplain was perceived by inmates in more detail later in this chapter.

Once prisoners had sought the help of a chaplain, the experience they had with them determined whether they came to view Christianity as something worth exploring further. In Prisoner 16's case, the relief he experienced as a result of talking about his problems; the sense of self-worth he gained from someone listening to him and taking an interest in his problems; and the introduction that he was given to a religious way of dealing with his situation through prayer; provided him with the impetus to find out more about Christianity,

*... he listened there and that, and when he did that like it was like I dunno... like a big weight had been took off me you know and I got err, I just don't know how to explain it, I like, I walked out of the room with a smile you know and I felt really good in myself for the first time for as long as I can remember I felt you know, I felt like I'm someone you know... I went in the room and I felt like you know me whole world had fell apart you know and err, I, I didn't, I wasn't bothered like if I was struck by lightening because at least if I dropped dead then I wouldn't be bothered you know I, and when I left the room I felt, that at least I'd got probably another day, but I felt good, in me I felt good, I felt good inside you know I felt like just one big weight had been took off me shoulder... I actually cried you know and it's err, it's been you know twenty years maybe more since I last cried you know and err blokes aren't supposed to cry are they, you know so they say you know but err, but I did cry, first time in as long as I can remember.*

*He prayed for me ... there and then, I didn't ask for it, it just happened you know and from that day... I haven't looked back you know and err.*

Prisoner 16

Earlier I noted that for some of the inmates, a crisis situation led to direct appeals to God, and reflection upon how a religious perspective could assist in their coming to terms with imprisonment or answering their questions. For others, such crises led to an encounter with religious individuals as they looked for support with their problems. Crisis, defined as important in the conversion process by Rambo (1993), Lofland and Stark (1965) and Kox, Meeus and Hart (1991), was, therefore, often important in prison conversion. I have shown, however, that individuals sometimes became involved with religious activities purely as a means of filling time or of breaking up the monotony of prison life. This can be defined as responding in a pragmatic way to some of the difficulties of living in prison, but not as the result of a crisis situation.

One additional way in which inmates became involved in chaplaincy activities was identified in the interview data. This group of individuals were not responding to a crisis situation either, but to a chance encounter with Christian inmates.

### *Invitations from Christian Inmates.*

It seems that some of those who experienced conversions in prison would not have considered participating in chaplaincy activities were it not for invitations from Christian inmates, those who were already involved in chaplaincy life,

*...[inmate] asked me to come out to church err, he said it was to help him clean things up, to set the PA system up and that so I says aye, wasnee expecting that I'd have to sit through the service...*

Prisoner 24

*Err, started getting used to the prison on this five years after about ten month, and err one of the lads here, who work up here, he asked me do I want to go to church, and at first I was a bit like that with him, get off, and he goes no you'll really enjoy it. So I came up, he introduced me to [chaplain] and all that and then we went into the chapel itself where they were having a sing along and they introduced me to all these people which was err quite a shock to me because like I'm not used to people talking to me nice and things like this. So we started talking and all that and I found it quite hard because like they were all speaking to me really polite and I'm thinking hang on I'm not used to this so. So after that I come up with [inmate] mostly every day and that, started having a talk to [inmate] about the err, about what happens up here and he says oh we get a lot of groups and all that up here and he said you'd probably be interested. So err I came up and like it was really nice you know what I mean, I got a really good feeling off all these people coming in and that, talking to me and err, I've never looked back since from that day and it's been really good.*

Prisoner 14

If an invitation to attend chaplaincy activities, and a positive experience of such participation, happened at the same time as an inmate had been reflecting upon a decision to change, and ways of achieving such change, participation often continued. The change process then took on a religious form. For this group, a desire to change was the impetus for finding out more about Christian belief,

*I just sat there and thought well I need help, I need to settle down and sort things out 'cos I can't go through the sentence like this, and that was it... so I spoke to [Christian inmate]...*

*I came to a turning point where I said err, I've got to sort me life out, I can't keep going on like this, and err, and that's when I offered myself to the, to God like, you know what I mean, and it's really changed me you know what I mean, everything what I've done now you know what I mean, has changed.*

Prisoner 14

In addition, individuals in the chaplaincy with whom relationships started to develop, gradually became people to whom the individual turned for help in their quest for change. Such individuals confirmed, in conversation with the individual, the efficacy of dealing with their problems from a Christian perspective.

Interaction, therefore, was important in furthering the inmate's journey towards conversion. Such interactive processes were also of paramount importance for those whose first contact with Christianity did not coincide with self-reflection. For both of these groups, it was interaction that influenced whether they took religion seriously and eventually converted. I will now discuss in more detail how this occurred.

### **The Role of Interaction in Conversion.**

Once contact with the prison chaplaincy had been established, interactive processes drew individuals into chaplaincy life and into Christian belief. For some, participation in chaplaincy life and interaction with Christians were defined as the most important aspects of the conversion process,

*... talking to [inmate] err, and talking to [chaplain], being involved in the chapel...*

Prisoner 24

Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will outline the aspects of interaction that were important in convert's talk about their conversion process. It was noticeable that for those who defined interaction as the key to their conversion, religious belief itself played very little part at the beginning of the process. What was paramount was their perception of those in the chaplaincy, the perception that others had of them, and the way in which they came to define people that had a Christian faith. Only after these processes

came consideration of the beliefs held by Christians. For those who had already reflected upon religious belief, the elements of interaction outlined served to reinforce the appropriateness of the Christian faith and way of life for them.

### ***The Role, and Perception, of the Chaplain.***

In a previous section I demonstrated that in times of crisis inmates may turn to the chaplain for help. I briefly mentioned that the chaplain was seen as different from other staff in the prison, being defined as a person who was understanding and who could offer support to inmates. The way in which the chaplain and his/her role were perceived was defined by inmates as important in their decision to become involved in, and convert to, Christianity.

As stated previously, interaction with the chaplain represented, for inmates, a relationship that was different from those they had with other prison staff, whose relation to them was primarily custodial. It was also different from the relationships they had with other inmates. Spending time with the chaplain can therefore be seen as a chance for inmates to get away from customary modes of interaction within the prison environment.

The chaplain's role was seen as caring, and the chaplain was viewed as someone who could act on inmates' behalf, who was on the inmates' side. The chaplain had this role for all prisoners, not just those who chose to become involved with the chaplaincy. They were able to act on behalf of inmates in times of personal or family difficulty, and were available to give support. It was also possible for the chaplain to arrange chaplaincy visits, where members of an inmates family visit them in the chaplaincy outside normal visiting hours in order to resolve problems or provide support. Telephone calls to family members could be made by prisoners with the permission of the chaplain. A common reason for prisoners to seek contact with a chaplain, and to make use of such services, appeared to be bereavement,

*I'd already seen [chaplain] before I started to go to chapel because when me Mum died I asked err, one of the wardens if I could speak to him because me Mum died like and he came over into me cell, and he asked me about me Mum and he said a prayer for me Mum you know and I said a prayer as well with him, so I knew [chaplain] in that way and he knew me...*

Prisoner 34

Chaplains were seen by prisoners as somehow separate from the prison regime, people who could be trusted. Others members of staff were viewed as solely interested in assessing them and making notes in their files. Inmates therefore felt that they could talk openly and honestly with chaplains,

*I'd rather talk to somebody who I know's on the Christian faith rather than somebody who's not at all, because they're more understanding, they're more sympathetic, because if I've got problems I can talk in the family about anything, but I cannot talk to people this side of the wall sort of thing, because they're all, write it down in your file...*

Prisoner 33

*... they're good friends of mine, most of 'em, because you can have a conversation with the chaplains you know, I mean it's a terrible thing to say but conversations in prison revolve around drugs and crimes and sex and that's it you know nothing else, I mean it's odd. The chaplain is neutral, you can trust a chaplain, you cannot trust anybody else, because you see as a lifer I'm a risk to society OK, that's the official policy, and anything and everything... becomes information for them, so if you didn't trust, if we didn't have the chaplaincy life would be hell because we don't trust them and they don't trust us, because everything I say to them, for example if I said my faith's helped me, someone would go running down and say hides behind his faith you know, refuses to accept his responsibility, all that sort of crap and that's why I'm reluctant to talk to people because they tend to throw it back at you and use it you know...*

Prisoner 8

They seemed to stand alone in prison as people with whom inmates could build relationships.

Chaplains were also perceived as having time to spend with inmates, and provided them with space in the chaplaincy away from the noise of prison life. They were seen as people who were willing to spend time listening to individuals, taking an interest in their lives. In this respect, contrasts were once again drawn between chaplains and other prison staff,

*He seemed to have more time to listen, to listen to you than err, some of these err, well you'll say, being nice about it they're not staff you know, you call 'em screws don't you, they haven't got time for you and err, the chaplains and that have got time and I used to sit down and we can have prayers and, you know use quietness and things like that and I thought this is peace this is, but it's strange that I've had to come into a place like this to get the peace... The main thing is like listening err, no one can do a magic wand... they've always got time for you err, I know for a fact I can go to [chaplain], "[chaplain] have you got a minute?" "Yeah sit down..." the chaplains, you know they must be doing what the psychologists are learned to not do you know, they come round and put things better.*

Prisoner 17

*...I think probably a lot of people in here would have, because they wouldn't think of going to a vicar, they would probably go for instance to probation where they would find somebody who was only interested in them to a degree, certainly couldn't afford to spend the time with them that the chaplain can, and they would come away probably bitter and resentful, every time I came out of [chaplain's] office I felt, even if only slightly so, far better than I'd felt when I went in... and because they are completely impartial, they can be a tremendous help because everybody who comes into prison has got some sort of, of problem which they need help with, and my admiration for the way the chaplains try to handle this and help people, you know in a human way, you know we can say forgetting the religious side of it, err really I'm lost with admiration for them I really am... I would say that without my faith and without the chaplains, as opposed to the chapel, that, that my time here would have been immensely, immeasurably harder than it has been.*

Prisoner 1

The perception of the role of the chaplain and his/her general characteristics were important to inmates, but so too was how the chaplain as an individual related to them. Once they had met him/her, their perception of the role became coloured by their perception of the person. This had the effect of either encouraging or discouraging participation in chaplaincy activities. Friendship with the chaplain, for example, led to participation,

*Nothing happened until I went to ... prison and a new chaplain arrived and we actually became close personal friends, and that's how I got into the church, it was a case of the new guy came along and he was nice and we got along really well so I thought I'll go along the first couple of weeks you know bum on a seat you know... he went round everybody introducing himself... he was a nice guy, very keen, very energetic, he was a born again Christian himself... and I got more into the chaplaincy and I said to him one day can a borrow a Bible and he said no, Bibles are not for lending, I'll give you one, so he did and err I started Genesis chapter one verse one and bang you know, the right time, the right thing, and I had to make a conscious effort to leave the Old Testament to read the New Testament...*

*If I hadn't got to know like [chaplain], then I probably wouldn't have gone into the church in the first place, so it was friendship and support in that sense that took me into the church, but once I'd got there it did it's own thing.*

Prisoner 30

It appeared that prisoners' perceptions of activities and services taking place in the chaplaincy were also important in determining whether they decided to get involved,

*I didn't feel comfortable going to church in my last prison because it was, they was doing drug deals in it and that was the only reason they'd go, so I didn't feel comfortable there. When I come here you know it was a bit, it was better you know there's more, there's more things to do in this chaplaincy than there was in the last one you know, they have a wider range of things, people coming in, it's a bit more exciting because I, I mean because I'd been to Soul Survivor so as you can imagine I like the lively stuff and really loud music and that which is like the, some of the events that come in here and that and that's, you know that's what keeps me going really is the err, is the excitement that you get up here sometimes you know from day to day.*

*I started off, first of all I started playing the guitar in the chapel err, and I didn't really come to any of the services but err, I started to get to know [chaplain] and that and I started to come more often, that's really how I got to you know, know what goes on here, when you come up here you see on the board and it says like... are coming and they're a live band and I thought well I might as well go to that and see what it's like... that's what really you know brought me to begin with and that.*

Prisoner 18

Defining the activities organised by the chaplaincy as worth attending, coupled with the development of a relationship with the chaplain, led to continued participation for this particular individual.

The discussion in this section has shown that the prison chaplain was defined by those who were interviewed in a particularly positive way. He was seen as an ally, someone who had time for individual prisoners and who took an interest in their lives. Interaction with chaplains was attractive as it represented a different kind of interaction from that which took place with other members of the prison staff, whose relationship to prisoners was primarily custodial, and with other inmates, with whom limited topics of conversation could be shared. Inmates could be honest with chaplains, who seemed to go out of their way to assist them in times of crisis, arranging visits, telephone calls and listening to their problems.

Much of the interaction between chaplains and inmates was non-religious. Nevertheless, the fact that the chaplain was a representative of Christianity within the prison meant that a favourable perception of their role or of them as an individual often led to a positive regard for Christian beliefs and participation in religious activity. This was one aspect of the process through which individuals came to develop positive regard for both Christians and Christianity. Once they started to become involved in the prison chaplaincy, inmates encountered other reasons to define religion in a positive way. I will consider these now.

## *Developing Relationships and Interaction in the Chaplaincy.*

One of the major themes that came out of this research was that when individuals entered the chaplaincy of a prison they encountered an environment in which they were accepted and valued. For many, this was the first time they had experienced such acceptance, and such positive regard from others. This played a major role in their wishing to participate further in chaplaincy life. As outlined previously, inmates appreciated the chaplain taking time to talk to them as individuals and showing an interest in their lives. For many, however, this was only the first example of interaction in the chaplaincy that made a huge impact upon them.

When referring to interaction in the prison chaplaincy, it is important to first of all outline who these inmates were interacting with. As well as the Church of England chaplain who co-ordinated the running of the chaplaincy, all the prisons that I visited had a chaplaincy team made up of representatives from other denominations, part time chaplains and assistant chaplains, and lay members of the public who often volunteered to help with chaplaincy work or to act as prison visitors. Most prisons also operated a scheme where churches from the surrounding area came into the prison to take chapel services on a rota basis. After such services there was time for visitors from outside churches to talk to prisoners over coffee. As the same people came into the prisons on a regular basis, there was a chance for friendships to form between inmates and those from outside. The other group of people with whom inmates interacted in the chaplaincy were fellow inmates who had an interest in religion, or were already Christians. The nature of the interaction and relationships that developed was of paramount importance in the conversion narratives of many inmates.

Inmates talked with amazement about the relationships that were able to form between them and those visiting from outside. Many were surprised by the positive attitudes of these people towards them. They were impressed by their interest in them as people regardless of appearance, what they had done, or their current status as prisoners,

*...they take me for like who I am and what I've got inside, not like you know because I've got tattoos on me neck and I've got a scar on me face and, they're seeing deeper than that you know and err that's, I think that's err, it's err, it's what I can try and relate to you know err, it's hard to explain really you know to find the right words and that...*

Prisoner 16

*... well since I've been, came out from [name] prison, just after I was in a high security prison ad I went straight in cat C prison instead of going to cat B like, and err seeing the people coming from outside, visiting groups and all that and mixing with them and all that was a completely different experience like... no matter what you'd done or, they're just not interested in that as long as you just, you just talk to them and they're interested in whatever you're talking about, so that's quite interesting and they, they believe in helping you out really whereas the others I've found they'll*

*listen to you and once you turn your back they'll just go and have a laugh out of you.*

Prisoner 10

Several inmates drew comparisons between the people they encountered in the chaplaincy and those they knew on the outside, stressing the way in which they were no longer labelled negatively in interaction,

*The biggest benefit [of becoming a Christian], no more prison, and, because I can, I dunno it's meeting, meeting good people, people who want to take me for who I am you know and whatever I've got to offer, not being... and you know and keep away from him, he's bad news and that you know...*

Prisoner 16

*...[chaplain] is the sort of guy that you will meet once every ten years, he's that good right, he's the best person that I ever met, he's the best person that God put in my life right, and I'll tell you now you will never ever meet another chaplain like this guy, he will go out of his way to back up the lads and he'll go out of his way to help the lads and he's, just totally different, whereas those people that I used to mix with they're just, they're not even worth thinking about, they're just horrible, they were toe-rags, but [chaplain] and people like that come up here they're just, yeah they're brilliant, they show kindness, they show love and it's genuine, it's not an act, they're not doing it to gain something, they're actually doing it because they want to, you know.*

Prisoner 22

For some, it was also surprising that visitors demonstrated their acceptance of them by talking to them as they would talk to each other,

*... we went into the err chapel itself where they were having a sing along and they introduced me to all these people which was err quite a shock to me because like I'm not used to people talking to me nice and things like this. So we started talking and all that and like I found it quite hard because like they were all speaking to me really polite and I'm thinking hang on I'm not used to this...*

Prisoner 14

The nature of such interaction indicated to inmates that people who came into the chaplaincy had a positive perception of them. This represented a starting point for them to develop positive perceptions of themselves. It was a direct contrast to the way in which past interaction had undermined their self-identity, as outlined in Chapter 3. This was particularly the case for those who had been involved with crime before, and who were serving one of a long line of determinate length sentences.

Inmates also noted the contrast between the way in which they were treated in the chaplaincy, and the way in which they were defined and treated in the prison generally, as anonymous, and identified by a number or their surname. The positive reflection of self they received in interaction with people in the chaplaincy counteracted the ways in which the prison system devalued them,

*... it's weird in a way because you have people coming in, in groups from the outside and they look at us as people, we're not just a number to them, and then with the church, people at church they look at us as people.*

Prisoner 17

*... it's really good I mean with the screws and that you're just a number, your surname and your number you know, when you come up here [chaplaincy] you get to know some of the groups that come in here whatever, they treat you with a bit of respect, even though you're a prisoner at least you get some respect from out there, they treat you like a human. So it is really, it is really good and helpful.*

Prisoner 18

*... the change in me is just like getting respect from people, being tret how I felt a human being should be tret, I mean I've been tret like an animal over the years by certain staff...*

Prisoner 33

The positive experience prisoners had of Christians within the chaplaincy was supplemented for some by interaction in other contexts. For example, Prisoner 10 formed a relationship with a teacher who happened to be a Christian,

*... she came and talked to me this afternoon and from then onwards I used to go and sit in her class and she used to come and talk to me like and err, she was the one who gave me the Bible first... and err she was the one who encouraged me and she looked after me for a long time...*

Prisoner 10

Where the prisoner's family had contacts with religion on the outside, the way in which religious individuals reacted to the whole family confirmed their positive perception of Christians. When Prisoner 32 was imprisoned, his Mother contacted the local church and the Priest went out of his way to support him,

*... her parish Priest at the time err, a fellow called... was really good with the whole family when I first got remanded, err very supportive, and he came to see me too, err and he actually brought me communion, and he took confession from me... he was brilliant, he really was, he travelled to Liverpool to see me, he travelled to Shrewsbury to see me, Wakefield in Yorkshire, he's written to me since...*

Prisoner 32

Part of the experience of being accepted and valued in the chaplaincy came from being included as a member of a group. This inclusion was demonstrated to inmates as their opinions were taken seriously by both other Christian inmates and the chaplain,

*...I think the first one I didn't like err, it was a guy, somebody giving his testimony and it sounded like he was threatening me, he was like that, you'd better believe in God or you won't go to heaven and he was that kind of attitude, I'm like that no I'm not interested, [inmate] asked me what I thought of it after it had finished and I knew he was, by this time err, I knew [inmate] was right into it so I says to him, it was all right, not really for me but it was all right, he was like that, no there was something wrong with it what was it? I was like that, I didnee like the way he went about it... the way you go about it is all right, the way he went about it was just making a err mockery of everything, he was like that right so I'll see [chaplain] then, I was like that, no don't that's just my opinion, I mean everybody else all sat there as well and they all sat and listened to it and none of them seem to be complaining about it so it was just me. Well he came back to me and he says it wasnee just you there was a few people who thought that as well so err he won't be back. A couple of services after that err I actually started liking it, then about three or four months ago err, I asked [chaplain] to help me ask God into my life...*

Prisoner 24

The fact that they were accepted and valued as part of a group was also mediated to individuals by those visiting the chaplaincy as they invited them to become members of their churches after release,

*...there's plenty of nice people you can meet and get on with, and like err, like err, like this lady who come in and that, who come in with her church and that goes yeah you can be accepted to our church which I'm, that's, I think that's the best thing I'm going to be looking forward to when I get out...*

Prisoner 14

Such group membership and acceptance, again, was contrasted with previous experience of interaction. Prisoner 14 was lost for words to describe the way in which his experience with Christians differed from his previous experiences,

*She said we're going to invite you to our church you know what I mean and I thought (sighs and laughs), I thought this, you know what I mean and like everything's really turned round you know what I mean, it's really changed.*

Prisoner 14

One particular chaplaincy was also able to facilitate involvement in a particular Christian charity. This provided a group outside the prison that inmates could be a part of,

*... me [charity] friends, they've set me up this, they've helped me with that and they've, it's been eight month since, eight or nine month since we did our first project and err, in that eight or nine month I've had letters from maybes five members of [charity] you know and all encouraging me and supporting me and you know, it's, that's what I think given me a lot of nurture you know and err, I've sort of, they've put their faith in me and I've sort of like, I've grown off that faith you know and err, I just don't want to let them down you know...*

Prisoner 16

Feeling accepted and part of a group, seemed to be key to continued participation in religion. This was demonstrated by the fact that although Prisoner 22 had come into contact with Christians before, he had not previously made any commitment to Christianity, and did not participate in activities for very long,

*Err, I went to a church first time when I was with [wife] right, I went to a church and, nobody asked me how I thought, nobody told me what was going to happen or anything like that, you know they're all so intent with getting on with their own little lives and all that lot, so like I didn't feel welcome or part of it, and I've never felt part of anything because I've always been on me own...*

Prisoner 22

I will look further at the effects of group membership on prisoners, and it's role in continuing to legitimate a religious way of life for them, in the next chapter.

In addition to the positive definition of self which resulted from being accepted into the Christian group, inmates found that getting involved in the chaplaincy was quite often regarded as positive within the prison as a whole. This furthered the development of self-worth, and reinforced commitment,

*...I can remember like when I was baptised and I looked round like and there was all these people there like and they'd all come to see me get baptised and I felt good you know because you know, I didn't feel embarrassed or owt like that you know I thought they'd just come to laugh at you and things but they didn't. Some of the teachers, because I was in education at the time, come up because they were really pleased and that, they were saying oh nice one... and that you know and I was thinking they're pleased for us, I thought they're not taking the mickey and that, they're just, they're being good about it you know.*

Prisoner 16

Involvement with religion seemed to demonstrate to staff an inmates willingness to turn their back on a criminal lifestyle. In addition, whilst other inmates often laughed at those who attended chapel, it appeared that once they learnt an individual was serious about religion, they stopped ridiculing them, and possibly even came to respect them,

*...people know exactly where I stand err, they know exactly my position, my beliefs err yeah I've been taken the mickey out of I mean a lot of the lads now know that I'm an ordained minister, you know and as soon as people find out they go what, you became one in here, yeah, phew, and that's a different thing and they sort of respect you for having to do all that work and get through all that stuff, so you actually can err, I don't use the title but there are a couple of sisters in the Lord that every letter they write's got the reverend ... on it, they said you worked hard for it so you know we want to give you it.*

Prisoner 5

The majority of prisoners had positive experiences of the way their religious orientation was regarded by fellow inmates, once they had made it clear that they were serious about it,

*...a lot of the guys when I first started getting involved with church err, you know Bible bashing and this and that, taking the mickey and that you know err, but I didn't give up, I thought like, I'd sneak onto the landing so they didn't see us walking with me Bible and that like, or put it down me jumper and that you know, under me coat and that like, or run down, and I were like, I used to, you know after I dunno two month or something I'd walk down, big smile on me face and I wasn't bothered what they said, I'd take me time walking down the landing and I was reading me Bible on me way down just to show them like I'm not bothered you say what you want to say, it's down to me, it's my choice err and that. I started feeling pride you know and err, sometimes I'd leave me door open you know and I wouldn't close me door and they'd go are you reading the Bible again [...] and I was like I'm just having a quick glance and that you know and err, now they've left me to it you know, some of 'em say good on you...*

Prisoner 16

Whichever way an individual came into contact with the chaplaincy, whether it was as a result of reflective thought, invitations from others, or as something to pass the time, once they become involved in chaplaincy life, interaction with religious people functioned in order to maintain their interest and to foster belief. Interaction with those in the chaplaincy, whether they were inmates, chaplains, or outside visitors, provided these individuals with definitions of themselves that gave them a sense of self-worth, and a basis from which to start to rebuild self-identity. This served to make going to chapel a positive experience, and therefore led to continued participation. The inmates for whom such interaction was the most important aspect of their conversion process were primarily those who had been labelled negatively in interaction throughout their lives,

who had poor or no relationships with their family, and who had grown up with very negative perceptions of themselves. Their experiences with individuals in the prison chaplaincy were, for some, the first occasions on which they had been treated with respect and where others had taken an interest in them, accepting them regardless of their history, appearance or current status.

Continued participation in chaplaincy life, and the development of relationships with Christians, exposed these individuals to the world view of Christianity. For those who had already reflected upon the appropriateness of Christianity for their situation, these relationships provided support and an arena in which problems and views could be discussed. For those who had not previously thought about Christianity, their experience of interaction, and the relationships that developed, were the starting point for the development of Christian belief.

Belief was fostered by a number of interactive processes resulting from the relationships that developed in the chaplaincy. The Christian world view was mediated to individuals in everyday conversation with the chaplain, Christian inmates and visitors from outside the prison, and through discussion groups, courses and literature in the chaplaincy. Beliefs were also legitimated because Christians were held in particularly high regard by inmates. Three themes relating to this latter point were identified in prisoners' stories as particularly important in the conversion process: the perception of Christians as a group; the perception of Christian relationships; and the use of Christians as role models to facilitate personal change. I will consider them in turn.

### *Perception of Christians.*

Once they began to participate in chaplaincy activities the inmates all seemed to have a very positive perception of Christians in general. As noted already, this was, in part, a result of the way in which they defined the chaplain. By a process of deduction, if the chaplain was seen as positive, and the chaplain represented Christianity within the prison, Christianity as a whole became defined as positive. This process was assisted by the positive experiences that inmates had with other Christians from both inside and outside the prison. Prisoners drew from their experiences with particular individuals in order to arrive at a definition of 'Christians in general'. In this section I will consider the way in which this occurred.

A great many inmates seemed to talk about Christians as a group, attributing the same characteristics to everyone with the same belief system. Instead of being perceived as individuals, it was their religious belief that appeared to define them in the eyes of these inmates. For instance, there was a belief that *all* Christians would treat each other with respect, in the same way as prisoners were shown respect by those they met in the chaplaincy,

*... this is a new break for me to meet new kind of people who are all going to respect each other and that is what the church is.*

Prisoner 17

The characteristics that were attributed to Christians were: that they were more caring; more friendly; more genuine; and more trustworthy than other people both inside and outside the prison,

*I turned to Christianity because I needed someone to love and care for me.*

Prisoner 13

*... they're more caring and more you know concerned about it, they'll help you out more.*

Prisoner 18

*... it was a question of getting to know some friendlier faces, as I say you don't have much contact except visits so it's all screws and their mentality is, you know.*

Prisoner 8

*I think the regular attenders [of chapel] are generally, generally more trustworthy I would say...*

Prisoner 4

The experience these inmates had of Christians led them to attribute them characteristics, not only related to the way that they interacted with others, but pertaining to their very nature, the way they *are* as people.

This perception also stemmed, for some, from their knowledge of Christian doctrine and their consequent perception of the codes of conduct that would be followed by anyone who was a Christian,

*I wanted forgiveness, I don't think I ever will be regarded as normal by any of the public, the most would say oh he killed his wife, all right say everybody fiddles the income tax, nobody would pay much attention to that, but if you've killed somebody you never ever will get properly forgiven, you'll always be a killer. Now I know it's difficult to accept but I thought that if I go with the church community, there's more chance of some form of forgiveness there than what there ever would be on the outside.*

Prisoner 2

It also came, in a few instances, from interaction with just one other individual, and observations of differences between them and others. Prisoner 24 initially came to have a positive view of Christians as a result of his surprise that one of his fellow inmates was

not like all the others. As a result of this perceived difference he became friends with this person,

*I dunno what it is, just something about [inmate] made me turn round and just start talking to him and having a conversation with him and that, and I still had me doubts that he was just a normal prisoner, he's like any other prisoner, he'll talk to you and that's it he'll talk behind your back. So what I did was I sort of tested him on it, err told him wee bits and pieces about myself and I never heard it coming back to me so then I started relaxing with him and we actually became friends, we're actually good friends now...*

Prisoner 24

This friendship led to conversation about religion, and eventually to his participation in the chaplaincy. The difference between this inmate and all the others was attributed to his being a Christian. Holding Christian beliefs was therefore legitimated for Prisoner 24, as they appeared to give rise to positive personal characteristics.

In their accounts, there was a tendency for prisoners to contrast 'Christians' as a group with others they had come across during their lives. Here again, we can observe the tendency to see Christians as a group, defined by their beliefs and holding all characteristics in common,

*... [chaplain] knows a good bit about me background really, so I feel that I can talk to him, I do, I can tell [chaplain] anything you know I can talk to [chaplain] it's no problem err, so and like all me friends around me, all me friends have done me harm since I've been in here, and I've done, I'm a nice person me, I like to, I've looked after people money-wise and everything when I've got it, but when I've come in here everybody's just like forgotten me. Err so err I believe that I was mixed up with the wrong people and since I've been here and I've become a Christian and that, I mix with the Christian people, Christian people are a lot better, they're more genuine in everything they do really.*

Prisoner 25

*... they're easier to talk to and they're more friendly, they're more likely to come up and say hello to you rather than somebody that's a non-Christian... Err somebody that's not a Christian, they'll walk by you in the street and that, and they won't even notice you, a Christian, they might walk by you on the street but err they'll see you and they'll smile or something and then keep on walking by, they just pass on that, what I like to say is that you've got a happiness from something else, and, they're just a lot easier to talk to.*

Prisoner 24

For some, this perceived contrast led directly to involvement with the prison chaplaincy,

*Well it's... the people in a way, people around me were more friendly and... I've had people in the past that have done it's, like I'd helped 'em ... and they've stabbed me in the back. Err, and I see this all over the place, I lived in Yorkshire for some time and I've lived in the Midlands and I've seen this all over the place happening and I thought [if I went to the chapel] I'd meet new sort of people err, around me you know different sorts of people who people can get to trust.*

Prisoner 17

Inmates drew from their interactions with Christians both inside and outside prison to come to a definition of what it was to be a Christian. The experiences they had of Christians treating them with respect, accepting them regardless of their crimes, and wanting to enter into relationships with them, led to the attribution of such characteristics to 'Christians in general'. They constructed a typification (Schutz 1973) or ideal type, made up of information accumulated from experiences with various individuals. The characteristics that were used in constructing this typification were taken from a variety of individuals, it is probable that no one person exhibited all of them. The characteristics which the inmates observed, especially in visitors from outside the prison, might have been particular to those who decided to visit prisons and participate in chaplaincy activities. The mere fact that they had taken time to visit prison and spend time with inmates demonstrated a certain degree of acceptance and interest in them. We would certainly not find Christians with negative perceptions of prisoners visiting the prison chaplaincies. Nevertheless, the characteristics that were observed by prisoners in individual encounters seemed to be attributed to Christians as a whole. This process implied that Christian beliefs were the source of such characteristics and thus rendered them worth exploring in more detail.

The perception that prisoners developed of Christians as a group was accompanied by a perception that relationships between Christians were superior to other relationships, not just in prison but generally. This accentuated the desire of inmates to enter into such relationships, and to enter into the belief system that appeared to fuel them.

### ***Christian Relationships.***

Those who were interviewed defined their observations about the nature of Christian relationships as an important part of their conversion process. They emphasised a particular closeness in relationships between Christians, often drawing upon the 'brother-sister' analogy, derived from Christian doctrine, in their accounts. This closeness, and the superior quality observed in these relationships, was attributed solely to the beliefs shared by the individuals involved,

*One evening walking away from the chapel, [name] and this other guy [name] who'd come in from outside to talk about his own conversion,*

*were walking along, I was a few paces behind them and I was looking at these two and I thought whatever they've got I want some, because it was such a close relationship you know, you could actually see it there was something going on there... you know it was palpable almost... so that just encouraged me further... I mean I've got close relationships, but there was something special, extra, indefinable going on between these two, you know they were totally comfortable with each other and having met born-again Christians now I can see that, that is a feature of their relationships with each other, you know it's just something marked and noticeable...*

Prisoner 30

This served to make the adoption of the Christian belief system attractive, as it might facilitate the development of such relationships.

Once individuals started to enter into the Christian way of life, the relationships they developed further reinforced their decision. There seemed to be an opinion that ready-made ties exist between those who share the same beliefs, that communication is easy between fellow Christians, and that a close relationship will usually develop,

*...now I have friends rather than acquaintances... [relationships are] much closer yeah, err this is something that people can't understand you know the difference between friendship and acquaintanceship, between brother and sister err they said, well I've got so many brothers and sisters now it's unbelievable. Err we had a group called... come in the other Sunday, last Sunday, and by the end of it, I'd only spoken to two of them, but all of 'em come over and give me a big hug and a kiss afterwards and everyone said how come he does this all the time and no one else does, it's just because they recognise, we recognise one another for who we are, and that's the difference you know being able to do that without having any sexual connotations or anything, just being able to say yeah look, and that makes a big difference you know and it's tremendous you know I just can't get over it, I think it's wonderful.*

Prisoner 5

*... it gives you good relationships with other friends you know you're kind of much closer, you're not, you're not so scared by you know being around people, it opens you out an awful lot...*

Prisoner 18

*...this example of these groups coming in as a gospel singers and err Christian fellowship groups and we see when we are talking together and sitting and all we as brothers and sisters and all, we can communicate easily, but if you didn't have that feeling or that you just come in there as a group and you'll find you're just a stranger in there, you couldn't communicate or anything like that, err it's a very different.*

Prisoner 10

*...when some of me [charity] friends have come round to see us ... everyone of them like will cuddle me straight away...*

Prisoner 16

There even appeared, for some, to be the possibility, through turning to Christianity, of transforming some of the most difficult relationships within the prison environment, those with prison officers,

*...there's even a few Christian officers here who started calling me by me first name, you know I've never been called by me first name in prison in twenty year you know ... it's a total different thing you know...*

Prisoner 16

Once again, inmates talked of contrasts between Christians and others. This time they compared the relationships that could develop with Christians with those they had previously, and with the restricted relationships and interaction that were usually available within the prison,

*...it's a full friendship you know and a friendships you know, but it comes from the heart you know and they want to be friends for all the right reasons you know it's err. Friends I've had in previous times err, they wait for you when you get out of prison with your discharge grant and you know once you've spent it like that's 'see you later' like, you know that's the type of people I was used to you know they come and knock on your door when you get your giro and that... and once you've spent your giro that's it 'til you get your next one you know so.*

Prisoner 16

*I think, you can't sort of get a normal friendship [on the wings] that you can up here [in the chaplaincy] but there again most of them that come up here are Christians anyway so they're going to have a different attitude towards life anyway, rather than not giving a fuck about anyone else and just caring about themselves.*

Prisoner 18

*I'd rather be friends with the people that come up here [chaplaincy] than half of the people on the wings because they're all idiots mostly you know, especially on the wing that I'm on, I mean I'm on a poor coper's wing and it's, it, I mean there are people on there that are poor copers but the rest of them are just dick heads that you know people can't handle them on normal wings...*

Prisoner 18

*There's a couple of guys that have just gone out, a couple of Christian guys got out last year I think, yeah last year, and yeah they're helpful to*

*have around because your average, everyday con in here is just a bit of a muppet and just after talking loads of drugs and planning his next job, the next one'll be the big one...*

Prisoner 22

Here again, 'Christians' were referred to as an ideal type, typified, and defined as a group, by their shared beliefs. The behaviour that inmates observed among Christians, and the particular features of their relationships, were seen as resulting from their status as Christians rather than from personal characteristics. Not only did inmates observe relationships that they defined as superior, they also experienced their relationships with Christians as distinct from those they had encountered previously or within the prison environment. Their belief that these differences were solely due to the presence of a shared Christian belief reinforced the appeal of Christianity for them and the efficacy of participation in chaplaincy life.

The perception of Christians and their relationships that I have discussed in the last two sections led to another process which, for some individuals, constituted a further step towards conversion. These positive perceptions, and the way in which they operated to promote the construction of the ideal type 'Christian', led to the use of Christians as role models for some of the prisoners. Inmates used their observations of others as vehicles for changing the way they related to people and the way in which they organised their lives. This was important for the conversion process as it involved taking on the Christian beliefs of these role models because of the way in which they were perceived to be bound up with the way that they acted and organised their lives.

### ***Christians as Role Models.***

The process through which inmates decided to use people they met in the chaplaincy as role models seemed to be rooted in a belief that those with whom they socialised played an important part in determining how they acted and the way it was possible to define themselves. Several individuals had come to the conclusion, upon reflecting about their lifestyles and the reasons for their repeated imprisonment, that the influence of groups with whom they had been associating was partly to blame for their predicament,

*When you're out on the landings or you're sat in people's pads, that's all they want to do you know, they'll either smoke a draw... or talk about the jobs they're going to do when they get out and I started thinking that's maybe why I'm coming back all the time, I'm not socialising with the right people...*

Prisoner 16

Such conclusions were sometimes reinforced by official prison reports about individuals,

*... it [report] says [name]'s going to go places if he starts associating with pro-social people instead of anti-social people and that's why you know I'm getting involved with the church members and that because to me they're all pro-social people, I mean you don't get prison visitors coming here you know talking this and saying that and the next minute they're out there doing that, so to me they're pro-social people. I mean every member of [charity] are pro-social people, and to me that's like moving forward you know so.*

Prisoner 16

An important aspect of the conversion process, for such individuals, was their desire to associate with Christians in order to effect change in their lifestyle, and the way in which they were able to identify themselves. The way that inmates talked about this stage of the conversion process demonstrates that they had given careful consideration to how the way that they identified themselves, constructed self-identity, and acted was influenced by the group of individuals with whom they associated. Participating in group activities with people who they defined in a particularly positive way, enabled them to start to identify themselves, in relation to the group, in such a way as to enhance self-worth. They realised that changing the type of individuals with whom they interacted might not only lead to the possibility of constructing a new lifestyle, but also of constructing a new self-identity. Their conclusions mirrored the theories of writers such as Becker (1972) and Shibutani (1972), but demonstrate that self-reflection is just as important a tool as interaction in the process of self-change. The following are examples of this process,

*... when I look at myself like you know I look at them, I know they're good people you know and I've never associated with good people, I've always like had the back dregs and that you know and, because that's like, that's how I felt about myself, I think I can't go any further than the level I was on you know, but you can tell if they're a good person you know I mean when I, I talk to [chaplain], I know [chaplain]'s a good person because of the way he's admired you know err, I like [assistant chaplain], they're all good people, the friends that come from Toc H I know they're all good people...*

Prisoner 16

*... we're on the same wavelength err, the visitors that come here, every, well I can't even fault one of 'em anyway, they really are nice people and all they ever want to do is be nice, be nice to other people. There's not a lot of that out there any more is there, it's all gone err, a lot of people don't, they're not bothered like about their next door neighbour or anybody around them and, like they're really selfish. But all the people, all the visitors that come in are really nice people and that's the sort of, that's the sort of life I'd like to live from now... because it's easy to, I, if you look at the, the people you're mixing with, you can end up like them*

*easily can't you, if you, I don't know mix with thieves you might become a thief you know what I mean.*

Prisoner 25

*I'm going to move away so I'm not like tempted because I know there's something still there... because if I'm with new people it'll be different... I'm not around people talking about drugs all the time, they're good people.*

Prisoner 31

Therefore, even in conversions that appeared to be primarily driven by interaction; self-reflection, and the formulation of decisions about the future based on such reflection, was still a very important element.

Some inmates mentioned specific individuals who they observed, held in high esteem, and used as role models for personal change. A connection was made, either because of the way in which these individuals accounted for their lifestyle and actions or because of conclusions drawn by the inmates themselves, between the way these individuals acted and the fact that they were Christians. This connection led to the belief that if they were to adopt Christian beliefs they could become happier, better people and enjoy the same sort of lifestyle and relationships that these individuals enjoyed. Prisoners were drawn to an investigation and adoption of Christian beliefs, and ways of interpreting and organising life, in order to attain the lifestyle or perception of themselves that they desired,

*...that's where I first met [name]... come up prison visiting at [prison] and there was something about him that was a little bit different, he never spoke religion to me, he never spoke about Jesus but he always had a smile on his face. One day I asked him what it was and he said that he was a Christian. So that's what started me getting into it a bit deeper... you know as far as I was concerned this was the sort of lifestyle that I wanted, what he had.*

Prisoner 5

*...I suppose the fact that a man of God cared so much for my family in particular, and me in a kind of secondary sense, fuelled my faith, you know I thought well you know it's really nice that someone you know, and I suppose I make the connection that he does this because he's a Christian, that makes someone who leads a Christian life a really good, you know nice person, the kind of person I would like to be anyway, and especially when you're feeling bad about yourself because of the crime and the sentence and letting everybody down and, and the devastation, the sort of ripple effect of the episode err, makes, or made me want to become a good person again, err and it's really, it's taken, I mean this is like six*

*years on and it's only sort of now, almost within the last weeks, months, that I've kind of started to recover my feeling of worth.*

Prisoner 32

The use of such role models, and the adoption of Christian beliefs, seemed to have a positive effect on these individuals. Many examples were given of the way in which change had been achieved through this process,

*...I didn't trust many people, you've got to really get close to me for me to trust anybody, but when problems did happen outside, I mean I wouldn't talk about it to anybody, maybe the odd one close friend... and like getting on with [chaplain] so well and getting on with the visitors, the visitors used to say... 'what's on you mind?', I said 'nowt', 'what's on your mind?', 'nowt', wouldn't tell them, and like I started opening up a little bit more then and there was a little bit more trust there and a little bit more respect for each other and they done everything they could to help me and I thought well if they can do that I can do that, so when people come to me with a problem, instead of just saying oh do your own jail, I started helping one or two, and all of a sudden I started becoming like a welfare officer on the wing, they wouldn't go to the screw, they'd say... 'our lass has blown me out phone her up and have a word with her', I picked the phone up, I must have saved about twenty, thirty marriages while I was up in [prison]...*

Prisoner 33

*...I've looked at them and I've thought, because you know what I mean I've thought to myself these people are talking to each other as if they've known each other for a long time and like just being so friendly to each other, I'm thinking well I can be that sort of person and I have you know what I mean, I've made myself be that person which has been really good.*

Prisoner 14

For some, observations of the way in which these role models interpreted the world, the way in which they interacted with others, and the respect they showed to inmates themselves, led to the conscious and deliberate adoption of a particular sort of behaviour. The adoption of a religious world view was then legitimated through observations of change by the individual and others around them, and because of the increase in self-worth that followed. This was especially the case when such change was defined as solely the result of interaction with Christians,

*...I'm a better person for it, not for being in prison but for meeting the type of people, for meeting the Christians that I've met in prison, I'm a better person through it, everybody's noticed that, me family have noticed that.*

Prisoner 33

Throughout this section, I have demonstrated that the processes outlined in the previous sections, whereby Christians came to be defined in a particularly positive light, culminated in the use of Christian individuals or groups as role models. This process was important for those inmates who wished to effect change in some aspect of their lives. Some desired a change in lifestyle and group allegiance, as they tried to find new ways to organise their lives that might lead them to a more positive view of themselves and their capabilities, and into courses of action that would prevent them going back to prison. Others needed to reconstruct self-identity because of the effects of interaction with family members at various stages in their lives, or as a result of their crime.

The association made between the behaviour and nature of individuals in the chaplaincy and their Christian beliefs led to a desire among inmates to take on such beliefs in order to enter into a particular way of acting, and a more positive way of viewing themselves. Becoming part of the group, being able to identify themselves as Christian, enabled them to value themselves as 'good people' in the same way as they valued those they emulated. I have also shown that while this process appears on the surface to be primarily interactive, self-reflection and reflection about decision making for the future were also of paramount importance. Without reflection on their desires for change, their goals for the future, the problems they had in the past, and possible ways in which change might be effected, inmates' assessment of the efficacy of Christian beliefs, and their decision to adopt such role models, would not have been made.

Once prisoners had become involved in chaplaincy life and had started to take on Christian beliefs, their interaction was not just with *people* in the chaplaincy. Individuals also interacted with what they read in the Bible, with religious doctrine, and with what they perceived to be God. In order to complete the discussion of the role of interaction in conversion I will now turn to a consideration of these relationships.

### ***Interaction with the Bible.***

For some, the Bible was, in fact, the first way in which they interacted with Christianity. This was the case for those whose conversion was rooted in self-reflection and the desire to answer questions about themselves and life more generally. It was through the Bible that some came to regard Christianity as worth pursuing as it gave answers to some of the questions they were trying to answer about themselves and their crimes,

*... I think it's finding a source a sort of understanding you know because in Scriptures there's a lot of sort of people who've killed people and who've still, who are still sort of part of the story or the historical side of Christianity, and when I read the Bible I realised that everything's in there, incest, bigamy, murder, the lot, and I thought blimey you know I didn't realise this... and I think well it all makes sort of sense to me you know why we do things to each other and why people love you even when*

*you've done something terrible... I think then I decided I was going to become a Christian, but I didn't join anything as such.*

Prisoner 8

Some of the stories in the Bible involved characters who had committed similar crimes and still managed to find a sense of self-worth through Christianity. This identification with others allowed the construction of a new sense of self-worth. Through Christianity inmates could develop a positive view of themselves which incorporated what they had done. In Prisoner 8's case, it was a while before he began to participate in any chaplaincy activities. At first his decision to take Christianity seriously was only confirmed by further interaction with the Bible,

*...I started to like forgive myself a bit... I'd never read the Bible so I went from cover to cover, I thought well I'll read it and I got stuck on a book called Ecclesiastes and err, it just stopped me dead in me tracks and I read it, read it, read it quite a few times and it seemed to sort of make sense err, it just made me think because there's lots of opposites and odd sort of wise advice in Ecclesiastes, and I suddenly realised, wondered why I'd never read it before because even if you're not a Christian it's a very good source of wisdom for day to day sort of living. And err I think that was the sort of point at which I decided I was, that this guy, this historical figure was something more than just a historical figure and that things that he'd said and that seemed to make sense to me.*

*...I think after reading Ecclesiastes I made the definite decision that you know there was something more to life and there was something deeper, and there was a lot of sense in the Bible, err, a lot of confusion and a lot of paradoxes as well but, because you know people can read into it sometimes what they want to, but I don't believe in that, I believe that, you know it's a good guide book err, and as I said there's a lot of things in there, people in there who've had similar experiences to me, I suppose, I think forgiveness is probably the root of it all, I think, I think being able to forgive yourself...*

Prisoner 8

It was possible, therefore, for interaction with the Bible, as part of the reflective process of seeking answers to questions about self and crime, to be a fundamental part of the conversion process.

For others, the Bible became a problem solving tool. After their initial contact with religion and attraction to it, they started to read the Bible. The way in which it provided solutions to problems, and guidelines for day to day living, increased the plausibility of Christianity for them. Prisoner 6 acknowledged that the Bible became meaningful in certain situations because it seemed to provide specific answers to problems. Finding such answers in the Bible served to precipitate further interest in Christianity,

*... there's bits that leap out at you... they become meaningful because of t'situation you're in err, or an, experience you've had and , and they do... they sort of stick as well and you go back to those parts and you'll read them again err... for me it was a case of wanting to find out more really...*

Prisoner 6

Others claimed that they always found a relevant passage to read, making them more and more convinced that it was true. It seems that the more this occurred, it became increasingly likely that individuals always interpreted what they read as relevant to their situation, a circular process which continued to reinforce belief,

*I've got the desire to read it you know, if there's anything I'm stressed out about I just look at, start reading the Bible from where I finished off. And there's always, there's always something that no matter what bit you read, there's always something in there that's, that's relevant to how you're feeling at the time, no matter what bit I read of it, it always has been for me anyway, no matter where I pick it up I think oh, oh, oh yeah... and then you feel much better about it.*

Prisoner 18

*... it really does [seem relevant], it's I don't know it, if I've got a problem, without actually looking in the Bible for it, I don't mean err, I mean if I mean to say if you know there's doubt about what to do or anything err, I usually read the Bible, not looking for an answer but usually there's something there that's for the situation...*

Prisoner 7

The Bible was also perceived as something that contained common-sense knowledge, and was interpreted as generally applicable to the world. Many individuals became convinced that if everybody followed the Bible, and therefore if everybody became Christians, there would be no more trouble in the world. This view of the Bible provided reassurance for individuals that following Christianity was the right thing to do,

*There's a prayer meeting on the, when they discuss the Bible, I like the Proverbs, I love the Proverbs, and I think it's common sense some of the Bible, I'm not as interested in the Old Testament though the Dead Sea Scrolls interest me and all that but, I like the Proverbs, there's a lot of common sense in it you know when you look at it...*

Prisoner 9

*...I started reading about the rules that God's put down for us to live by, and I thought it's all there, it's all written in this book how to live, how to live a good life, if you live by these rules, they're all, I mean half your*

*problems would all go overnight, they would go overnight, it's written there in the Bible.*

Prisoner 23

*...all what I've read of the Bible and that, and I've heard about the Bible, if the world, or the people in the world, lived like the Bible it would be a nice place without a doubt...*

Prisoner 25

The existence of the Bible provided a constant legitimization of beliefs, even in the absence of other Christians,

*...you get that sense of, that it's that permanent back-up all the time that you know 'I'm still with you' and 'you keep reading'...*

Prisoner 6

For some prisoners, interaction with the Bible became very important and replaced interaction with people. The relationship they had with the Bible was promoted to the top of their hierarchy of significant and reality defining relationships, even where they still had relationships with people who might be regarded as most significant in defining reality, such as partners or other family members (Berger and Luckmann 1966),

*...I mean when I came into prison my first thoughts were about my family you know I'm going to miss the family and I'm going to miss my freedom, and yeah I was very low then and, and then also was coming to terms with what I'd actually done, that was very difficult err, and it was sort of when I realised I'd been forgiven err, that sort of lifted me a little bit err and, but then as I got really into studying the Bible and then could forgive myself err that became more important than my family err, even though my family, they are closer now probably than what they were before.*

*...she [fiancee] does support me but err, no I wouldn't say that she was me main support I think me main support is just the Bible...*

Prisoner 7

The Bible appeared to bring about feelings of self-worth, and answers to questions, that were not provided by family or friends. The framework through which life was interpreted and organised, and through which definitions of self were formed, came to be taken, for most, solely from the Christian belief system.

It was also possible for interaction with, and confirmation of reality through, the Bible to replace outside relationships and support where none existed. Prisoner 10, who had experienced feelings of isolation until he got involved with the chaplaincy, started to get involved in Christianity by reading the Bible, and found that it gave him a source of encouragement,

*I was at [prison] for eight years... and while I was in [prison] I experienced lots of difference like err I wasn't feeling any more lonely or anything and err I started to read the Bible every day and it gave me more and more encouragement.*

Prisoner 10

It is important to note, then, that the role of interaction in conversion, and in the subsequent reinforcement of belief, need not only involve people. The role of interaction with other individuals mediates the belief system of Christianity to converts or pre-converts, but this role can also be filled by the Bible, or perhaps any literature about Christianity, that can also mediate Christian doctrine to the individual. The particular efficacy of the Bible, as opposed to other literature, comes from the Christian belief that it is the word of God. Therefore, in interacting with the Bible, using it for problem solving and so on, inmates were in effect, or from their perspective, interacting with God. Inmates also gave examples of more direct interaction with God that assisted in their conversion and in sustaining their belief. The Christian belief in the possibility of a direct relationship with God makes it stand out from many other religions. This relationship was significant for most of those who were interviewed.

### ***Interaction with God.***

I mentioned previously that several individuals turned to God when they first entered prison, as there was no one else to whom they could turn. Interaction with God, for some, was an attempt to transcend the loneliness and lack of support in the prison environment,

*... when I was in the cell at night, even though I was in with someone else, I used to think you know what is there, what can I turn to you know I've read these books [novels] you know what is there to do you know, everything, God, you know what I mean there's no one else to talk to and it's the last avenue... in a sense the loneliness, when all your defensive barriers have gone and all the materialistic things have been taken away and you're just in an empty cell, only for six hours until you wake up, but one hour is long enough... and when you can't cope, can you help me, you're only talking to the walls, so if you can substitute that, and it's when you've got a stillness and a quietness that you can take things on board, there's no flashy cars, there's no goals to aim for because you're not going nowhere, time, you've got time, but you still want company, someone to talk to, even if it's in prayer...*

Prisoner 29

*Knowing that God's there is what gives you peace of mind, knowing that you've got somebody to fall back on... it's like, you understand God, you understand.*

Prisoner 29

*... so like saying I'm not angry any more, that's a massive benefit, because a lot of people in prison are so very, very bitter, because as I said when that judge sentenced me, he didn't just sentence me to coming to prison or to lose me dignity, he sentenced me to losing everything that I ever had, and to suddenly go from losing everything to now thinking well I haven't lost everything, I've got God on my side, I have got something, that's something that you, that, that's a miracle in itself, to know that you're not on your own.*

Prisoner 23

Interaction with God in some ways parallels interaction with other people. In the same way as prisoners found that they were accepted by those within the chaplaincy, some experienced being accepted by God as one of the most important features of their conversion,

*... what's Christianity given me, it's given me, it's given me me best friend, it'd given me me best friend, which is Jesus, somebody that is never going to let me down, someone that is always there to love me, is always there to help me, as a kid, I never knew love as a kid, I never knew a mother or anything like that, as a kid you fall over, you scrape yourself and your parents pick you up, Jesus picks you up, loves you and takes care of you, and I just cannot put into words what my faith means to me but yeah, I haven't cried since I was four years old, it's physically impossible for me to cry, but when I think about Jesus on the cross I can near enough cry.*

Prisoner 22

*... at the end of the day he's a loving God and he'll just, he'll love you no matter whether you mess up or what, he'll just love you, so like it's good...*

Prisoner 22

*I've never found, like I said when I have tried to love somebody, it's never been there for me, well me parents weren't there for me err, well me adopted parents, when I got married it wasn't there for me and then it's like an eight and a half year relationship it wasn't there for me and all of a sudden to find a loving relationship with God, I'm thinking oh hang on, it's very nerve racking...*

Prisoner 23

*I always thought that going to church was, you just prayed, sung a few hymns and that was what God wanted, err and since I've you know with the Christianity, it's not a religion as I thought it was a religion, it's err, it's a relationship with God himself, and he wants a relationship with everybody, that's how I get to thinking about it, and err it just, just the thing of not saying all the hymns and the boring straight like collar and*

*ties and you know just wanting to be yourself kind of thing and that's what I wanted to be.*

Prisoner 34

*The major way that it's benefited me, it's given me back err self-esteem, it's actually taught me, it's, it's told me something of the value of, of my own value in God's eyes err, because in accepting all the power and might of God himself and to learn that he actually values me as precious as anything else in his kingdom, is amazing. Err, it's err, it's almost something that I can say well you know despite what anybody else thinks you know, God really loves me, and that's a kind of antidote to anything that ever might come my way...*

Prisoner 32

*The strength which I mean I think has come from what it's given you is an increased sense of your own worth and the fact that, that you, that you can be forgiven and taken care of err and that, and this thing I mentioned about being non-judgemental I think it broadens you tremendously and that you know, that life can make you feel like I did which was totally, totally worthless and, and totally, and that everything you do was wrong, and I suppose one of the things that Christianity says to you is that there is somebody there who does literally I mean, it is very, very glib to come out with this phrase well God loves you but what you're talking about there in that sort of love is something absolutely cosmic, something, something completely and all-embracing and says look you know you are a person, your sins can be forgiven, go away, start again, because I not only believe that God forgives your sins but forgets them as well, and what it offers you is this enormous chance to, to start again, to put everything right.*

Prisoner 1

Everything that I mentioned about relationships with individuals in the chaplaincy also applied to this relationship with God. Inmates felt accepted for themselves, no matter what they had done, and found love and care where many had not experienced it previously. The relationship with God, however, can be seen as even more powerful in the creation of a new, positive self-identity because of the way in which these individuals perceived God as all powerful, in charge, and as the ultimate authority; and because, for converts, God can become the most important significant other (Berger 1969). The process through which a relationship with God gave rise to the construction of a new self-identity was also facilitated by the Christian doctrine of forgiveness which was described as important by most of these individuals. I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 6.

Another aspect of human relationships that was mirrored by inmates' interaction with God was the adoption of role models. It was possible to use Jesus as a role model just as any individual might be emulated,

*...yeah I've got someone to try and emulate, now I can't do it in my own strength but through the power of the Holy Spirit I can actually try... That's my goal in life, is to see Jesus in everything...*

Prisoner 5

Lastly, the relationship with God also had the problem solving function that I identified with relation to inmates' use of the Bible. Many individuals went to God with their problems rather than any other person with whom they had a relationship. The fact that they interpreted various things as answers to their questions reinforced this method of problem solving and strengthened their interest in, or commitment to, Christianity. Talking to God provided Prisoner 34 with an outlet for his problems where previously he kept the stress inside,

*If I had any problems, I'd be saying them to God, I'd be talking to him about, either in my mind or you know I'd be speaking out loud like I'm talking to you... [before] I would have just bottled everything up, just trying to black it out and make out it weren't happening, the problems and the worries I had I'd just bottle it up, but now I can just sit there, and I've got an understanding pad mate as well, because I've got a new pad mate now, he don't believe, but he's got nothing against me, you know and if I want to pray you know out loud, there's no problem.*

Prisoner 34

This problem solving relationship with God made Prisoner 6 more positive about facing the future,

*I think it's made me connected a little bit stronger err and like I said it gives you that chance to, again through me faith, through praying and love err, it's almost like talking it out with God if you like err you do get that sense of direction, where you're going to go, not quite sure what you're going to do next but because you know you've got to face various difficulties err, you're geared up to face them without, without any of the err, you worry about it but you're not frightened err...*

Prisoner 6

Prisoner 7 and Prisoner 10 said that they could relax about their problems because of their belief that God had taken them upon himself, and would sort them out on their behalf,

*... the way I am err coping with the problems of prison life... people come and ask me how do I manage it, and I can tell them that you know that Lord's got all my problems on his shoulders rather than me having my problems on my own shoulders.*

Prisoner 7

*...the encouragement what I got err from the Lord himself ... I can remember things when things were supposed to be feeling, I don't know feeling down or anything and all of a sudden it just comes out and it's done on it's own really and err, I find it, I'm not on my own, I can feel it that the Lord is there with me and err he knows what he's doing and he knows my needs and that's the main thing, that's what's giving me more encouragement because without him I don't think I could have made it so far in this sentence, yeah.*

Prisoner 10

Once prisoners were involved with Christianity, relationships with Christian inmates, Chaplains, visitors, the Bible, and God served to increase the plausibility of the belief system, provided ways in which to construct a new self-identity and ways of living, and continued to act in a way which confirmed and maintained belief. The role of religion in the everyday lives of these inmates also served to make it appear continually attractive and plausible, and to maintain commitment. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

#### **Conclusion to Chapter 4.**

Several conclusions about the way in which conversion proceeded for these prisoners have been drawn in this chapter. Firstly, I considered the role of previous religious beliefs and contact with the church in rendering Christianity attractive to individuals when they are in prison. There was a wide variety of experience among those who had converted in prison, some having had positive experiences of religion in the past, some having no attitude towards it or no contact with it, and some having very negative experiences. Although good memories of religion were important in the conversions of one or two individuals, in the majority of cases whether inmates had come into contact with or how they had defined religion in the past had no bearing on their decision to convert. This decision was based, rather, on encounters with religion during imprisonment and subsequent assessment of its pertinence for them.

Encounters with religion in the prison environment came about in various ways. The conversion process started, for some, with direct appeals to God or to religious ideas as a possible source of answers to questions about themselves, their crime, and life itself. Others had chance encounters with religion and did not concern themselves initially with Christian beliefs. Many sought the help of the prison chaplain in times of crisis, defining him/her as someone who would be understanding, and who stood apart from others in the prison regime. Others started to attend chapel services as a way to fill time in the monotonous, unstructured prison environment, or were invited to services by other inmates.

The themes that were drawn from the stories inmates told about their conversions were divided into two broad categories: reflective processes and interactive processes. A consideration of both of these was important to give a full picture of religious conversion

in prison. Previous studies of religious conversion, such as those considered in Chapter 1, have failed to adequately address the reflective dimension of the conversion process.

In some cases, reflection took a directly religious form as individuals sought to account for their situation, or to find help where no sources of assistance were available. Reflection of this nature was most often found in the accounts of those who had committed murder and were looking for ways in which to interpret and find meaning in their actions, find answers to questions about both themselves and about existence, and to construct a plausible and positive self-identity that incorporated the fact that they had taken a life. It was also found in the stories of those for whom the sentence they were serving was their first, and who had not been engaged in criminal activity as a normal part of life. These individuals appealed directly to God and to religious ideas for help in coping with the initial stages of imprisonment. They reflected upon the possibility that God could help them, in the absence of any visible alternatives. The efficacy of Christian concepts and ideas in the situations of both these groups led to continued interest in religion, and eventually to participation in activities arranged by the prison chaplaincy.

I also noted that self-reflection had a role in the conversion process for individuals trying to make sense of repeated convictions and prison sentences. Such reflection included an analysis of the sort of person the individual had become, the way in which their crime and sentence defined them, and the future that was anticipated if current courses of action were continued. This process culminated in the decision to change both self and lifestyle. Although such reflection did not have a religious element to start with, when combined with encounters with Christianity through attendance at chapel services or interaction with other Christians, the decision to change took on a religious form.

Interactive processes, as the result of chance encounters with the prison chaplaincy, were the driving force behind the conversions of individuals with a history of criminal convictions, low self-esteem, and lack of family attachments. Once they had made contact with the prison chaplaincy, the relationships that developed with the chaplain, visitors from outside churches, and Christian inmates, served to draw them into chaplaincy life and to legitimate Christian beliefs and lifestyle. Prisoners were treated with respect by these individuals, and were accepted regardless of their crimes, status as prisoners, or appearance. This made a huge impact upon them because of their previously negative experience of interaction.

These positive experiences, combined with their perception of the prison chaplain as distinct from the prison regime, on the prisoners side, and interested in prisoners' lives, led to Christianity as a whole being defined in a positive way. Using the characteristics of individuals with whom they had come into contact, inmates constructed an ideal type, 'the Christian', whose behaviour, attitude to life and others, and relationships, were viewed as superior to those of people who did not have Christian beliefs. Christianity was seen as the source of such positive characteristics and was therefore taken on by some inmates as a vehicle for personal change. They used Christians as role models, attempting to emulate their attitudes and behaviour, and

entered into the world of Christian ideas out of their belief that it was adherence to the Christian way of life that gave rise to the behaviour, and indeed very nature, of those individuals they admired. Whilst this process was driven primarily by interaction, reflection was also important as inmates evaluated their observations about Christianity and linked them to their own projects of change. As they entered into Christian belief and lifestyle it was further legitimated for them as they observed changes in themselves, and were able to identify themselves as part of a group that they held in high regard.

In addition to interaction with those in the prison chaplaincy, all of those who experienced conversions in prison defined interaction with the Bible and with God as important. Their role in conversion, and in the maintenance of a Christian world view, has also been largely ignored in previous studies of conversion.

The findings presented in this chapter have demonstrated that it is impossible to define *the* conversion process. There was no set of stages (Lofland and Stark 1965, Rambo 1991) through which all prisoners travelled as they journeyed towards conversion. The elements of the conversion process that have been presented here represent the experiences of a great many individuals; each person's experience was slightly different and included different combinations of the factors outlined. The major differences in experience, however, can be attributed to the crime that was committed, and to whether the inmate had been in prison before. Those serving life sentences, and those who were imprisoned for their first offence, experienced conversions that were achieved and maintained primarily through reflective processes, whilst those serving determinate length sentences attributed their conversions more to interaction.

Some elements of the conversion process that were identified in previous studies were also found here. For instance, several individuals experienced what they defined as a crisis situation (Rambo 1991) prior to conversion. However, not all those who converted experienced such a crisis. We can conclude, therefore, that its importance has been overemphasised in some studies. Similarly, seekership (Straus 1976) was identified in the stories of some individuals, particularly those who were seeking answers and new ways in which to interpret life. As some individuals came into contact with religion purely by chance, however, it cannot be regarded as necessary for conversion.

I have not had room here for a discussion of the speed of conversion. However, the accounts that have been presented imply that conversion was a gradual process through which religious beliefs came to be rendered plausible for the individual. After conversion, processes continued to work in the everyday lives of prisoners, legitimating their new found beliefs. The next chapter discusses these processes, assessing the role that religion had in the lives of prison converts as they continued to live within the prison environment and looked towards the future.

## Chapter Five

### Life as a Prison Convert.

This chapter looks at some of the processes which served to continually render Christianity a plausible way of life for each individual. Having identified many factors other than imprisonment as important in why individuals might initially define contact with religion as beneficial, many of the subsequent functions of religion described by prisoners were intimately bound up with the fact of imprisonment and their attempts to live successfully in prison, to sustain a positive self-identity for the duration of the sentence, and to think positively about the future.

The chapter is divided up into three sections. In the first I consider factors pertaining specifically to the prison environment, looking at the way in which involvement with Christianity helped prisoners to get over the monotony of the prison environment. I look at how it represented an important source of autonomy for the prisoner in an environment that otherwise allowed them little chance for self-determination, and the way in which various aspects of Christian belief and involvement with religion gave them a sense of purpose and a role, both in prison and in life more generally. In the second section I discuss the role of religion in inmates' reflections upon the future. I address the way in which involvement with Christianity appeared to provide a network of individuals with whom prisoners could become involved after release; the way in which Christian beliefs helped them to cope with the uncertainty about when, or if, they might be released; how Christianity was used as a way for individuals to assure themselves that they would not commit further crimes and go back to prison; and the role of Christianity in the goals and aspirations that inmates described.

The role that Christianity played in everyday life legitimated it as a successful way for the prisoner to organise their life and think about themselves. This was not the only way, however, in which beliefs and commitment to Christianity were maintained. The third section considers other ways in which commitment was maintained, and belief confirmed, for these converts. Throughout the chapter excerpts from the prisoners' stories are used to illustrate the way in which Christianity provided a meaningful framework through which to organise life.

## The Role of Religion in Prisoners' Lives.

### *Getting over the monotony of Prison Life.*

As I showed in the last chapter, many individuals initially attended chaplaincy activities as a way of filling time. Once they had converted and attended regularly, they still talked about having something purposeful to do with time as one of the benefits of being a Christian in prison. One of the benefits of getting involved with the chaplaincy was that everyday life there was different from the monotonous routine of the prison in general. It provided individuals with a taste of a 'normal' life, or at least, a life less removed from the outside world,

*Well, you meet all kind of different sorts of people you know and every day is different, it's not the same and err, my day consists of, the majority I'm here, except for going over for the old role check and things like that, but then, my life is basically coming up here, that's what's keeping me going...*

Prisoner 17

As stated in Chapter 3, prison life on the wings was very noisy, and inmates found it hard to get and peace and quiet or time to themselves. Attending activities in the prison chaplaincy gave inmates the opportunity to spend time in an environment where peace and quiet did exist,

*I like to come over here, it's interesting, not only the outside people who're coming in, you get a slowing down, it's fast on the wings, everybody's buzzing about, they want tea bags, they want this, they're short of money, they need this, and you come over here and the breaks are on again, you're slowed up, I like the slow life me...*

Prisoner 9

Two individuals had become involved in Quaker services. They defined the peace and quiet there as a particularly important aspect of their involvement with religion<sup>35</sup>,

*...I actually did like the, the tranquillity of the service itself which is usually an hour and a half but at the prison it was half an hour of silence and silence is quite a rare commodity I think in prison.*

Prisoner 4

The Church of England services were also experienced in this way by some,

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<sup>35</sup> Quaker services are made up of long periods of silence during which participants are encouraged to adopt a reflective attitude. At various points during the service those who feel it appropriate may share their thoughts with the group.

*...I get a sense of, not peace exactly, but there's a calmness there when I take communion.*

Prisoner 30

Reference was also made to the monotony of the conversation that could be found on the wings. In the chaplaincy there was the possibility of engaging in discussion of a different, perhaps more 'normal' nature,

*Yes I come here about three, four times a week, but I like the quietude, I like [Methodist Chaplain], in fact they're all, all right and I would go to church all me life and I even joined in with the Salvation Army last year for six month in here, it was that err, it was like a programme, but more for the discussion as well because I can't get a discussion I mean all we've got over there [wings] is the smack prices for the week you know sort of thing...*

Prisoner 9

Another way of getting over the monotony of prison life seemed to be to find an interest to pursue, much as people engage in hobbies in the outside world (Cohen and Taylor 1976). In prison, common activities of this nature were going to the gym or participating in education. For those I interviewed, Christianity seemed to have taken on this role. It became an interest, something not only to be participated in, but to be learned about in greater detail. Much time was spent in discussion about religious issues, reading the Bible and doing Bible courses.

In the last chapter I mentioned the need for prisoners to pursue activities within the prison in order to structure time. These activities helped to break time up into small parts and made it pass more quickly. According to some individuals, finding activities to engage in, and interests to pursue, became increasingly necessary with increasing freedom in the prison<sup>36</sup>,

*...here it's much more relaxed err, and initially, you've got a gym here that we can use err you can walk about quite freely into other pads because you get a key and everything err, but then the difficulty is because you've got a bit more freedom err kind of boredom seems to set in more because like err, because there's things you'd like to do that you can't do err and it's known at weekends, and at weekends certainly are the longest, the week days fly by because with us being able to work err, obviously wi' t' job I'm doing [chapel orderly] I have to work on an evening as well so I can actually split my day, basically you split days up into chunks err and that helps them pass but over a weekend err, Saturday nobody works so it's just Saturday's just Saturday it's like being back in a cat B prison*

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<sup>36</sup> Perhaps, following this, we might expect to find more converts in open prisons than closed. Perhaps being very tightly controlled is actually easier for inmates to cope with than being given a certain amount of restricted choice. Since all but one of the prisons I visited were open prisons I cannot comment on this point, but further research on this topic would be interesting.

*because seemingly you can walk about and maybe watch telly in t' TV lounge, you can't do anything other than that you know...*

Prisoner 6

Groups that were run in the chaplaincy gave inmates something to do in the evenings, and also a variety of activities from which to choose,

*... we have some quite good groups actually we've got, there's Bible study class on Monday evenings and then they're running t' Alpha course on Wednesdays err and they both always end up with discussion groups and I've found that's helped me...*

Prisoner 6

It was not only the activities that were provided, however, which helped with the structuring of time. Prisoner 5 described how religiously based activities structured his time very rigidly from the first moment he woke up in the morning,

*I've got a very set pattern of when I get up in the morning I do my readings, Now I've got Daily Bread, I read that one first, and I'm going through the Bible, well I go through the Bible every year so it might be three or four chapters, then I do Every Day with Jesus, then I do the UCB, then I do Faith and Victory, so I do all that before I even have my breakfast, and I've done that for the past twelve years.*

Prisoner 5

Once they had established an interest in religion, prison converts seemed to use the majority of their time pursuing this interest on their own as well as with others. Prisoner 25 underlined how it had become his main interest in prison,

*It's given me a big interest, I think you hear about it and you know about it and then you want to learn more about it, err it's quite, it's quite strange how it takes over, you don't realise, I have now since you've been talking about it but you don't realise how you're getting involved with it you know what I mean, it's quite strange isn't it...*

*I'm not a person for reading, never have been, but I'm not a person for telly here, you know I never watch telly hardly ever, but I find myself, anything to do with Christianity I usually pick it up now and read it, just to see what's wrote down basically about it.*

*... the only thing I can say in I've changed the way I spend my time is like I read parts of the Bible every day, err I've listened to the Bible on cassettes, well the New Testament anyway, err and I've done that Bible correspondence course, so I'm actually looking more into everything to do with the Bible and Christianity and like obviously I spend a lot of time,*

*well I spend every day here [chaplaincy] don't I, I'd sooner spend time here than I would over there [wings].*

Prisoner 25

Even though he did not usually like reading, when it came to Christianity he spent a lot of his time doing just that.

Involvement with religion shared some of the functions of other activities, for instance, many inmates talked about conversion as a learning process and referred not just to reading the Bible but to studying it,

*...I mean before I used to read it [Bible] but it was mainly oh I'm going to church this week or have a look at, you know think about looking at it you know but err, no I wouldn't say I really studied it before whereas now it's sort of I can't put it down.*

*Most of my time, spare time is spent writing letters or just reading the Bible err. Basically in prison all I've done is go to work or I've been trying to get as much studying as I could, you know I've tried to make time serve me rather than me serve time err, and chapel activities and writing letters.*

Prisoner 7

It is possible to say that, for most of these individuals, conversion involved a learning process. They recognised this as important, as something which they could feel good about and were doing for themselves,

*...I suppose what you do is it's a learning process, you actually find that what you, that in reality what you're doing is learning something more about the, you know a subject which has become increasingly important to you, certainly learning about Christianity per se has become absolutely crucial in the, in the understanding I think I've come to that I mentioned before about this aspect of, of forgiveness which I think you know is, is the crucial, is the crucial point.*

Prisoner 1

*...I don't want to start preaching to some people what I don't fully understand myself yet, maybes in time when I can understand the full meaning of everything you know, that's why, because we have Bible classes here once a week and that and I come over to Bible class and I'm asking questions all the time...*

Prisoner 16

*There is various things you can ask isn't there, there's most of the things that you do ask can always be answered... if you do keep going on asking and asking, you're learning all the time aren't you so that's quite good.*

Prisoner 24

One benefit of learning about Christianity was that, for those who had never studied anything in depth before, or who did not enjoy reading, it give them the feeling of bettering themselves, or improving some of their skills. This, in turn, gave them greater self esteem. Reading about a Christian subject gave Prisoner 25 a sense of achievement that he hadn't felt before,

*...I went in the telly room and [inmate] was watching a testimony thing about Jimmy Rice, so I sat watching that and I thought that's really good that, I was really impressed, do you know what I mean, and then, I don't read books ever, I've never read a book in me life, but I took that book of Jimmy Rice's back to me pad and I just couldn't put that down, I read it, within two days I'd read the book, and that, I was really pleased with that because you know honestly I'd never read a book, can't be bothered with books. So after reading that, that even brought me more into believing, I wanted to believe then, do you know what I mean, err and I'd already asked [chaplain] about the job here as a chapel orderly, I said if the job comes up can I have it and he says yeah...*

Prisoner 25

This sense of achievement made him more determined to continue his involvement with Christianity.

Studying the Bible and learning more about Christianity was also used as a way to keep the mind active throughout long sentences. Prisoner 10 was afraid that living in prison would adversely affect his mind, and used study as a form of defence against the prison environment,

*Well that's, there's another one because nobody visits me I haven't had any visits for over eleven years now and err by keeping in contact with these Christian fellowships and all that I've been getting information about outside more and all that lot, that's which err again has kept me active and err, at one stage when I first started my sentence I thought I'd be completely destroyed by the time I'd finished my sentence because I had nothing to depend on really, but err once I took the religion up, Christianity, I started studying, err keeping my mind active and all that...*

Prisoner 10

Involvement with one purposeful activity gave rise, for many, to a change of heart with regard to other purposeful activities within the prison, resulting in a complete change in their use of time,

*...when I was in prison last time I was err taking drugs err, going everything just really to get on everybody's wick you know what I mean, and now, when I look now I think coming to church, doing art on education, sports, I love doing sports now, that's one thing I've never been, ever liked doing, taking part in everything what happens in the prison now, it's just a whole turnaround for me, using time and not just letting it go err flow away you know what I mean, just fall away.*

Prisoner 14

Being involved with Christianity was seen as the impetus behind this change in attitude, and participation in religious activities continued to be their predominant interest. Most inmates were involved in the chaplaincy on a daily basis,

*...there's never a day I'm not up here you know what I mean, I'm always up here, I'm always involved with everything what goes on up here, all the groups err, everything like that.*

Prisoner 14

Religion had become the overriding interest and use of time for these inmates. It provided a hobby, and an opportunity to engage in learning that gave rise to the sense that they were bettering themselves. In this respect, involvement with religion can be likened to participation in education as a way of filling time within prison. The fact that Christianity became such an all encompassing interest, however, appears to be due to a feature identified by Prisoner 34,

*When the cell doors are locked I get out the Bible to learn more about Christianity, it gets rid of some of the boredom and gives me something which means something to do...*

Prisoner 34

The material that the inmates were reading and studying was meaningful to them as individuals. The Christian ideas and beliefs with which they became involved had something to say about the way in which they lived their lives, and an influence on the way they were able to define themselves. This helped to make all the activities associated with Christianity more meaningful and purposeful, making them attractive as the major use of time. It was in this respect that religious activities were different from other activities available within the prison such as education or sports. I will return to the subject of religion as purposeful activity again shortly.

Buying into the world of Christianity also gave inmates a considerable choice of activities to pursue. They could choose to participate in various different services, for instance, some chose to become involved with the Quakers and others attended the Catholic or Pentecostal services. Most did this alongside their attendance at Church of England services and daily chaplaincy activities. There were also a variety of other activities that could be chosen. Some of these were organised by the chaplain, others were solitary pursuits. Prisoner 5 managed to structure his whole day with the various

Bible notes and courses he followed, others attended discussion groups and Bible studies in the chaplaincy. The range of options available for the prison convert allowed them to construct a new life within the prison, choosing from a menu of religious alternatives. Prison chaplains can be regarded as facilitators in this process, organising activities within the chaplaincy and presenting to inmates the options from which they could choose.

The exercise of individual choice in this process helped inmates to get over some of the problems of living in prison. I will consider this in the following section.

### *Autonomy.*

Another way in which religion provided a way of resisting the monotony and restrictions of prison life was by allowing a degree of autonomy to be exercised in deciding whether or not to become involved in Christianity, and later in choosing between the different religious activities that were available. This seemed to be important for many prisoners since they stressed the autonomous nature of their decisions to convert. Many identified the lack of pressure to attend chaplaincy activities as important in their conversion,

*... [chaplain] was kind of relaxed about things and that, he was inviting me to the services and that, he wasnee making it look as if, or trying to make me feel as if I had to go to the services, and then he asked me to the Bible study one week and I said aye without even realising...*

Prisoner 24

*... the following Sunday I went to chapel again, thought well maybe there is something in it you know, there could be something err, then err, the good thing about the chaplaincy team in here is they, they don't try and convert you, they don't say oh God is this, God is that, they'll, they'll leave the option open to you, they'll say it's up to you, if you want to believe in God, if you want to believe in Christianity, believe in Jesus, then it's up to you, we can't say what you should do and we don't want you coming up and say oh yeah I believe because you said it, it's something you've got to feel inside now.*

Prisoner 23

*... he's a really, to be honest with, [chaplain], he's the best person I've ever met to do with the church, err he's so relaxed, he doesn't, you know he don't force anything down you, he'll you know, if you ask for a Bible he'll give you a Bible, if you ask for a telephone call or something you know if he can give it you he'll give you one, or if he, just advice he'll give it to you, and that's how it should be, I think everybody should come to God or come to believing in their own way, not fired down their throats you know what I mean.*

Prisoner 25

*...the first chaplain I encountered here, err I don't think other than his services in many, many hours of talking to him about my personal life and what I'd done and how it had brought me here, never mentioned God once. He err, I suppose, I don't think he even formed the role of a confessor, it was simply a case of someone there to listen to and offer his opinion as a person as I first perceived it on what I was saying to him. Now I would say that all his answers to the questions or the things I said to him were, were without doubt informed by his own personal faith, but what he did was never once even offer to ram God down my throat, in all, in the many hours that we spent together we never once prayed...*

Prisoner 1

The chaplains acted in such a way as to allow such autonomy of action and decision. This was highly valued by these individuals because it was the only way in which they could exercise such self-determination in the restrictive prison environment.

Once involved with the chaplaincy there appeared to be a continual chance for inmates to exercise autonomy in a way which was impossible in other sectors of prison life. Prisoners were included in decision making about events and activities, and were even encouraged to make recommendations about the way the chaplaincy was run. This was illustrated by Prisoner 22 who had collaborated with the chaplain on a number of new initiatives in the chaplaincy, and in the prison as a whole. Having his ideas taken seriously, and the opportunity to put them into practice, stood in direct opposition to the restrictions of the rest of the prison regime, and provided a measure of defence against such restrictions and the powerlessness and dehumanisation which went hand in hand with them,

*...there's a lot of things that I sort of like introduced with [chaplain]'s help so I think err, like what err, going round seeing the lads are all right, the little issue, doing the services and getting involved in the services, trying to book events, various group things like that so it's good.*

Prisoner 22

Christian beliefs helped to alleviate feelings of powerlessness and gave individuals some sense of control. This control was experienced not just in their own lives, but with regard to their role in the lives of people on the outside that they thought they were letting down, and in family situations where they felt they should be able to help. However, they did not directly reclaim any power for themselves. Their sense of control came from a belief in God that enabled them to ask him to intervene in these situations on their behalf. Thus, inmates could overcome the sense of impotence they felt whilst in prison by asking God to take care family members and their problems,

*...there's nothing I can do to influence things out there, that's the frustrating thing about prisons, I can't stop people hurting, I can't help them if they're hurting, the only way is I, as a Christian I can pray...*

Prisoner 8

*...everyday basically everyday there's been a prayer for me family err, all directly by name for him to watch over them and keep 'em safe while I'm here err, but also sort of saying thank you as well for t' love and support they've shown me...*

Prisoner 6

Prisoner 6 was able to say thank you for his family's support, even when he could not see or speak to them. Although powerless and restricted by prison rules, inmates were able to have some element of interaction with their family through interaction with God. Through prayer they were able to feel that they still had some influence on family life.

### ***Contact with the Outside World.***

Involvement with Christianity also gave those in prison a chance to have more direct contact with the outside world. In the chaplaincy, inmates had the chance to interact with religious people from outside the prison. As outlined in the last chapter, this was one of the characteristics of the chaplaincies that made them stand out from other prison departments. Prisoners were able, through interaction with these individuals, to keep in tune with what was going on outside the prison and experience some elements of outside life whilst on the inside.

Prisoner 18 argued that those in prison need to maintain contact with people from the outside because of the limited social life and topics of conversation which can be found inside. Such contact was also sought because during the course of a sentence, for various reasons, perhaps the length of a sentence or the distance of the prison from family and friends, visits seemed, for most, to decline,

*...any contact with the outside for me is a great help because it's not, you know you get tired of just seeing, if you were here every single day you can imagine being around the same people every single day and then you, you'd go off your wits wouldn't you, you need to see other people that, that aren't associated with prison at all to be able to cope, that's why, that's why it's a good idea to have visits from your friends and stuff which I hardly ever get now...*

Prisoner 18

Contact with the outside also gave prisoners a focus based in something other than just prison life. This prevented life from being lived solely in respect to the prison environment, and its rules and restrictions,

*...you've got contact with the outside world now because of the Christian fellowships and all that to talk and it keeps your mind active err, whereas at one stage you couldn't keep, all you had was no outside contact at all and you just talk about prison system all the time and err while you're thinking about prison system you also start hating the prison rules and regulations and you become a, say wild and trouble-maker person. Whereas you don't get time to do all that now...*

Prisoner 10

Prisoner 10 regarded contact with the outside world as helpful in mitigating some of the detrimental effects prison might otherwise have had on him. I will come back to this point later. However, whilst finding a focus outside the prison freed inmates in some ways from the restrictions of the prison environment, doing this also allowed them to live more successfully within that environment.

Although those serving shorter sentences lost some contact with friends and family, the prolonged lack of outside contacts was more marked for lifers, as there was no definite end point to their isolation. These individuals used contact with Christians, throughout their sentence, to build up a completely new network of support as contact with previous support networks ceased,

*...there aren't many lifers lucky enough to have kept contact with their families and outside people and err most of the lifers have built their contacts in outside worlds through Christian fellowships and Christianity really... and prison visitors throughout my sentence and err I've kept contact with everyone really and in church and all that so I've, more or less I've built up a completely new family so.*

Prisoner 10

Prisoner 5 found that involvement with Christianity led to a large numbers of visitors,

*I get visits quite regular, err mostly from brothers and sisters in the Lord... and then err I get ministers come up to see me quite regular and things like that.*

Prisoner 5

Some inmates even started attending chapel services specifically for the purpose of having contact with those from outside. In many prisons the chaplaincy was the only place where such contact was available,

*I just wanted to go along and, err perhaps join more in the fellowship I think that would probably you know, because at [previous prison] you had many people coming from outside prison so you could, still communicate with people from beyond the walls, whereas this prison doesn't encourage that at all...*

Prisoner 4

Contact with those from outside was regarded by inmates as contact with normality. It represented a chance, even if only for a short time, to transcend the limitations of the prison environment, the way in which they were defined by it, and the self-identity which it was possible to present and maintain there,

*I like the outside people who come in as well, you get a normal conversation and a bit of a laugh.*

Prisoner 9

*They were friendlier, a lot of visitors came in from outside and they were good, it was nice as I say it enabled me personally to have that normal contact with people albeit infrequently, err, which has always been important to me, that's why I associate with the chaplains a lot because they're good friends of mine, most of 'em, because you can have a conversation with the chaplains you know, I mean it's a terrible thing to say but conversations in prison revolve around drugs and crimes and sex and that's it you know nothing else, I mean it's odd.*

Prisoner 8

Just as important as maintaining contact with the outside world, for inmates, was creating a meaningful life *within* prison for the duration of their sentence. The following sections discuss how life in prison became purposeful as a result of both Christian beliefs and participation in chaplaincy activities.

### ***A Purpose in Life and a Rationale for Imprisonment.***

There were three ways in which involvement with Christianity enabled prison converts to construct a role for themselves and find a purpose in life within prison. Firstly, on an existential level as inmates looked for meaning and purpose in their lives as a whole, they were able to rationalise their imprisonment as a part of God's plan for their lives, and their role in God's plan for the world. Secondly, as they made decisions and organised day to day activities, they could refer to what God wanted them to do, finding value in their actions as a result of their belief that they were doing God's work. Thirdly, they found practical work to do within the prison. They were able to construct roles for themselves in the chaplaincy, or in private, that had religious meaning and through which they could value themselves. I will discuss each of these in turn.

A major feature of inmates' accounts of their imprisonment was the way in which they described it as part of a plan that God had for their lives. The majority had rationalised their situation by making reference to reasons why imprisonment had been good for them, and to God's achievements in their lives as a result of it. Conceptualising their imprisonment as part of God's plan allowed them to develop a positive view of their situation. They also developed a more positive view of themselves, the majority stating that they had become better people as a result of their experiences.

Having this view of both the situation and themselves enabled them to maintain a positive self-identity. The belief that God had intentionally brought them to this point gave them a sense of self-worth and the impression that there was a reason behind the events that had occurred in their lives. Thus, they turned what was a negative experience into a positive one.

For those with a religious faith, the idea of being caught up in God's plan for them located them within God's plan for the world as a whole, giving them a sense of purpose for their lives,

*I used to see myself as sort of I'm [name] you know and err, my life is mine and what I decide is what I want to do, and if it pleases me it pleases me, whereas now I feel I'm more, instead of being err, an engine say, I'm more just a little cog in God's overall plan and I know that God has plans for me and I go along with that instead of kicking up the traces and trying to run my life my way, I want to run my life God's way.*

Prisoner 7

Believing themselves to be part of God's overall plan for the world, and knowing that God had plans specifically for them, seemed more worthwhile than simply pursuing their own projects for their own sake. This led to a much increased sense of worth and purpose in life.

Many felt that God had brought them to prison to show them something about themselves, to prompt them to sort out their lives, or so that they would encounter Christianity. Prisoner 1 felt right from the beginning of his sentence that there was a purpose for it, especially since the nature of his crime, and the fact that it was a first offence, would not usually have led to imprisonment,

*...I genuinely believe that at that point God started to step in and speak to me and say now look come on I'm actually going to show you something you've never considered while you're in here and that's where I'm going to bring you to when you walk out that door...*

Prisoner 1

He believed that God had given him the chance, whilst in prison, to think about Christianity and to take it on for himself. This belief caused him to accept the sentence and to withstand the challenges imprisonment presented.

Some individuals rationalised their imprisonment as wholly the result of God's intervention in order to bring them to faith,

*...I think t'reason, I've said this to a few people, I think one of the reasons he put me in here was to make me believe in him more you know, I know it's a silly thing to say but I think while I've been here it's like his way of*

*like saying you know, you're going to join me kind of thing you're going to believe in me more.*

Prisoner 34

*I mean like I've gained, I mean though I'm saying that I should have never been in prison, I'm pleased for the experience, even where I shouldn't have been here I've been put here for a reason, and I think things are starting to even themselves up, I'm a better person for it, not got being in prison but for meeting the type of people, for meeting the Christians that I've met in prison, I'm a better person through it, everybody's noticed that, me family have noticed that.*

Prisoner 33

As discussed in the last chapter, interaction with Christians in the prison chaplaincy often led to increased self-esteem. The process through which self-esteem gradually grew for converts was assisted by the belief that God had picked them out, intervened directly in their lives, and had a purpose for them.

Many saw imprisonment as a opportunity, given by God, for them to analyse themselves and their lives, to consider the mistakes they had made, and to change how they would organise their lives in the future. Their conversion to Christianity was seen as part of a process of coming to a fuller understanding of what they wanted out of life,

*...it was an argument that got out of hand err, and I err lost control err, and I mean no matter what [victim] had done you know there, there's no way that she deserved to die err, you know this was one of the real deep problems of me accepting and coming to terms with err, I suppose in a way that when I was on the tablets err when I first came in, that did help because I was in such a fuddled state that I was sort of coming to terms with it err, in a way without the pain being err, perhaps it was the Lord's way of saying well, right, you've got to come to terms with it now, it's now time to come to terms with yourself, err but err, whichever way it was it was the Lord that did it not me...I mean I'm not saying I became a Christian because I'm in prison I think err the Lord must have thought the time was right and, I'm not one of these that's trying to say the Lord told me to kill [victim] you know, but I think that he's used the time, err for me.*

Prisoner 7

*I think it had already been pre-decided err, he wanted me to go to prison because it's been the kick up my backside to get myself in gear again... there's three ways that God answers your prayers, yes, maybe and no and err mine was probably yes but you're going to suffer for it first basically err, and, and it has, it's brought me right down to feet back on the ground time...*

Prisoner 6

*I know when I was out there I was looking for something, without a doubt I was looking for something, and I think with me coming here that has definitely, maybe it's God's way of showing me this is where I want to be you know, not in prison but the Christian side of things... There was something missing err, could never, I didn't, well I wasn't happy anyway, and I don't think I was, I don't know err, being here now, I think this is all a big lesson for me, I think like this is me last lesson of my life do you know what I mean to come proper err, and I think, well it has it really has helped me, ten and a half months I've done now and I've really opened my eyes up to what sort of life I do really want and where, which path I want to go down do you know what I mean err.*

Prisoner 25

It was easier for them to accept imprisonment with the sense that God was working through it in order to improve their lives. For instance, Prisoner 7 talked about the fact that he expected to be found guilty of manslaughter rather than murder. If that had been the case he would have had a considerably shorter sentence, but his belief that the sentence he received was part of a higher purpose enabled him to accept the life sentence he received,

*Well obviously it's what the Lord wanted.*

Prisoner 7

Converting to Christianity thus gave prisoners a new way in which to conceptualise their imprisonment. Rather than being something painful and negative, imprisonment came to represent God's intervention in their lives. They believed they had been picked out by God and brought to prison for a specific purpose, to re-evaluate their lives and themselves, to encounter Christianity, and to start to live life in a way which promised a better future. This belief not only gave them a sense that there were plausible reasons behind the events that had occurred in their lives, but gave them a purpose in life and enhanced self-esteem. Reference was also made to the way in which God's intervention and plan for individuals connected them to his plan for the world as a whole. The belief that by pursuing God's purpose for them in prison, they were also performing a role in this greater plan, gave rise to still greater self-esteem and sense of purpose in life. This set of beliefs located the reasons for their imprisonment, and the status they had as prisoners, outside both the prison regime and society in general, allowing them to cope with the restrictions of imprisonment and to accept their situation.

### ***Doing God's Work in Prison.***

Christian belief, as well as providing a rationale for imprisonment, also gave individuals a basis from which to make decisions about action on a day to day basis. Again, this involved the sense of having a role in God's plan. This gave purpose to life even within the restrictions and monotony of the prison environment.

For those with a Christian faith, decisions about what to do on a day to day basis, although restricted at one level by the context in which they lived, were not made with reference solely to the ins and outs of living in prison. Because of their belief that God had a plan for their lives which represented the best way to continue, many inmates made their decisions about what to do, and how to act, with reference to what they felt God wanted them to do in order to further this plan. In some way, this restored autonomy as inmates freely chose to defer to God's desires for them rather than rooting their actions in the restrictive rules and regulations of the prison<sup>37</sup>.

Action was therefore no longer pursued merely for personal gain or because it was required by the institution, its purpose became altogether different,

*...I think that it becomes your way of life and err everything you do seems to have a purpose err, you're not doing it for yourself, you're doing it for the praise of God...*

Prisoner 7

Dealing with decisions about action in this way allowed prisoners a sense that they were above the regime of the prison, empowering themselves by organising life with reference to a completely different world view. This was demonstrated by the way that Prisoner 22 talked about his day to day life,

*... in me quiet times I say right Lord what do you want me to do today, and sometimes you know I feel as though he says do this or do that and sometimes I feel as though he says right just go on with what you normally do... so I go and do whatever he wants me to. But before I used to get the prison regime you know, well I refused to be part of the prison regime, I'm more free inside now than I ever was on the out, err and I'll stand there and say that in a service and that guys'll, he's off his head 'im, but they've got to understand where I'm coming from, but I try and revolve me days round God.*

Prisoner 22

It seems that even following the prison regime could become liberating if the reason for doing it was changed. Following prison rules because it was required of prisoners may have felt restrictive and disempowering, but following them because such action was God's will, and furthered his plan, felt entirely different. In this way, change in the motivation for action functioned to allow prisoners to live more successfully within the prison environment. Having a different source of motivation for action was continually justified for Prisoner 22 in the way he interpreted the events that happened during the day, using his new Christian scheme of interpretation. I asked him whether he organised his time in relation to points of reference inside or outside the prison,

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<sup>37</sup> For further elucidation of this definition of autonomy, see Dworkin (1988).

*I organise now, yeah it has changed as I've gone on, I now organise my time on what God wants me to do, I have a quiet time in a morning, we don't get unlocked while quarter past eight in the morning so I get an early morning call at seven o' clock, now normally I'm up at half past six right, so I get up at half past six and I just have my quiet time, bit of time with God and I say right, what do you want me to do today, it's like... the guy that I err, [chaplain] and me have been talking to and just made a commitment the other day, well like I woke up one morning, I says I really want to share the gospel with someone today, you know I really want to share it with someone, this was during my quiet time so like, now I'd gone all morning and I hadn't seen anybody and I'm really praying a lot and saying look Lord you know I really feel as though I want to do this and I really feel as though you want to do it, so [inmate] came into me pad, he called me into his pad, I mean he didn't, I didn't ask him, he says [name] I want to talk to you about your faith and I want to, and I'm like that you know, just blowed me away...*

Prisoner 22

The conclusion that can be drawn here is that for those who had a religious faith, time and activity could be organised with reference to something that was neither of the outside nor of the inside: it was applicable in both worlds. This was a good way for the prisoner to deal with the problem of which world to identify with, or with the feeling of being split between the two. It would not be beneficial to go through a prison sentence wholly identifying with the outside world, as it makes the time inside harder to get through, and yet wholly identifying with the prison world brings with it a fear of institutionalisation and deterioration (Flanagan 1982, Schmid and Jones 1991, Sapsford 1978, 1983). Adopting religion as the master scheme of reference, through which life was organised and self defined, allowed self-identity to be kept constant whether the prisoner was inside or outside the prison. There was no longer the problem of an individual seeing themselves differently because they were in prison and must abide by prison rules, because the only rules which were important were God's rules. The primary way in which individuals identified themselves was as 'Christian', and self-identity was maintained in interaction with God, and with others who shared the same view of the world.

Time was also structured in terms of 'doing God's work', and the purpose and motivation for action was the same inside as it might have been if these individuals were released. Inmates could therefore project self-identity into the future, envisaging themselves and organising their lives outside using the same frameworks they used inside the prison.

The concept of 'doing God's work' within the prison structured the everyday activity of inmates, giving it purpose and meaning, where much prison activity was otherwise meaningless. Having this rationale and motivation for everyday activity gave inmates a sense of esteem and importance, a feeling that even though they were in prison they were engaging in worthwhile activity. This was in contrast to inmates pre-

conversion feelings of being removed from reality and unable to have any influence on the world,

*Makes it bearable and you know so I say the thought that I'm just in here and the Lord can use me while I'm already, still in prison, that gives me a great feeling that the Lord can work through me even though I'm in prison ... everyday life in here, it's well it just helps me to get through the day err, as I say I don't see this as a prison err, just as a training ground for God's work and if it's God's will that I'm in here then I don't argue with that I just get on with it, and it's surprising err, the number of lads that say how do you cope, and we sit down and talk and I tell them about the Lord... err not by me going to preach to them or trying to convert them but it's in the way I am in prison and how I cope and they think it's great and they want a bit of it you know so, in that sense I'm doing God's work.*

Prisoner 7

The role that these individuals had found doing God's work transcended the gap between inside and outside and to some extent 'normalised' the experience of being in prison. Inmates were able to orient themselves to life as a whole rather than merely towards getting through their time in prison. I will return to this point later in the chapter.

In addition to organising everyday activity with reference to God, some individuals had taken on much more specific roles derived from their involvement with Christianity. Prisoner 5, for instance, believed that he had a particular 'calling' from God. Much of his everyday activity was organised in relation to this,

*...I became an ordained minister of ... college, and now I've actually got my license which is renewed every year, we pay five pound to have our license renewed every year and it's actually got a picture of me and it says the Reverend [name] ... err, and they see me as an evangelist, the Methodists see me as a pastor teacher, err other people see me as a preacher, I've actually been called to be a preacher teacher right, err, it's one of the most difficult ministries to have because the responsibility's on your shoulders all the time...*

*Most of my time is spent reading my word, err word of God and studying, Bible studies err, I still do a bit of painting occasionally, I've actually started playing scrabble the last couple of months err, but you know most of my time is just spent doing the Lord's will. I spend a lot of time in the chapel here on my own because I believe this is where my mind is being renewed, I've got to renew my mind, God's renewed my spirit, it's down to me to renew my mind and change my attitudes through the renewing of my mind and this is what we've got to do, it's not something that's done over night you have to work at it.*

Prisoner 5

Decision making in everyday life was also achieved using role models, as discussed in the last chapter. The role model most often used in this respect was Jesus himself,

*Decisions like that are very easy now err, I refer to what I believe Christ would have done or, some of the apostles...*

Prisoner 8

A religious frame of reference was therefore able to provide a rationale for all decision making and activity during the course of life in prison. It provided a way of existing inside the prison which was purposeful and meaningful, constructing imprisonment not just as punishment or as time which must be served, but as an arena for the pursuit of God's work.

### ***Practical Roles for Converts.***

The third way in which involvement with religion provided prisoners with a role, and source of purposeful activity within the prison, was through the practical opportunities that it afforded them.

Virtually all those who were interviewed had at some time been chapel orderly or had some other role within the prison chaplaincy. In open prisons (category C and D) prisoners were required to do a job, much as they would on the outside. The chance to work in the chaplaincy provided Christians with a more meaningful source of work than other jobs such as working in the laundry, kitchen or gardens. The fact that there was usually only one chapel orderly also made the holder of the post feel particularly important or valued by the chaplain. This was the case for both Prisoner 17 and Prisoner 33 who felt that the chaplain had chosen them and gone out of his way to enable, or persuade, them to do the job,

*... he's gone do you want the chapel orderlies job, I went you've got to be joking, no seriously, your name's been put forward, and I said well listen I says I've started getting into church a bit but I'm not that confident, listen all you've got to do is hoover up and make the teas and get things sorted out for the service, and I've gone aye, aye go on then I'll do it, and then I was getting on well with everybody, I had freedom of the jail, wander where I want and stuff...*

Prisoner 33

*... he does marvellous things in a way because I'm on C wing and there's not much goes on there and it was grand in a way because [chaplain] got me on with the governor, past the security, everything to get this job and that's a big achievement...*

Prisoner 17

Both of these individuals felt that they had been given trusted positions and were valued. Their work was also meaningful to them as it promoted further involvement with the chaplaincy and facilitated activities which were important to them.

The practical activity in which some converts engaged, whilst being connected to the chaplaincy, was a result of roles they had constructed for themselves. Prisoner 5 and Prisoner 22 both gave examples of the way in which they had constructed such roles. The process started whilst they were chapel orderlies at their previous prisons,

*...I became his orderly up there and at one stage he actually had me as his secretary answering the telephones and things like that, he said if I'm not here [name] he said you answer it.*

Prisoner 5

*...I ended up getting the chapel orderly's job, so I was up here most of the time and then I started helping out like organising the events, doing [chaplain]'s paperwork, things like that, and then I started taking a couple of services, first of all just helping [chaplain] and then I started taking me own...*

Prisoner 22

Having had a role within the chaplaincy, when they no longer had an official role they were able to construct one for themselves based around the work they had done before. The roles they constructed were sanctioned by the chaplains and made them both feel needed and useful, giving them purposeful and meaningful activity in which to engage. It is necessary to quote at length from Prisoner 22 in order to appreciate the extent of the role he had constructed for himself,

*Right my time, typical week for you right, Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings we have a prayer meeting at half past eight in the morning right, Monday morning there's the Alpha course so I've got to get things set up for that, I've also got to see [chaplain] to see if there's any promotion that needs doing for the week, we also run a magazine called the Little Issue right, which is, we put that together. Monday afternoon I generally do administration things, Monday night I try and get off, it's me one night that I get off. Right, Tuesday is me study day, if I'm maybe planning a service or I'm doing Faith and Worship local preachers training course, so I do a bit on that, along with other courses on other things. I also go round the wings, check that, this is an ongoing thing every day, go round the wings, check that the guys are all right, see if they need any help with anything, letter writing, if they just want to have a chat with someone or if they need to see a member of the chapel, if they want a radio, just general sort of stuff like that, just check the guys are all right. Tuesday night we normally have an event on so if I aren't doing the sound for it, because I'm sound man and all that lot, I do all the PA for bands all that lot, lighting, the full lot, so I try and organise that and then hopefully*

*try and book other events on Tuesday night you know talking to peoplesaying can you come later or something. Wednesday morning we have another prayer meeting, then we have Bible study, and then Wednesday afternoon is Bible study for A unit which is the vulnerable prisoners, sex offenders, that lot, so if they need it, I help out with that, if not I help out on the education because I'm actually on the education wing as well and I'm actually more qualified than the computer teacher in there, and know more... so I end up having to run that computer room, so if there's any problems with computers I have to go back and sort 'em out which is a right nightmare. Wednesday night I have a couple of Christian friends that come in and they maybe come round the prison or they come up here, so we just sit down and have a bit of fellowship, bit of a chat. Thursday, Thursday morning I just generally go round the wings, check that everything's all right err, we have bang up early on Thursday morning so I try and do a little bit more study then, because you normally get banged up at quarter past twelve, but on a Thursday you get banged up at eleven o' clock because they have a meeting on, so I try and do a little bit of study then. Thursday afternoon is like trying to get the Little Issue done, a bit on that maybe, and Thursday night I try and get off if we haven't got an event on because sometimes we may have an event on. Friday morning we have another prayer meeting and that we have [member of chaplaincy team]'s group which starts on Friday morning, which is just general come over, talk about anything you want... we talk about anything but religion always comes up so it's a good time to just witness a little bit and you know just try and get alongside the lads and just help 'em out. Friday afternoon the Methodist minister comes in so I like to have a chat with him, just generally get alongside him, and we have the Muslim prayers up here so we try and accommodate for that. Friday night [name] may stay, which is another member of the chaplaincy, so I normally have one of 'em for dinner on Friday, some time during the week I'll have a member of the chaplaincy over for dinner, and then Saturday I manage to get off with a little bit of luck, never works out, I never manage it but, it's actually supposed to be my day off, and then Sunday morning I have a bit of praise and worship on the wing with the lads, just try and get round a little bit, and then a service on a Sunday afternoon for the open side and then a service on the night for A unit and sort of like that's my week... and in between that I have to do listeners, I have to do seeing the guys on the wing plus a prayer meeting on the night on the wing plus various other bits and fit me gym in and have visits and things like that.*

Prisoner 22

The role and routine described here resembles the way in which life and work are conducted on the outside. Privileges were attained and prison rules avoided, for instance, he was allowed to eat in the chaplaincy with visitors from outside. In fact, the role he presented in this account made him appear more like a staff member than a prisoner.

The role that he constructed enabled him to develop a self-identity in which he could identify himself as part of the chaplaincy team, thus getting away from the restrictions placed on self-identity in the prison environment,

*Yeah well right we actually have a lot of visitors because what I try and do is like, I'll just check the diary and I can tell you, it's amazing having to use a diary in here, right yeah... the first Sunday I try and get the inmates to do it, the second Sunday I try and get [chaplain] to do it, third Sunday I try and get a visitor, now we have various groups that come in that do Tuesday night events, or [member of chaplaincy team] comes in on a Friday, different teams come in at different times you know all that lot so I'd ask them if they come in to do a service, so they'd normally take like third week, and then on forth week try and get a joint one between me and [chaplain] or if we had a special event on you know try and get them to do something like that, so.*

Prisoner 22

He filled his time to such an extent that he had to use a diary, again indicative of the construction of a role that 'normalised' the prison experience. This role afforded him a great deal of status, and a feeling of power and self-determination which might otherwise have been missing in his experience of prison. He also had set jobs to do within the chaplaincy, which led to feelings importance and value both there and in the prison as a whole. This is particularly demonstrated in the self-appointed task of checking on other prisoners.

Prisoner 22 was not alone in using religion, and involvement with the chaplaincy, as a basis from which to construct himself a role. Prisoner 5's account also included evidence of role-making in order to provide purposeful and meaningful activity, and a sense of importance within the prison. As stated previously, he had become ordained as a minister whilst in prison, and felt that he was called by God in a special way. From the outset, people urging him to do take this type of role made him feel important,

*...so [Methodist minister]'s come and within a couple of weeks he said it's about time for you to start this Methodist lay preachers course isn't it? ...I said no I said I haven't got any money, he said it's already been paid for it's, in fact he said it's on it's way, he said it'll be here next week. I went corr leave it out, so I ended up studying for the Methodist lay preachers err which is a two year course and I passed that including being taken from [prison] to [different prison] to take the Sunday service and preach there and be judged and all that...*

Prisoner 5

Although he was in prison serving a life sentence, he acted out the role of minister, taking on responsibilities in the chaplaincy much as a staff member would do,

*...he [chaplain] keeps on dropping hints you know if I want to preach I've got to ask him you know drop hints to him... a couple of weeks back err, [Methodist chaplain] suddenly asked me if I'd take the Bible study group because he wasn't in that night, and now whenever he's away he wants me to take the Bible study, so that's the Lord so he's been faithful to me err you know...*

Prisoner 5

Prisoner 32 had found a role within the chaplaincy playing the saxophone at chapel services. He viewed this not just as a practical role, but one which was meaningful because it allowed him to express his faith. It was also something for which he was appreciated, and through which he was able to build a sense of positive self-regard,

*...I play saxophone now and I'm told that people really enjoy listening to me play the saxophone in chapel, I play lots of hymns and some sort of, some are not hymns but they're kind of, I mean I play things like Wonderful World, Louis Armstrong, I play err, Walking in the Air from the Snowman, that kind of stuff on the soprano sax, and I actually speak through my sax, when I'm playing it I'm communicating err, I can pray through it, I play some slow kind of err chorus and it's my prayer and err, I suppose I mean, you know they talk about people talking in tongues you know, that kind of personal, well my music feels like that, and again I'm sure that, that would never have happened, that's all part of this journey of ministry, of discovery.*

Prisoner 32

He linked the purpose which this practical activity gave him with the higher purpose and role that he felt he had in God's plan,

*I'm firmly convinced that everything I do when it comes to my own personal ministry, my music, my chapel activities, is in God's hands you know because I put it in God's hands and say look you know if you want me to do this then you'll have to show me what you want me to do, and I believe that I just follow what he wants me to do, because it might sound a strange analogy but I mean my saxophone's in that back room there, one of them, and I've got the other one in my cell, and if you, if I open the box and you look at it, I can tell you that I can't play one of those things because they're far too complicated and, and all the rest of it, err I've tried before. Now, but I've never tried to play one to play kind of musical ministry of faith before, and I can play one now, I can play it reasonably well now, that tells me something about why I'm here.*

Prisoner 32

Like others, this role within the chaplaincy afforded him certain privileges and status as a team member. It seemed to put him on an equal footing with those who visited the prison to help with chaplaincy activities,

*...the chaplaincy team here involves you know people, volunteers, part time chaplaincy team members and I have a lot to do with them you know, [volunteer] for example does music with us and I see her once, twice, three times a week rehearsing music, and we sit and chat and we will pray together and maybe read the Bible together and then we'll practice some music and we'll have a cup of tea you know, so it's really nice, it's a very family kind of atmosphere.*

Prisoner 32

These roles within the chaplaincy provided a source of meaningful activity for prisoners which took up most of their time, in much the same way as work and hobbies might on the outside,

*...that's the way I like to do it, I just keep myself busy, I'm in prison so, yeah you've took away me freedom but there's no point why I should sit around on me backside getting fat and just doing nothing, because that's what you'll end up doing, so, but I enjoy it...*

Prisoner 22

*...at times there's not enough hours in the day, you know I mean it might sound silly in prison that you've not got enough time but err at times I find that I could do with another couple of hours in the day.*

Prisoner 7

Like participation in chaplaincy activities more generally, this type of activity helped individuals to mark time during the prison day, and helped their time in prison pass more quickly. These practical activities, combined with the social activities organised by the chaplains in the evenings, gave prisoners a focus to life in prison. The chaplaincy also provided a venue where inmates could spend time, an alternative to the wings where time was unstructured and available activities were limited.

It did not appear necessary, however, for the chaplaincy to be the sole focus of religiously oriented activity. Several inmates made reference to practical roles they had constructed for themselves that were independent of involvement with the prison chaplaincy. Such roles spanned the inside/outside divide. They provide yet more examples of the way in which Christian prisoners were able to feel that they were exerting an influence outside the prison walls, that they had not been stripped of every possible social role, and still had a degree of autonomy. Both Prisoner 5 and Prisoner 7 constructed pastoral roles for themselves, playing a part in conversions and supporting others through letter writing,

*I write between twenty and thirty letters a week, different people, different prisons, they writing to me about, most of 'em, believe it or not, are Christian sisters err, you know, they've actually become very close and personal friends and if they've got a problem they're actually writing to me and saying [name] how do I sort this problem out? So it can be quite hectic that way, where before I used to hate women and only use 'em for one thing, God has actually turned it around the opposite way and said you know you help them, you be to them the big brother, you be to them the father figure, you be to them one that they can come up to, sling your arms round...*

Prisoner 5

*...one of the things is I've been helping to convert people err and that's happened on a few occasions in prison but it's happened more so outside... I've got a number of pen-friends err, especially in Cuba, err don't ask me why but I've got a lot in Cuba and when they've written to me the first letter I've written back to them, I've told them I'm in prison, and what I'm in for, and how long I'm doing, and then they've, I think there's only three that's never written back out of the dozens that I've had. And over a period of months they've nearly all said along the same lines that err, they continued to write to me because I was in prison and I was doing a long time and they wanted to cheer me up and they look forward to me letters because I cheer them up, how did I manage it, so it left the door, it opened the door to tell them about Christ and err, of the what, it must be about twenty two, twenty three that I write to regularly now in Cuba, they've all come to know the Lord, and it's really helpful...*

Prisoner 7

Such activities were recognised and officially sanctioned by chaplains, and roles that originally began in the prison chaplaincies became roles in the Christian community more generally:-

*I've been used by the Lord a few times to talk to people about Jesus and I've seen them enter the Kingdom of God err, you know so this is what happens you know err, you, you just, [chaplain] here's encouraging me, he doesn't realise it but I actually told him the other week that you know he's got the gift of encouragement because he does encourage people...*

Prisoner 5

In this section, I have shown that there were various ways in which, through involvement with religion, those in prison were able to construct roles for themselves that gave both a sense of purpose during imprisonment and practical activities in which to engage in the otherwise monotonous prison environment. Inmates also derived a sense of importance within the prison, and a sense of self-esteem and self-determination, through such activities. There were very few opportunities for purposeful activity within the prison, particularly activity which gave such a sense of self-worth, education being a

notable exception. It is arguable, however, that involvement with religion provided the only arena within the prison in which such a comprehensive role could be constructed.

The roles that prisoners constructed for themselves, their belief that God had a plan for their lives, and the sense of purpose that they derived from Christianity also helped prisoners to cope with uncertainties about when they would be released. This next section discusses how this occurred.

### *Uncertainty about the Future.*

A major problem for those in prison, especially those serving life sentences, was the uncertainty about when, or if, they would be released. Those serving determinate length sentences had an idea of how long they would serve, but the exact release date was unknown and depended on decisions made by anonymous others. Those serving life sentences had been given a tariff when they were sentenced, but they observed that, for most lifers, this rarely corresponded to the actual amount of time served. So although those serving determinate length sentences knew the maximum amount of time they had to serve and could organise themselves with reference to that, those serving life sentences did not know from year to year how long they had left,

*...I thought you know thirty years and I might be out you know that sort of thing, you know it was only after a number of years that I realised there was ninety nine years on a life sentence, and coming to that understanding that ninety nine years is what you've got to do, makes it much easier to do it. Daft as it may sound, that can make me say well ninety nine years that's my sentence, if I get out before that great, but that's what I've got to keep my heart on, it's a ninety nine year sentence, it's not a ten year, it's not a fifteen year, and they can give you these tariffs of sixteen years which, my tariff's sixteen years, and it's like a carrot you know if you do well you're going to be out on this, and that's a load of utter and complete rubbish as well because very few people I've ever met have got out near their tariff, so you know there's err, I found that was the easiest for me, once I grasped hold of the concept that it was a ninety nine year sentence then I could take each day as it comes...*

Prisoner 5

As demonstrated in the previous three sections, involvement with religion allowed prisoners who had come to this realisation to construct a life within the prison in which they had a positive and meaningful role, a role which would also be applicable to life on the outside if they were, at some time, to be released. In this section I will consider the way in which a religious frame of reference also helped to alleviate anxieties about the timing of release.

Most prisoners had a feeling that God was directing their lives, they presented evidence that this had happened in the past,

*... he's putting me, you know onto the right path really...*

Prisoner 10

*...I think I've been guided to the prisons where I could get the right help and you know I suppose if I've asked the Lord, I know I've not been able to do it myself so he's guided into the ways of doing it.*

Prisoner 7

Prisoner 22 felt that God had intervened in the whole of his prison career so far,

*Well that's where err, you see God at hand again in my life. I was charged with two counts of armed robbery, one on a post office, one on a garage, forty three charges for cheque book fraud, possession of fire arm and conspiracy right, that's what I was charged with and that's what I'm serving this sentence for. Now, God honoured me through that... I ended up in a YP jail at first, so I'm going through the system, I've gone through a magistrates court, I've now ended up in crown court right, but in between there I've been transferred down here which was like an answer to prayer because the jail that I was in, I was due to go to [name of prison] jail right, which is cat B dispersal, right dispersal prisons are the worst prisons you can ever imagine, err all the trouble makers, all the arseholes, pratts, cowboys, the lot end up in 'em, so I was looking like I was ending up in there but God blessed me by getting me down here... Friday the 1<sup>st</sup> of December '95 and that was pleas and directions, now that's for me to turn round and say right, I'm going guilty, right you'll need this report off probation, you'll need that report off psychiatrists and all this lot because they needed to understand a bit more about me past background, problem was the judge turned round to me and says Mr [name], we haven't got no reports for you, do you want me to sentence you? It don't happen, it don't happen, it just don't happen right, so I says yeah right fair enough, so he says right on the armed robbery on the post office I'll give you six years, on the armed robbery on the garage I'll give you four years and for the check book fraud we'll just give you nothing, we'll take it into consideration. So like the Old Bill were trying to get me eighteen years right, that's what the Old Bill were trying to get me was eighteen years plus right, they weren't happy, they were absolutely furious, right so I come back here and I'm like real happy you know God's honoured me...*

Prisoner 22

A belief that God was intervening in their prison career on their behalf, and with their best interests at heart, allowed these prisoners a way out of the feelings of powerlessness and dehumanisation which resulted from knowing that bureaucrats at the Home Office, or within the prison, had sole responsibility for making decisions about their lives. The anxiety provoked by the knowledge that the most important decisions about their lives

would be made by people who perhaps knew little about them, was alleviated by their belief that God's plan was being worked out through the outcomes of such decisions. Consequently, it appeared that the prison authorities no longer had total control over their lives,

*I've accepted the Lord and I know that he will open the gate for me when he knows the time is right, and it don't matter what the Home Office say of what the prison Governor says but when the Lord knows it's right he will open the gate and he won't keep me in.*

Prisoner 7

*...now I feel a lot happier I mean the officers and the people who is dealing with my paperworks and reports and all that, no matter what they're going to do, I know I've got trust in the Lord that he will guide them onto the right paths whatever they're doing.*

Prisoner 10

The belief that God had a plan for their lives, therefore, not only gave inmates a rationale for their imprisonment, but also helped them to accept the length of their sentence and the uncertainty about when they would be released. The inmates rationalised the length of their stay in prison with reference to God's will, work they could do for God whilst in prison, and various goals that they had been sent there to achieve,

*Well the way I look at it is, is the Lord's making use of me so obviously he's got work for me to do while I'm in here, and err who am I to argue with him, I just accept it and I know that when he knows the time is right he will open the gate for me...*

Prisoner 7

*... it's nice to look forward to the time I can get out but err I don't sort of sit brooding thinking well I should have been out twelve months ago and, or whatever you know, no I'm err, I know that the Lord's got a reason to keep me here, err he's got some work for me to do either on myself or with somebody else... and to make the best use of it [time] as I can and hopefully he will guide me and it will not just be for my benefit but for his glory as well.*

Prisoner 7

*I should have been released twelve years ago after I'd been to the judge, but err I'm here for a reason what the Lord wants me to be here and I'll be here for as long as he wants me to be here for, there's a reason for it...*

Prisoner 10

Even for those with fixed length sentences, a belief that God would allow them to be released when the time was right alleviated any anxiety about forthcoming parole boards

and their outcomes. It allowed them to get on with life in prison without fixing their hopes on a date for release,

*I'm due out next year right, now I could get out this year, I'm due for my parole this year right, but I've given that to God, you know if you want me out, you get me out, if you want me in, you keep me in.*

Prisoner 22

The belief that God would provide for individuals upon release also served to alleviate fears and anxieties about life after imprisonment. Many had previously worried about what would happen, and where they would go, after release. They were able to eradicate this fear because of the belief that God would be with them and would provide for their needs. The future, following conversion, was perceived optimistically,

*I've got something to work towards, I mean I might have nothing yet but err, I know that if I got my hands and said to God look err, I'm out next week, I've got absolutely, what am I going to do, I know for a fact something would happen because somebody would say well there's a parole hostel here or there's a B and B that's got a bed there for the night, might only be for the one night, but something's come up from then, I've got complete trust in him, I know he's, I know he's there for me.*

Prisoner 23

Lastly, as I said in the previous section, the role that some of these individuals had constructed for themselves 'doing God's work' was defined by them as equally important and plausible both inside and outside prison. It therefore seemed not to matter when, or even if, they were released. They had constructed a life that, if released, could be continued and yet if never released would continue to give them meaning and purpose,

*If, even if they said to me I'd never be released tomorrow I'd still be happy because to me prison is a mission field anyway, you know...*

Prisoner 5

*[I have] Freedom and peace you know err, being set free and having the peace to stay peaceful and accept what's going on... Not just in here but for my whole life.*

Prisoner 7

*...keep me in jail for the rest of me life, as long as Christ's with me they can keep me in jail all me life, I don't give a monkeys, don't worry about it whatsoever...*

Prisoner 33

For these Christian prisoners, then, a belief in the intervention of God in their lives alleviated the anxiety surrounding the uncertainty of a release date. In fact, for some, the combination of factors I have discussed, such as a belief in God having a plan

for their lives, and the construction of a role that was equally valid and meaningful both inside and outside the prison, led to life having the same meaning inside prison as it would on the outside. Especially in the case of those serving life sentences, there was no longer a need to know that release would occur in order to be able to project themselves into the future. Although the life sentence effectively cut off inmates' ability to plan a future on the outside, it seems that becoming a Christian in prison, whilst not actually removing the uncertainty surrounding release, reinstated the ability of lifers to project self-identity into the future. Their involvement with Christianity provided reassurance that release would occur if the time was right, a meaningful role that could be developed whilst in the prison for use outside at a later date, and purpose in life wherever it was lived.

I have discussed a variety of ways in which conversion to Christianity helped prisoners in their everyday lives in prison. The stories told by inmates also demonstrated that involvement with Christianity was meaningful to them in their consideration of the future and their possible lives outside. I will now consider the way in which Christianity was incorporated in inmates accounts of their aspirations for the future and possible lives after imprisonment.

### **Thinking about the Future: The Role of Religion for Prisoners and Ex-Prisoners.**

In this section I look at the role that religion played for inmates in their consideration of life after release and in planning for the future. The problems they anticipated facing in the future were bound up with the fact that they had committed crimes and served prison sentences. Involvement with Christianity gave them ways of thinking positively about the future. It provided a group of people who, they anticipated, would accept them regardless of their prison history. It also gave them ways of organising life, and thinking about themselves, that might prevent the continuation of their criminal career and further imprisonment. In addition, it provided a basis from which goals for the future could be formulated.

#### ***Ready Made Group Membership and Relationships.***

A practical way in which involvement with Christianity appeared, to inmates, to provide for release was in the availability of a Christian network in which they could become involved, wherever they were. Some provided evidence of the use of such a network within the prison environment as they transferred between different prisons,

*I think it's the support of other prisoner, well Christian prisoners err, it's a great upheaval moving from one prison to another and I know that whichever prison I go to, that within sort of hours of getting there I can*

*have friends by just going to the church and meeting other Christians who'll be certain to welcome, whereas err, there's other lads that come and it takes them weeks and week and weeks to settle down... for me there'll be the group straight away.*

Prisoner 7

*There's a group that you can be part of, part of a little community within a community, because you know that they'll be there.*

Prisoner 29

It seems that having a religious faith in common constituted something on which friendships could be based on arrival at a new prison. Their faith was something which differentiated them from the rest of the prison population, representing a certain way of organising life in the prison environment. These features gave individuals a sense of identification with the Christian group whichever prison they were transferred to. As discussed in the previous chapter, many inmates regarded relationships with other Christians as deeper and more genuine than those which could be formed with other people, and thus involvement with a Christian group was sought at each new prison.

The experience of group membership within the prison environment led to a perception that on release there would also be a group of Christians that the ex-prisoner could join, a set of ready-made friends. Inmates also knew that this could become a reality through the intervention of the chaplain on their behalf,

*... [chaplain] will try and help you, if you go and see him before you get out he'll get you plugged into a church you know around your area, he'll try and get 'em up here to come and see you before you get out so that you know a couple of faces, so that you don't feel so alone and isolated when you get out.*

Prisoner 22

Ties were often formed with groups on the outside through deliberate chaplaincy intervention, but also formed naturally through regular interaction with chaplaincy volunteers. Such interaction culminated, for some, in invitations to join a particular church after release. For example, Prisoner 14 was invited to join one of the churches who regularly took services within the prison,

*... this lady who come in and that, who come in with her church and that goes yeah you can be accepted to our church which I'm, that's, I think that's the best thing I'm going to be looking forward to when I get out...*

Such groups were regarded, in some cases, as a replacement for family ties that had been lost. Joining the Quakers had this function for Prisoner 9, and joining them after release had become one of the main goals in his life,

*This is what I was looking for, this was the niche that I was going in, this was what I wanted and when I went out I was going to go in the Quakers.*

*...now me mother's dead and me father's in America and I'd consider them [Quakers] me family...*

*I mean there's no Quaker church here you know but when I go back down south, I'm going home, that's how I see it, looking forward to getting back down there, and I know I'm going where I belong.*

Prisoner 9

He anticipated, as a result of his observations and conversations with the Quakers, that group membership would engender the kind of support he might need when leaving prison,

*Some of them didn't have much money but they were happy and they help each other I mean one lass she got all her house wallpapered off one, and one was unemployed and they all piled food round and it's like a commun, a small community and I was over the moon that they'd, it pulled me in, into this community, it was like a family.*

Prisoner 9

These readily available Christian groups, in which ex-prisoners could get involved, also represented the chance for them to break away from old friends with whom they got into trouble, whilst still being able to identify themselves as part of a group,

*...I've got a lot of friends now you know what I mean I think well I've got all these friends out there and like I'm going to stick with them friends instead of the ones what I was with, because basically they wasn't friends you know what I mean.*

Prisoner 14

*I'll be seeing some of me old friends still, err but I don't want to get involved with my friends I did when I got into bad drugs...*

Prisoner 18

Others were worried that they would not be accepted on the outside because of their prison history. Their perception of Christian attitudes towards them helped to remove this anxiety,

*...so until the day I die I'm always going to be classed as a criminal. Every job you go for, have you been in trouble with the police, well yes I have, well sorry... but, but I'm not going to be the, the, the bitter attitude, I'm not going to be out there thinking well I haven't got a chance because society's not going to give me a chance but I know I've got a chance*

*because there's a lot of Christians out there that are willing to accept me whatever, but I've never realised that before, I've, I've got a family.*

Prisoner 23

Another relationship which would remain constant for these individuals after release was the relationship they had with God. Many mentioned this as important in thinking about life after release as it meant that they would never be alone. They translated their experience inside prison to their expectations of life outside,

*... when I pray to God it's usually when there's a crisis or a five o' clock in the morning when I wake up with a sweat on and I'm frightened, I mean men do get frightened but we don't show it like women, just bite the bullet sort of thing, but I do get frightened now 'n again and it gets me through it, I go come on he's the only person I've got...*

Prisoner 9

*...I know he's there all the time you know what I mean, I know he's always looking down on me so. I know when I'm up here I'm safe that's you know what I mean, I'm always safe when I'm up here you know, and I know that when I go out there I'll be safe as well so yeah.*

Prisoner 14

The interviews showed that there was a general perception among Christian inmates that, after release, there would be a ready-made group of Christians wherever they went with whom they could become involved. They believed that they would be accepted irrespective of their background, much like they had been in the prison chaplaincy. This perception came from their interaction with those from outside churches whilst in prison, invitations from such individuals to join their churches, their perception of Christians as different from other people in society, their belief that a shared Christian belief constituted the basis for acceptance and for the formation of close friendships, and direct intervention by the prison Chaplain in trying to link up prisoners nearing release with churches in their area.

These perceptions and hopes alleviated some of their anxiety about release such as fear of rejection, isolation and lack of support. These anxieties were also alleviated by the perception that they would have a continuing relationship with God. The perception of the availability of good relationships with Christians also provided prisoners with the hope of group membership that might replace lost family ties and provide a substitute for groups with whom individuals no longer wished to associate. All of these prisoners talked about their future relationships in a positive way. These future relationships were, without exception, envisaged as Christian relationships.

The provision of an alternative set of friends was perceived by inmates as something that might make it easier for them to avoid becoming reacquainted with people from their past, who may still be living a criminal lifestyle. All of those who were

interviewed talked about how their involvement with religion served to ensure that they would not go back to previous orientations. I will now consider the way in which it did this.

### ***Religion as Insurance.***

*...religion... I think it's err, it's really a very good help, especially in prison because you've got nothing else and if you turn to it in prison, you know and you're still a Christian when you get out, at least you've got a chance in life to make it and not you know fuck up again and get back into prison because it's not what you want at all, if everyone really thinks about it, even though people say they don't care if they come back to prison or not, they do you know, nobody wants to be in here for the rest of their lives, it's horrible, and religion can play a big part in helping you not coming back.*

Prisoner 18

Those who were interviewed often talked about how their involvement with religion might ensure that life in the future would be better than it had been previously. More specifically, they spoke of the way in which it would stop them coming back to prison, or making the mistakes they had made in the past. Although they all seemed to hold this belief, there were several different interpretations of how and why religion would help them in this way.

Several inmates talked about the opportunity conversion gave them to make a new start in their lives. It represented a chance to leave their past lives behind, and brought hope of a better future. This opportunity was seen by some as the major benefit of involvement with religion,

*A new life, it's definitely a new life, more love, a new start.*

Prisoner 13

Prisoners needed to be able to think about the future as a more positive phase of their lives than the time before imprisonment when they made the mistakes that led to their offence. Many were trying to ensure that they would not be coming back to prison in the future. Life sentence prisoners needed to find ways of constructing a vision of themselves in the future as people who were not capable of killing again. Whether the immediate future lay inside or outside the prison environment, it seemed from listening to their stories, that all prisoners needed to find a way of becoming comfortable with reflection upon their future selves, and of envisaging these future selves positively. In order to do this, many individuals felt that they had to break links with the way they organised their lives in the past, as well as with the groups they were involved with previously. Some had come to the conclusion that it was their own failings, trying to run their own lives and achieve goals on their own, that caused their lives to go wrong, culminating in imprisonment. Evaluating themselves in order to bring these failings to

mind, and appealing to God to help them in their decisions and actions, seemed to assure them that they would not make the same mistakes again and that, in the future, they would be able to live their lives more successfully.

There were various ways in which inmates interpreted the help that religion could provide in ensuring that they had a new start in life and would not return to prison. For some, Christianity offered new ways to organise life that would prevent them reverting to lifestyles and behaviour that resulted in their crime and imprisonment,

*...I've got everything in perspective now and I'll never be budged never, I'm straight, I know exactly where I'm going to go, I'm not even going to get in that fast lane again, I get offered joints, I get offered cocaine, everything and I'm, I've always knocked it back... and I will stick when I go out, you know some people think it's like a cut on and off switch you know religion in jail, get their parole and, but it won't be with me, I will stick with them Quakers and even if the Quakers weren't there I would probably go to the Protestant church... it's a way of living and it keeps the breaks on you...*

Prisoner 9

Changing the way they lived their lives so that they did not get into trouble and return to prison was the main impulse behind their decision to convert. Turning to Christianity was regarded, in some cases, as the only way in which to successfully adopt a different lifestyle. The Christian lifestyle was perceived as 'good', standing in direct opposition to the lifestyles they had engaged in previously,

*Well like because of my crime... I want something good instead of bad and this is the only way I can do it... I've got more confidence already... I was on the drugs outside and well I got off 'em before I came to prison and I'm sorting myself out and I want to stay that way. To stay out of trouble, that's the most important thing, to stay off drugs and help me Mum because I've out me Mum through a lot and they've stuck by me through a lot, that's one of the main reasons why I want to stay clean...*

Prisoner 31

The rules for living offered by Christianity were also seen as important,

*It's going back when you get out, making the same mistake again, now I've got to resolve, because coming back in, I've got to get stronger this time because it's happened twice before... and I've been easily led, through temptation and greed... I've got to be stronger and follow the rules... there's got to be no turning back in my case this time, and that's where I've got to grow, from that strength.*

Prisoner 29

After analysing their behaviour prior to imprisonment, inmates isolated aspects of that behaviour that had contributed to their current predicament. They then found ways in which they might achieve change in these areas. They were able to provide themselves with assurance that such change would be achieved with reference to their involvement with Christianity. For instance, some attributed their criminal behaviour to an inability to share problems with others, or to a lack of others with whom to share them. Involvement with Christianity provided assurance that this problem would be resolved, as it provided relationships with people with whom individuals could share their problems, and a relationship with God, with whom problems could also be shared. Anxiety about dealing with problems in the future was thus alleviated,

*I also want to get involved with the, the Christian people outside err... if I've got a problem I don't want to go back to saying right so that's another problem I'll forget it right and just start building up problems and problems, I'll end up locking myself back up again. I want to be able to go to somebody and say look you know here, look I've got a problem and they'll sit and talk about it and that, and sort things out that way. I don't want to go back to the way I was, I want to make things better than they are now, and it can be done through Christianity.*

Prisoner 24

*...it's made me more open err, certainly more humble err, I am not frightened to share a problem of my own with anybody else err, it is basically when you talk it out, then through talking it out you get your, you get that err, get a sort of direction of where you're going to go, at least you have a plan of action what you're going to face... I think it's made me connected a little bit stronger err and like I said it gives you that chance to, again through me faith, through praying and love err, it's almost like talking it out with God if you like err you get that sense of direction, where you're going to go, not quite sure what you're going to do next but because you know you've got to face various difficulties err, you're geared up to face them without, without any of the err, you worry about it but you're not frightened err. I suppose you've got to be honest... err, the fear of acknowledging or, or letting other people know that... I were struggling was the lead up of, to me getting here I suppose... if you like this is my second chance, I get that feeling that whatever happens I can take it quite within me stride because I know for a fact that he'll help me through if I ask him... I know my personal failings probably better now than anybody err I think you trying to, you tend to err, everybody knows your own failings but are not always willing to admit them sort of thing and err you tend to shut them out don't you, you know err, well I won't do that, I aren't prepared to do that because then if I do that I'm lying to myself and again to God.*

Prisoner 6

Evaluating their previous actions in the light of their new Christian perspective also led inmates to believe that things had gone wrong in the past because of attempts to achieve goals on their own, or for their own sake. They developed a belief that their actions would be more successful if they asked for God's assistance, and pursued his goals rather than their own,

*... it's given me something to look forward to, err I'm sure I'll be happier doing something for God than rather doing it for myself and it all goes wrong.*

Prisoner 18

*...I've got the help when it's needed. Tried to do things my own way as in life, and there's problems all the way, ask the Lord for guidance and help and it's there.*

Prisoner 7

For some, the mere belief that God was on their side provided assurance that they would be able to make changes in their lives and avoid coming back to prison,

*But I know myself when I leave here it's going to be the biggest test for us you know, the biggest test if me life you know and err, err, I know it's not going to be a bed of roses, I know a lot... you know but err hopefully I think I've done it this time you know... I've got God on my side...*

Prisoner 16

Finally, having a purpose in life, as discussed in previous sections, was an important way in which religion gave prisoners confidence that they would be able to change the way they organised their lives, and would therefore not be imprisoned again. Even though some inmates could not say what their purpose would be, they felt sure that, when the time was right, God would reveal it to them. This would provide a focus for action and a diversion from criminal behaviour,

*...it's changed my life completely, completely turned it round, because I would've, when I'd finished this sentence, gone out and been very bitter and I would've been back in trouble again, like I said I'd have been the typical err, gone out for a few drinks and somebody would've said something, something out of line and I would have just, just exploded and probably hurt somebody again or probably robbed somebody or, would've been in and out all the time. But now when I get out err, there is, God has got a purpose for me and yeah, I don't know what, I haven't got a clue.*

Prisoner 23

*...it's given me a life, it's got me, it's got me sorted out, it's got me a life and it's got me a purpose and a goal to do...*

Prisoner 18

*I used to have fears about getting out and going back to crime, I used to have fears about getting out and not being able to you know do what God wants, but now I know that I can get out and I can, I'll just honour God, that's all I want to do is just want to serve God...*

Prisoner 22

In this section I have shown that one of the anxieties felt by prisoners when projecting themselves into the future was that they would re-offend after release, leading to further imprisonment and negative definitions of self. Involvement with religion, and the use of a Christian framework of interpretation for life, gave prisoners methods of assuring themselves that this would not happen. Becoming involved with Christianity was seen as a way of breaking away from previous ways of organising life and personal failings that resulted in crime and imprisonment. It provided inmates with a new lifestyle, new rules to follow, people with whom to share problems, a purpose in life, and perhaps most importantly, a relationship with God who was on their side, providing someone with whom to share problems, guidance in everyday activity and goals that they could pursue. Conversion to Christianity seemed to represent to inmates an opportunity to break with the past and make a new start in life.

This new start was accompanied by new goals and aspirations for the future. I will now consider the way in which inmates planned their future activity, and the extent to which their involvement with Christianity was instrumental in such planning.

### ***Goals for the Future.***

The way in which inmates talked about the future was invariably positive. Whether this positive vision involved a detailed plan of what the future might hold, however, varied considerably. Once again what was revealed by questions about the future was a split in orientation between lifers and non-lifers. This split was unsurprising as those with fixed length sentences had knowledge of a definite future outside the prison, regardless of how long they had to serve prior to that, whereas life sentence prisoners had little idea when, or if, they might be released. In this section I will look at the kind of aspirations the inmates described, and the relationship between these and their conversion to Christianity.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Christian beliefs gave life sentence prisoners ways in which to successfully think about the future. Without these beliefs, consideration of the future was effectively closed off for these individuals,

*There's nothing to work towards in a sense, no it's pointless working towards it... you deal with time inside by occupying your time as best you can...*

Prisoner 8

Although the responses of lifers to questions about future aspirations were characterised by a lack of concrete plans, they made reference to priorities and goals that were equally applicable both inside and outside the prison. Such priorities included maintaining relationships with family and friends, but most often related to 'doing the will of God' as outlined previously. Thoughts of outside activities were dealt with through reference to a belief in 'God's plan' and 'God's timing',

*Goals and aspirations, I haven't got any really, before I wanted to get up with me job and on with me sport and contests with the bands and things, I'd still like to do things like that but people are important to me now, err time with me daughter and me girlfriend and me parents and family, that's much more important now, job, I'll get a job when I'm meant to get a job.*

Prisoner 8

*My aspiration at the moment is just to do the will of God you know, that's all. Before I wanted to be a millionaire, I wanted to have a string of women, I wanted to have all the fastest cars, you name it err, now I don't need any of those things...*

Prisoner 5

*To do my, to do my obedience to the Lord what he's sent me on earth to do it... and carrying on doing it, that's the one thing.*

Prisoner 10

Both decision making and the timing of opportunities on the outside were left up to God, as was the case with thoughts about the timing of release. For those who were unsure when or even whether they would be released, a religious world view helped to overcome the difficulty of whether to plan the future with regard to inside or outside, or indeed whether to plan for the future at all. The point of reference for life planning became 'God's will', belief in which was equally sustainable on the inside or the outside. Through reference to God's plan for them these inmates were able to sustain a positive outlook towards the future and their future selves. This positive outlook encompassed the possibility that they might remain in prison for the foreseeable future. It was possible for them to think about the future without having to consider where that future would be spent, and without having to plan a particular course of action. They relied on God to provide them with practical opportunities if they were released.

This attitude was furthered by a belief that all Christians are given a job in God's plan for the world. This not only filled these individuals with a sense of purpose, but gave them assurance that there was no need to plan for the future, that they would always find a niche where they would be valuable and working for God. This belief was applicable on the outside or the inside,

*I believe that it's like the many parts to the Christian body, err my contribution, I know I'm meant to... help people who are disabled and less fortunate than me, and that's my bit, I don't believe you have to, you see I think people get paranoid, I think people believe that they have to do too much, but you don't have to do anything, just be yourself, not the mask, your real self, and I think that's sufficient... you'll get something to do, because if you are a Christian you will be asked to do things, whatever it might be, but you will you know there's no doubt about that.*

Prisoner 8

Other prisoners spoke of more concrete goals, many of which had a Christian focus. Goals that they had prior to conversion were still important to some inmates. These had more meaning after conversion, however, as religious significance was attributed to them. This religious meaning gave inmates a stronger drive to achieve their goals,

*...I always, as I said before, felt that I'm here to serve, I don't think I'd ever thought about it before, I used to just do it... but now I have to do it, now it's a responsibility and a duty, and it's also a kind of profession of faith, I profess to be a Christian and I try, I should try harder really, that everything about me is Christian-like, I do try to sort of reach this unobtainable sort of Jesus-like kind of existence, fail miserably, but I do try and I try to sort of encourage people to see me as an example of how things might be, I mean if I can be an example to a man who takes drugs, and say look I don't take drugs, I don't need that kind of thing, I go to church you know and I take communion and I sing and I play this thing and I, you know, I want to be that kind of example. So it [Christianity] has changed me err, my sort of modus operandi, the way that I do things, and it's also brought meaning into my life.*

Prisoner 32

*I still want the same goals but for a different purpose you know, I've wanted to, I want to be a musician you know, I want to get a band together, but the difference being now is that it'll probably be, I'll probably be doing Christian music instead you know... My mate he's err, he's just got into... he's got into a big group down there but, that they're playing all over, and he's doing guitar lessons for people, live worships and stuff which is really good, something I could really get into because I don't want a nine to five job, I couldn't handle it, I've done it before you know, I'd rather get on the dole and get myself a lot of equipment, get myself really, you know get a lot of practice in, get myself really good and, earn a living from music and stuff, that's what I really want to do, that's what I've, that's what I've always wanted to do about four years now... it's like I've always wanted to do my music yeah, but now I've got a higher purpose because I want to be doing it for the benefit of other people, through Christianity... I want to be doing it with Christian music*

*and it'll be having a Christian side to it, the lyrics will be a Christian side to it, but it'll be Indie music which is totally different than people have heard before so it'll be strange, but there's nothing to stop me from doing it, there's nothing in the Bible that says you can't do it, it says God loves all music so... I'm just going to be doing it for, for God. That's the difference, I mean that's, that is the purpose of it, the goal, that's what keeps me going.*

Prisoner 18

It was not only the rationale behind their goals that changed, giving increased motivation and significance to activities. The type, and amount, of satisfaction they anticipated also provided renewed drive towards them,

*... it would be doing it, it wouldn't be the money wouldn't really come into it... because you get satisfied in two ways you know, you're doing work for God and you can see that those people are getting help through that and it's worship through the music that you're playing, you get some satisfaction from that as well so it's really, it's really good, and you're still doing what you want to do at the same time.*

Prisoner 18

Becoming involved with religion led to the formulation of goals for the future for individuals who previously had no aspirations,

*I intend to look for a church that is err, that's well a Christian church... I want to get involved with the, the Christian people outside...*

Prisoner 24

*What's important in me life now? Err carrying on what I'm doing, going to church, err and when I get out, living a stable life and hopefully settling down, which is one thing I've always wanted to do which I've found really hard to do you know what I mean for years like.*

Prisoner 14

They made it clear that this formulation of goals was a direct result of a change of attitude associated with involvement in religion,

*Me goals err, like going to college and things like that. Err, it's changed a lot actually you know what I mean, going to college you know what I mean is a, it's going to be an all new thing for me... when I look back, I wasn't interested in that before, I didn't want to go to college, I thought no, leave it. But err coming up here [chaplaincy] you know what I mean and that's it, it's just turning round and saying I'm going to college when I get out and I'm going to do it, you know what I mean...*

Prisoner 14

The adoption of a religious perspective was also evident in the stories of those who had very specific goals for the future. Many regarded these goals as given to them by God, feeling that they had special 'callings'. This particular process of life planning was described by both lifers and those with determinate length sentences. Their beliefs allowed them to combine detailed life planning with the idea that God would provide opportunities for action. They had something definite to look forward to without any worry about when they would be able to undertake such activity, how it would proceed, or whether it was the correct course of action to take. For those who already had definite plans for the future, again there was evidence that it was the adoption of a new perspective that changed the basis for their action, gave them renewed motivation, and also made their ideas seem attainable,

*Well my, initially it was just a matter of setting up my own business and making as much money as I could for myself, whereas now as a Christian it's err, to set up my own business, to make as much money as I can to help others. No this was, the fish farm idea was sort of at the back of my mind but initially that was just a matter of one way of making money, whereas now it's a way of helping people err, with leprosy err virtually the whole family's err shunned, they can't get any work or anything and I thought well this would be one way of helping them. You know sort of in Africa, Asia and South America err, there is leprosy and err, and also you've got the tropical fish there and it would save the natural environment by breeding the fish for, commercially rather than going and catching them in the wild, so in one sense that, you know I've been guided along that path, so I want my business to be a success and to do that.*

Prisoner 7

Those who believed that God had spoken to them, giving them set goals to pursue after imprisonment were not necessarily enthusiastic about their calling. However, a belief in God's plan for them and a certainty that following it was the best course of action, gave rise to definite plans for the future and a feeling that they would have an important role to play for God after release,

*...I didn't really like Hull as a place, I've lived there before, now God's really calling me to Hull when I get out right and I, I didn't want to go, but now I've got so much peace I just can't wait to get out and go there... as I was praying about it, God was really sort of saying oh [name] I want you there, I'm not telling you why I want you there, but I want you there, so I'm like saying right, you want me there, see you later I'm not going there, and then you know you sort of like humble yourself and say sorry you know, messed up, and I've just had peace about it and various things have happened and I'm now so happy about going to Hull it's unreal, he's taken away all my problems, all my fears, all this lot you know he's taken it all away, and now there's more things trying to stop me going to Hull,*

*like from the Devil and all that lot than what there is trying to get me to go, and it's just like testing times but you get used to it.*

Prisoner 22

A common theme among inmates' aspirations for the future was a desire to help other people. Many of them were keen to put their experiences of crime, drugs and imprisonment to positive use. This aspiration led to a perception among inmates that not only was their time in prison not wasted time, but their experiences of crime, drug taking and so on could be turned round and regarded as useful. Interpreting their experiences in this way added weight to their perception that imprisonment was part of God's plan for their lives and was not wasted time. Such interpretations of their imprisonment and their lives prior to it were used by inmates to construct a story about themselves where all of their experiences came to have a function. The progression of events in their lives came to have a sense of order and usefulness as they considered future activities. Such biographical reorganisation and reinterpretation is discussed in more detail in the next chapter. The following are some examples of this aspiration to help others,

*If I went outside now I wouldn't be the same person I was, I'd be more helpful, I'd be going to a community sort of thing where I can go and dig out people's gardens or take old people or handicapped down to the leisure centre or down to the local bingo...*

Prisoner 33

*...I'm going to one of the schools in, next month err to talk to the pupils and I'm hoping to be able to put together something that I can throw at the Governor to see about setting up a group where we can go out to all the schools in the area to tell kids what it's like in prison without stressing the glory of being in prison you know sort of try and keep them out of prison...*

Prisoner 7

*...me goals have certainly come down to quite small my goals have. Err, basically just to stay in work err and really just to be there for my family more than anything else, and I've got this thing where I really want to be able to go out and tell other people from here, I want other people to benefit from if you like my experience in prison and I'm going to work as hard as I possibly can to do that, that is one, that is one of my goals really...*

Prisoner 6

*...to tell you the truth I don't really know what employment I want to get you know, but I have thought like I want to get involved in maybe some sort of youth work because I believe that's like what I'm getting drawn towards you know and err, maybe going back to school and err educate myself I think you know and err, maybe just put the experience I've had over the last, I'm thirty six now you know and I think I've still got a good*

*thirty years left in me you know and err, if I can err learn by me experiences maybes I can put something out to them by like teaching something else from 'em you know and maybe that's what I'm getting drawn towards, I intend to go back to school.*

Prisoner 16

The formulation of these goals was invariably linked in some way by converts to their new religious beliefs. Many attributed their desire to help people to their involvement with Christianity,

*... what it's [Christianity] learned me to date is that you can go and be helpful towards people and err, you try and respect, you respect each other err. Basically what I want to do when I, is go into helping more people than anything err, and then that is mostly, a lot of charities I imagine would be where you help old people and that.*

Prisoner 17

*... my future plans is I want to help people when I get out... and I think being a Christian's taught me how to help myself as well as other people, before you can help somebody else, get your own life sorted out first and then try and help somebody else.*

Prisoner 33

Inmates also allowed for the possibility that their plans would not come to fruition with reference to the importance of having God's help and such activities being part of his plan,

*... I said it was just an idea and whether it'll come off or not I don't know but err I think if the Lord's got his hand on it then it will.*

Prisoner 7

*... going into the street, feeding the homeless and you know, I could get, I could see myself doing that you know and err, I think I'd be err, I've been homeless myself and I could sleep with some of the guys you know because I've been that level, I've been on the same level as that, I could probably relate to them, I'd share the same cardboard boxes if I had to you know but err, I could, I could see myself doing something like that maybe not full time, just for a couple of weeks at a time or something you know... but I'm hoping to put my experiences to good practice you know and I know with God on my side I can do it you know and err I've never asked him for anything in my life you know but I've asked him this time round err just to push things in that direction.*

Prisoner 16

The possibility of engaging in such activities seemed to increase, for these individuals, as a direct result of their involvement with Christianity. Prisoner 16's

involvement with a Christian charity, which came about through the prison chaplaincy, had already offered him the chance to put his aspirations into practice. Immediately after release he planned to take part in one of their events aimed at educating the community about drugs,

*...I've been invited to the project in, on behalf of [charity], as a project leader you know and err, I couldn't have done that before, before I got into prison I couldn't have done that you know and err, I owe a lot to where I've got to actually coming over to church and this, this err project I'm taking part in, in Bridlington, there's a policeman invited along, there's a probation officer invited along, err a doctor invited along, a nurse, a youth worker, a teacher, a probation officer, social worker err, everyone connected with the drug scene in one form or another you know and err, myself... we're all going to sit around you know in a group and have a debate like, and that's going to be good like because I've got twenty years experience I know I can pass on to somebody you know... I'm right looking forward to it you know and err, I wouldn't be doing that now if it wasn't for getting involved in the church, the chaplaincy here you know...*

Prisoner 16

Many saw the chance to realise their aspiration to help others through involvement with the church,

*... I honestly feel that I've got a, a particular gift now that nobody else, other people have, I don't mean nobody else has, I don't mean I've got a gift from God or anything, what I mean is I literally feel that because of the experience it can be put, be put to good Christian use. Err, seeing some other people that go to church and profess to be good Christians and living out Christian lives, well if they're just saying the words then it's not enough err and I've had first hand experience of it err, and I want to go out and say look wake up you know, I'm a criminal basically and these people then realise that two, two things I hope'll come out of it, two that it will awaken them into, to, to doing more within the, their spiritual lives err, and also to sort of say that look you know not everybody that's in prison's an animal you know because that, I think that's the broad view of other people outside think that's exactly what we are...*

Prisoner 6

*When I came into prison my only goal was to get out of here and get married and have some children, which, they was my only goals at the time which I know I'm going to have those now, but to have another step forward of me fiancée believing the same as me... me mother in law, she's going to Romania very shortly like, she's been three of four times, she organises trips and takes medical supplies out to Romania to these orphanages, and I hope, which she says I can do, is go to places like that*

*with her, and carry on going to the church and... learn more about it and get more into it... I'm registered disabled anyway so like work-wise I didn't really have any plans in that, because I was pensioned off for life through me disabilities, and it really, when I was on the out I didn't really have any goals really, my, you know 'till I come in here because like I say I only became a Christian while I was in here, a full blown one, and I didn't have any goals and me life was wasted when I was on the outside, just drinking and, you know... gambling, used to waste a lot of money gambling and things like that.*

Prisoner 34

The goals described by most of the inmates were quite small and mundane. For some, these were the first goals they had formulated in their lives, but for others there had been a big change and downsizing of goals. Having modest goals perhaps assured individuals that they would be attainable. The downsizing of goals was also associated, for many, with a belief that they should compensate in some way for their crimes,

*[My goals have] definitely changed, I wanted the fast life, now I just want the quiet job, when I get out of here I want to get a job... I want to be a hospital porter or something like that, I want to put something back in... there's a lot of good to be done out there and there's not enough people doing it.*

Prisoner 28

*I get loads of ageism cracks on me but it's not bothering me because I'm pretty confident, I know exactly what I want out of life, and I do want to give something back you know what I mean... now I'm very slow but laid back, I don't panic, and I like this life but I know it's going to speed up again when I go out but I'm not going to allow it, I'm, I'm going to stay, I don't need it now, I just need a council flat, a bicycle, and I'm interested in cookery now, well I've been on a course for two weeks, and I've enquired at [university] to do a cookery class... and I'm going to a chiropody college because we've had two lifers here and you make a decent living... it's not much but it's, I don't need a lot now, I don't need it for drink, I don't need it for drugs, I can sit down with a Thomas Hardy book or a Victor Hugo book and I'm over the moon...*

Prisoner 9

All of these individuals attributed the changed priorities in their lives to involvement with Christianity, rather than as a result of imprisonment. They intended to achieve a new, more 'normal' life through their new Christian lifestyle,

*I see a better life for myself now, err, like you know I don't class myself as a bad villain you know what I mean... you know I'm a gentleman, or was a gentleman you know what I mean I looked after people, people respect me and like me, err. I've had all the fast cars and stuff like that, I don't*

*want that any more, I want, all I want is an ordinary life... the goals in a sense I would like now, I'd like to live as near as possibly I can to a Christian life, err, probably on the Christian plan and things like that you know, err.*

Prisoner 25

All of those who were interviewed described changes in their aspirations for the future, or a changed basis for their goals. What can be identified in the way they talked about these goals and aspirations is a change in the way that they interpreted themselves and their lives based upon the adoption of a new, Christian belief system. Their perception of what was important in life changed because of their new outlook upon it. Several individuals recognised that their priorities had changed because of changes in their beliefs and lifestyle,

*[My goals have changed] Because I'm a Christian, no, prison wouldn't have changed that, because I've got a different set of beliefs now, money's not really important, that's easy to say that but, it's genuine, it really isn't the main road to virtue now, it's not, you can't buy the time that's gone by, you know it's, you realise that, you know no amount of money, no matter how rich you are, I know some of my friends who are very, very rich and they're never happy, it's because they've had a lot of sadness in their lives and they can't come to terms with it and they can't buy it back you know...*

Prisoner 8

*It's given me a new perspective on life, and it's a perspective that I regard as now being essential to life, a missing part that is actually desperately needed by a lot of people that don't actually know it... I believe in God as creator of all things and that the body physical is merely a vehicle for the soul to develop and that it's our purpose in life to return to God and be one with him... a lot of people have what I would say is misdirected purpose, they know they need something in life but they pursue a career in business or they pursue a career in whatever and it's actually, they're missing out on spiritual lessons of what they need... Important to me now is peace of mind, with work where I was, felt tied to a job I wasn't happy with because I needed a pay packet, now it will be job satisfaction that matters... whereas I never went to church now it will be a case of going to church and taking communion, so it's not so much goals that have changed, it's lifestyle that's changed day by day.*

Prisoner 30

Throughout this section I have discussed the goals and aspirations that converts had for the future. For some these goals were vague, concentrating on the 'doing God's will'. Others had more definite plans for the future: some had renewed motivation to pursue existing goals, reinterpreting their purpose from a Christian perspective; some felt that they had been called to specific work, or to particular places, directly by God; and

others aimed to compensate for their crimes, or put their experiences to good use, helping other people. All goals and aspirations appeared to have a Christian basis. All attributed their changed aspirations to their involvement with Christianity, and many linked the possibility of realising their goals to involvement with the church or to the direct intervention of God.

Although living in prison constituted a major influence on the way in which individuals were able to think about the future, this was not acknowledged by any of those who were interviewed. They were able to think about their future lives, using their Christian beliefs, without considering the role of their status as prisoners in such projective thought. There were several ways in which the adoption of a Christian belief system functioned to overcome the restraints of this status, allowing prisoners to successfully project themselves into the future.

Recourse to the concept of 'doing God's will' gave life sentence prisoners an opportunity to project themselves into the future without having to consider whether that future would be inside or outside the prison. Even those who had concrete plans for the future were relying on God's intervention for their plans to come to fruition. The timing of their future actions, and indeed whether they would be possible at all, was left up to God. They had found a new way of conceptualising themselves and their future that was very much a reaction to the constraints that prison put upon them. Their new belief system also gave rise to a downsizing of goals due to the prioritisation of a different lifestyle from the one they had before. Inmates believed that the realisation of their goals would be facilitated by involvement with churches and other religious organisations. Having modest aspirations also, perhaps, assured them that their goals would be attainable after release, regardless of the stigma they might have as ex-prisoners.

Finally, the aspiration to help others and to make up for their crimes, also attributed by inmates to their religious faith, provided them with a rationale for their previous experiences, a way of ordering their biographical narrative so as events appeared to occur for a greater purpose. Not only did God bring them to prison for a reason, but their experiences both in prison and before could be used to benefit others. In acting out this belief, using their experiences to help others, this positive definition of self would be validated.

Throughout this chapter I have addressed the way in which religion played a part in the everyday lives and thinking of prison converts. As the Christian perspective was used in everyday action and thought, it was continually rendered plausible as a way of interpreting and organising life. To conclude this chapter I will look briefly at some of the other ways in which Christian belief was continually legitimated to inmates and thus how commitment was sustained.

## Maintenance of Commitment and Confirmation of Belief.

*...I've got a lot to owe to the church I think, even when I leave here I, I couldn't turn me back on it, I couldn't do it you know.*

Prisoner 16

Inmates seemed to define most of their positive experiences in prison as a direct result of involvement with Christianity and intervention by God. The way in which they defined events from *within* their new Christian perspective was the major method through which their belief and commitment to Christianity was maintained. In the following sections I will briefly consider some of the events that inmates defined as important in confirming their belief.

### *Answers to Prayer.*

Some individuals described particular circumstances as a result of which their belief had been confirmed. Such confirmation was attained through a circular process in which the Christian perspective itself was used to define and interpret situations, thus reinforcing itself as plausible. For instance, inmates came to define occurrences as a result of the direct intervention of God in their lives. Many incidents were interpreted as answers to prayer. Such interpretations reinforced belief in God and gave rise to an increased likelihood that individuals would pray again in the future,

*...I'd been up twice to the front and given me life to Christ, it just happened one night... and me fiancée, we fell out, and she wasn't seeing me because she said it was a big thing and she thought it was going to change me... anyway as it happens we did split up but I never stopped coming to church, but every night I used to pray to God that she would come back to me, and after about four weeks I got a phone call err asking me if I'd have her back and she'd become a born again Christian and ever since then I thought well he's answered my prayers I'm sure he has, so that's how I look at it anyway... I believe if it wasn't for me praying I wouldn't have me fiancée now you know, and I think it was down to him that he brought her back to me, you know, so I thank God for that, the way she's changed, it seemed to change her as well you know, and err, basically just having God in me life [is the most important aspect of his life]... it's brought us very close together, saying we was miles apart at one stage, I just can't believe, you know just praying like I did, that it brought us closer together and now we're like that (crosses fingers).*

Prisoner 34

*...on November 11<sup>th</sup> err, there was a lady who I got talking to who was one of the Christian visitors like err, we went into the chapel and had a prayer and err, I was thinking about [wife] in prayer and the day after I got a latter from [wife], the first letter in six months saying I'm sorry*

*[name] for doing this and doing that but err sorry... and then we just hit it off again like, sort of like... but it can't have been a coincidence after six month and then one night I decide to pray and then the day after a letter comes you know saying can we start again and that...*

Prisoner 16

### **Comments about Change.**

Belief in the efficacy of the Christian perspective was also confirmed when inmates received positive comments about themselves from others. Several inmates pinpointed the fact that others had identified a change for the better in them as a major reason for their continued participation in religion,

*...when [wife] come to see me she told [chaplain] on the way back out, she says that was the [name] I fell in love with you know...*

Prisoner 16

*...there's three boys in the wing... one is also in for arson, err, I never really talked to them and yet the three of them turned round and says they've seen big change in me and that, so now that I new the identities of them it seemed more real and I'm like that, fair enough, OK then, yeah, I actually enjoy it when he says things like that because it picks me up a bit then you know because a lot of times I don't see the changes and what I need is for somebody to turn round and say you're changed, I can see a change in you.*

Prisoner 24

Attributing this perceived change to involvement with Christianity made continued commitment attractive, as did starting to see changes for themselves. Achieving change legitimated Christianity as an effective way in which to change self and life,

*...I'm saying thanks and please a lot more so I've become more pleasant in that way, I have noticed that and err, because I've noticed that it's err, made me stick wi' Christianity more err, because there is something there that I've noticed in my life that has changed.*

Prisoner 24

Another change that inmates achieved following conversion was to stop taking drugs. There was a common belief that they could not bring such change by themselves and they attributed their success to God's intervention,

*To being me off drugs shows how powerful the spirit of Christ is, because I love a joint... and as I said I used to just treat 'em (drugs) like smarties...*

Prisoner 33

*...I'd realised it was too late to go to the exercise yard to get it [drugs], so I was like that well... another night straight, but I'm sitting there in my cell thinking... if I'd really wanted to do that, I could have, I could have ignored him or just gave him a quick answer and then jumped out right, so something else has been there to stop me from doing that err, it was something [Christian inmate] said a while ago, God doesn't want you to do it, he'll stop you from doing it right and I was sort of thinking well OK then... it's worked, he's just stopped it somehow and it's worked because I'd always told [Christian inmate] that as soon as I get on the other side of the gates I want someone to meet me there with a big bit of hash and a lot of junk right so I can start back off again, and [Christian inmate]'s like that, by the time you get out of here you'd have gave up the drink and you'd have gave up the smoking, the hash, and you'd have gave up smoking, and I'm like that, I'm not giving up smoking I like it too much. Err and I see it that err God's intervened in me going to get the cannabis from the exercise yard err, because otherwise I could've done it because I err, there's three or four boys on the wing that I could've went and said get me two deals while you're out there...*

Prisoner 24

The last quote also demonstrates the powerful way in which interaction with those who shared a Christian world view led inmates to increasingly interpret situations according to that world view. If the Christian inmate had not previously talked to Prisoner 24 about God intervening to stop him taking drugs, he might not have regarded that occurrence as particularly noteworthy and might have bought drugs at the next opportunity. The more the Christian world view became the taken-for-granted way of interpreting situations, the more evidence to support it was found.

### ***Interaction with Others.***

The role of other Christians in confirming belief, and furthering the Christian way of thinking as the taken-for-granted reality for converts, was important. Interaction between those who share a common world view has been regarded by many theorists as important in maintaining a particular view of reality (cf. For example, Berger and Luckmann 1966, Shibutani 1972, Becker 1972). For those who were interviewed, interaction was important not just for the maintenance of a reality but for broadening that reality, bringing their own ideas in line with those of the Christian community,

*... it's nice to talk with them and discuss the Bible because you then see other than just your own view and you can put forward your views and it's, widens your horizon and err very often the Lord will speak to you through somebody else without them realising it, and without you actually asking them but they'll come out and say something which you know is a message for you, and it's been really helpful and supportive...*

Prisoner 7

*...yeah err, it's nice to know there are other people that feel the same, err all be it, we're all on different sorts of levels of, of Christianity or, or like I said about this pilgrim journey, we're all on different levels of it, you pull strength from others, you learn things from other people as well you know err, but I'd, I think it would have been, certainly it's made it much, much easier for me err, to be here because of that.*

Prisoner 6

When beliefs were hard to understand or individuals came across parts of the Bible that were difficult to believe, contact with other Christians allowed the Christian world view to be sustained and strengthened, rather than undermined through lack of understanding, or what Christians might have regarded as misinterpretation. The mediation of Christian ideas through discussion gradually convinced inmates that they were true,

*... with [Christian inmate] and that you know I mean he's took me through all the Bible you know what I mean and there's things in there what I thought it's really hard to believe you know what I mean, and now I'm getting to believe this and you know what I mean.*

Prisoner 14

Since inmates trusted these Christian individuals; when they explained the Bible and gave plausible explanations for particular beliefs, there seemed no reason to doubt that what they said was true. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, talking to those who shared a Christian world view about problems or looking in the Bible for answers to everyday dilemmas also reinforced belief. Every time a plausible interpretation and a successful answer to a problem was found, the scheme of interpretation used to arrive at the answer was legitimated.

Belief was also confirmed for inmates as they talked to individuals who had gone through similar experiences to them and had arrived at similar answers to questions and problems. For those who had converted in prison, it was useful to be able to compare experiences with others who had done the same. Prisoner 10 spent time talking and sharing experiences with others after he became involved in Christianity,

*...I came to more come out more to talk to people err I've experienced other people's what they've been through and when they talk about how they became Christians and all that err we had quite a few multi-racial days down here since I've been down here, it's quite interesting.*

Mixing with those from similar backgrounds who had also made commitments to religion whilst in prison seemed to function in order to reinforce his own decision.

A similar process occurred when inmates talked to others about their faith and those others also converted. The more people an individual observed converting to the same faith, the more plausible it's beliefs and way of life became. Prisoner 7 talked

about testimony being important, not as a public declaration of his own faith, but as a vehicle through which to tell others about Christianity,

*...sometimes it, you might have somebody in church that's a church-goer so they will come to church and, to be able to tell them that I was a church-goer but was never a Christian you know it, it shocks them, they think that they're Christian and if nothing else starts them thinking, they come and start talking and asking why you're a Christian now but you were only a church-goer before, you tell 'em that you've asked the Lord into your life or gave your life over to the Lord and on a number of occasions it's happened that they have then become Christians. And err, I've also, the hardest was going out to local churches, I've done that a couple of times... I'm also a listener err and very often err it's a way to get them, tell them about the Lord as well, so although they come, they're usually very down I don't try to ram religion down their throats, but usually they see how calm you are and when they're getting more on an even keel they will come back and say look how do you manage and it's opening the door, I think the Lord uses me as a listener for this purpose.*

Prisoner 7

Others also looked for opportunities to tell people who had similar experiences to them about Christianity,

*I can talk to as many people in here... as many as I can to see if they would gain anything from Christianity, become a Christian... because we have been in the prison for such a long time and we had such a, lots of spare time we come to a time when we can accept, sit down and talk to and listen to anybody for as long as we want you know and err we can understand how there's, what people will be going through because we've been through those over the years like and err we could be quite helpful to guiding them onto the right path as well you see.*

Prisoner 10

*...people realised then, he can hit home where certain other people cannot hit home, and I've talked loads of people into coming to church... change of scenery to start with, I mean that's what it was with me, change of scenery, and then if I invite ten people up to the chapel and one person become a Christian then I'm happy...*

Prisoner 33

Christianity is a proselytising religion and as such we would expect to see converts telling others about their faith. However, we might also expect them to engage in this type of activity to reinforce their own beliefs. Observing others converting to Christianity, especially those who had had similar experiences to themselves, reinforced the reasoning behind their own decisions. As others converted, conversion in prison appeared to be a reasonable and understandable decision to make. Only one person,

every so often, had to convert in order to render the religious way of life continually plausible. Those that did not convert could be written off as misguided, they had not found what Prisoner 10 called 'the right path'.

Not everyone acted in a way that reinforced their beliefs and rendered their decision to convert plausible. However, this was dealt with by the way in which the views of various groups were ranked in terms of importance. Those who did legitimate their own beliefs and actions, such as fellow Christians, were regarded as worth listening to. Those who did not regard their conversions as positive events, or who did not experience conversions, were in turn defined as 'not worth listening to', 'not knowing what they were talking about' and so on. Both Prisoner 9 and Prisoner 16 demonstrated the way in which the opinions of those who were not religious were written off, enabling belief to be maintained,

*I'm not bothered as long as I know. I used to be bothered what people thought, I'm not bothered any more. I mean they shout out the window when you go to church on a Sunday morning, hey dickhead and things like that, I just smile... I've got what I want.*

Prisoner 9

*...a lot of the guys, when I first started coming over to church and that... a lot of the guys when I first started getting involved with church err, you know Bible basking and this and that, taking the mickey and that you know err but... at the end of the day they're not friends as in you know, the, like I live two hundred mile away you know and many times I won't see the guys again you know so, but err I've met some good guys in prison but there's, as far as friends go no, no, the people I'm starting to call me friends I believe are genuine friends you know err, me [Christian charity] friends...*

Prisoner 16

They acquired the positive identification and esteem that reinforced their world view from those in the chaplaincy or from churches outside the prison. Others became divided into categories, the broad definition of which was 'believers' and non-believers'. Those who sustained their view of reality, and gave them a positive view of their convert selves, were defined as important and promoted to the top of the convert's hierarchy of significant others<sup>38</sup>, whilst 'non-believers' were demoted in this hierarchy and were no longer perceived as qualified to offer an opinion on reality. Reality was thus confirmed through both interaction, and reflection upon those with whom that interaction took place.

Several ways in which commitment to Christianity and continuation of belief were maintained have been identified here. Once individuals had adopted the world view of Christianity, events were interpreted through this framework of meaning.

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<sup>38</sup> I use the term significant other here to refer to any others who play a role in defining and confirming reality for the individual.

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966) theory can become reality when it comes to be used as the taken-for-granted framework through which life is interpreted. The Christian theory of reality became reality as experienced by converts as it was increasingly used as the taken-for-granted way in which their lives were interpreted and events given meaning. It seems, therefore, that Christian beliefs reinforced themselves.

The Christian framework of interpretation was also mediated to individuals through interaction with others who had the same beliefs. In addition, others perceiving and commenting on changes in the way that converts behaved, and the subsequent acknowledgement of such a change by individuals themselves reinforced Christianity as real and as an effective agent of change. The key to this process was that such change was defined as positive, and attributed solely to the new religious orientation of the convert.

Belief and commitment were also maintained through the process of biographical reinterpretation. Being immersed in a belief system which provided an all encompassing view of the world meant that as the past, present and future were interpreted according to this view it continually reinforced itself. I will address this process in more detail in the following chapter as I consider the ways in which prisoners changed as a result of conversion.

### **Conclusion to Chapter 5.**

Throughout this chapter I have looked at the post conversion lives of prison converts, assessing the role that religion played in their lives in prison and in their consideration of the future. It was important to consider this because, if we regard conversion as a process, it is reasonable to assume that the convert only remains a convert insofar as their new beliefs and lifestyle are rendered continually plausible in everyday action and thought. This side of conversion has not been adequately considered by theorists.

In the first part of the chapter, I looked at the ways in which involvement with Christianity had an impact on inmates' lives in prison. I showed that such involvement provided individuals with a wealth of possibilities for action in the otherwise mundane prison environment. Involvement with the prison chaplaincy provided inmates with a range of activities that were markedly different from other options available within the prison. This difference rested on the fact that, for inmates with Christian beliefs, activities based in Christianity were defined as meaningful, and appeared to relate to their life as a whole, rather than merely being ways of filling time.

In choosing between these activities, and indeed in choosing to become involved in religion at all, inmates had the chance to make autonomous decisions about their lives, compensating in part for the lack of self-determination in their prison lives in general. Once involved in the chaplaincy, they were also given the chance to have a say in how activities were run. Christian beliefs also offered prisoners the chance to overcome some

of their feelings of impotence with regard to involvement in the lives of family or friends. Through prayer they were able to ask God to intervene in situations on their behalf.

Involvement with the prison chaplaincy gave inmates a chance to mix with people from outside the prison. This enabled them to keep in tune with what was happening on the outside, gave them the sense of engaging in 'normal' conversation, and provided them with the opportunity to act out a self-identity that was not totally constrained by the way the institution defined them.

Christian beliefs also provided the convert with a way of developing a positive perception of imprisonment. They believed it to be part of God's plan for them, a chance to re-evaluate themselves and their lives, and an opportunity for them to come into contact with Christianity. The belief that they could work for God whilst in prison provided inmates with a way of organising their day to day activity. This mode of organisation enabled them to transcend the restrictions of imprisonment, as it was not based around the prison or the outside world. In this way, prisoners were also able to overcome problems of whether to identify themselves using criteria from the inside or the outside. They could rather, identify themselves as 'Christian', a master status (Snow and Machalek 1983) that transcended the inside/outside divide. Their time was structured around 'doing God's work' which provided a renewed motivation for action, and a purpose for life as a whole.

Converts also had the opportunity to construct a role for themselves in the prison, based around the chaplaincy or around their perceived role in the Christian community. Most of those who were interviewed had either been chapel orderly or had constructed some other role for themselves within the chaplaincy. These roles were sanctioned by chaplains, and provided an important sense of worth for inmates. Working in the chaplaincy also gave individuals a chance to identify themselves with chaplaincy staff and visitors as opposed to other prisoners. This was also the case for those who constructed a role for themselves relative to the Christian community as a whole. It was possible for inmates to act out a pastoral role in relation to individuals outside prison through writing and receiving letters.

Belief in a purpose for imprisonment, God's plan for them, and his intervention in their lives also alleviated inmates' anxieties about when, or if, they would be released. Their role 'doing God's work' was equally applicable inside and outside the prison; their lifestyle and motivation for action would remain the same if released. This was particularly important for life sentence prisoners who had no idea when, or if, they would be released. They believed that it was up to God when they were released, that not being released would signify that he had a purpose for them in prison, and that he would eventually provide for them on the outside. Whether inmates were serving short, long or life sentences, these beliefs meant that they could successfully project themselves into the future. We all engage in a process of projecting ourselves and our actions into the future (Giddens 1991, Schutz 1973); Christian beliefs allowed these individuals to continue to do this regardless of their removal from the outside world and uncertainty

about what they would do when they were released, or about whether they would be released at all.

In the second part of the chapter I extended this debate, considering the role that Christianity played in inmates reflections upon the future. Their anxieties about the future were alleviated. Their experiences with Christians in prison, and their perception of Christians in general, led them to believe that there would be a ready made group of Christians on the outside with whom they could become involved and who would provide them with support. Conversion also represented, for prisoners, a chance to break with their former lifestyle and ways of dealing with problems, and to separate themselves from the people with whom they committed their crimes. In various ways, their beliefs and involvement with Christianity provided them with assurance that their lives would be better in the future, that they would not commit any more crimes, and that they would not be imprisoned again.

Future goals were also focused around Christianity. Many sought simply to continue God's work, others had found a new rationale for existing goals and renewed motivation to realise them. Some inmates had goals for the first time in their lives and attributed this change to their conversions. Their new beliefs and lifestyle led to a downsizing of goals and a desire to help people, either to put their experiences to good use, or to compensate for their criminal activities. Many sought to realise their goals through involvement with churches or other religious organisations.

Throughout the chapter I have demonstrated that, through religious belief and involvement, these individuals were able to construct lives and identities that had purpose and meaning, and were equally plausible both inside and outside the prison. A religious frame of reference also helped inmates to think constructively and positively about the future. As long as this way of organising life remained effective, commitment to a way of life informed by Christianity, and to the beliefs which underpinned that, was maintained.

Continued commitment was also assisted by a range of other processes. In the final part of the chapter I considered some of these. I concluded that once a Christian way of thinking became taken-for-granted by converts, the way in which they interpreted events meant that Christian belief, in effect, reinforced itself. This process was assisted by the way in which beliefs were clarified, and a religious world view was continually mediated to the convert, in interaction. It appears that after conversion had occurred, those with the same beliefs were promoted to the top of a hierarchy of others, classed as 'real friends' who had the converts best interests at heart and knew what they were talking about. Those with competing beliefs were simultaneously demoted to the status 'not worth listening to'. Being involved in the conversion of others also legitimated the prisoner's own decision to convert. As others converted, and defined the Christian belief system as useful, conversion was reinforced as a plausible course of action to take.

The final process through which commitment was maintained involved inmates' perception of changes in themselves and their lives. Such changes were often pointed out

by others and were eventually experienced by inmates themselves. Defining such changes as positive, and attributing them solely to conversion to Christianity, again reinforced the efficacy of the decision to convert and fostered continued commitment.

An experience of personal change following conversion was emphasised by all those who were interviewed. In the next chapter I discuss various aspects of this change.

## Chapter Six

### Stories of Change.

One of the most dominant features of the accounts of prison converts was talk of the way in which they, and their lives, had changed. In the preceding chapters I looked at some of the ways in which religion changed the lives of these prisoners, and the effect that it had their on self-identity. In this chapter, I will concentrate on their accounts of change.

To begin the chapter I look at some examples of the way in which converts talked about change, considering what they meant when they said they had changed. I then consider the role of religion as an agent of change and some of the ways in which changes in self-identity occurred for these individuals. I focus specifically on the way in which they overcame stigmatisation, and the role of the Christian doctrine of forgiveness in facilitating change.

There will then be a consideration of why, for these individuals, religion was a successful agent of change. Here, religion will be compared to an alternative discourse of change available within the prison: psychology.

Next I address the question ‘What has changed?’ With reference to the discussions in this and previous chapters I consider changes in self-identity, and more general changes in prisoners’ views of the world. The discussion focuses on the way in which converts’ views of the world in general, and their ways of interpreting themselves, others and situations, had changed because of the adoption of a new symbolic universe. This is followed by a look at the way in which the new self-identity and interpretive framework were put into practice in everyday life; the way that new selves were ‘acted out’ in interaction.

Finally, I address the role of biographical reinterpretation and the construction of narratives about self in maintaining the new self-identity and symbolic universe. Here I consider the way in which change due to religion was constructed in opposition to change that might have occurred in response to the prison environment. I also discuss the way in which inmates talked about past and present selves, their interpretation of the past, and the way in which their accounts were constructed for the interview situation.

### *Descriptions of Change.*

All those who were interviewed talked about changes in themselves and their lives which had come about as a consequence of their conversion to Christianity. Prisoner 9 described what had happened to him as,

#### *Total change.*

In some of the interviews, individuals continually reiterated that change had occurred. Prisoner 14, when talking about his involvement with the chaplaincy, continually made reference to his belief that becoming involved with religion had changed him. For example,

*I've started to change coming up here, it has changed me a lot you know what I mean.*

*...people couldn't believe it how I've changed.*

*...it's the best thing I've ever, what's ever happened to me you know what I mean, it's really changed my life. I mean meeting new people err, when I get out I'm going to a church in [area] and err I've been accepted by the church, so I'm really looking forward to that which has really changed my life.*

*...me attitude towards people's changed err, drugs, I've not touched drugs since I've been back in prison for over two and a half years you know what I mean that's, so really a lot has changed really... I've really changed in a lot of ways you know what I mean, I mean like [chaplain] the chaplain, he's a really good friend you know what I mean, he's helped me through it and all, talking to him and that, it's really changed.*

Others were more specific about how Christianity had changed them, for instance, Prisoner 34 stressed his happier outlook on life,

*Before I was, well first time in prison, losing me Mum and what have you, err, not seeing me kids for two years as well, so that was all weighing down on me, err it just seemed to lift me and all the depression seemed to go, I seemed to have the sparkle back in me eyes, I seemed to be smiling and laughing again and seemed to be happy more generally in myself.*

*The main thing it's given me is, more confidence, err more outgoing, err it's made me feel more alive and generally happy, you know nothing seems to upset me any more, you know the slightest thing doesn't upset me, I just seem to take everything in it's stride now.*

There was a tendency for them to emphasise a difference in themselves before and after conversion,

*...I know I'm an entirely different person than what I was.*

Prisoner 2

*The biggest benefit is there is not just one err, is inside I'm not angry, inside I'm very compassionate, I'm, I'll sit down and talk to people, I'll listen to people. Inside I've got a lot of love that I didn't realise that I had, I not the angry, nasty person that I was.*

Prisoner 23

*I said that I'd follow God no matter what and I intend to, you know I'll follow him no matter what, and it's strengthened my faith, all these bad experiences, good experiences, they've strengthened my faith all the way through and I'm a different person now to what I was and I'm a lot closer to God.*

Prisoner 22

These statements about self-change are not surprising given the content of the Christian doctrine surrounding conversion. It was apparent in the talk of some converts that this doctrine had had an effect on the way they saw themselves following their conversion. Several inmates used language derived from the Bible to describe what had happened to them,

*...[baptism is] a funeral, your old self dying and your new self rising...*

Prisoner 5

*...his presence has been with us err and it's, it's given me sort of like shedding the old [name] err, or what I'd become err, to, to what I'm going to be...*

Prisoner 6

There are many references in the Bible that reflect this way of talking, for instance,

*...since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its creator.*

Colossians 3:9

Change as a dominant feature of the accounts of converts, then, is unsurprising. Individuals experienced changes in the way they could define themselves, in their relationships, their behaviour, and their outlook and attitude towards life. Having established that such changes were experienced by converts it is necessary to address how they were brought about by conversion to Christianity. The following sections

consider some ways in which the adoption of a Christian perspective was able to promote changes in the lives and self-identity of prisoners; why it was viewed by them as a successful agent of change, and as preferable to alternatives; and how we can conceptualise the changes that occurred.

### **Religion as an Agent of Change.**

Throughout Chapters 4 and 5 I identified ways in which involvement in Christianity assisted prisoners in overcoming some of the assaults that had been made on their self-identity as a result of previous experiences, their crimes and imprisonment. In the following sections I will look in more detail at the role of Christian ideas in bringing about changes in inmates' self-identity. Stigmatisation by both others and self was identified in Chapter 3 as a significant problem for inmates. Their crime, their status as prisoners, and the length of the sentence they were serving all limited how inmates were able to define themselves. For many, these processes were coupled with negative perceptions of self that arose from interaction with family members over a long period of time, or as a result of situations or relationships immediately prior to their crime. The power of stigmatisation and self-labelling was apparent when inmates talked about the changes that had been brought about as a result of conversion. Many concentrated on the way in which Christian doctrine had enabled them to overcome such negative evaluations of self. In the following sections I will discuss the way in which religion acted as an agent of change in the lives of prison converts, concentrating on the way in which it complemented their own attempts to overcome stigma.

### ***Beginning to Overcome Stigma.***

Individuals can become stigmatised in interaction, as Goffman (1963) contended. As shown in Chapter 3, however, individuals can also stigmatise themselves in self-reflection because they possess cultural knowledge about which attributes are socially discredited. Prisoners stigmatised themselves because of the crimes they had committed, because they were forced to identify with a stigmatised group, and because they were aware of the attitude of other members of society towards them, both whilst they were in prison and for the rest of their lives after release.

There were a number of ways in which those who were interviewed attempted to overcome their stigma. They began this process through reflection upon themselves, other prisoners, and people in general. The Christian perspective that they gained following conversion complemented and further assisted this process. In this section I will look at the ways in which individuals started to overcome stigma through reflective thought. This will be followed by a consideration of the way in which religious ideas fed into this process, and the role of the concept of forgiveness.

Inmates seemed to try to overcome their stigma, and the negative effects that it had on the way they could perceive themselves, through a process of coming to view all

humans as equal. They tended to emphasise people's attributes as individuals rather than lumping them together in categories as they might have done before. Two elements of this process were identified in prisoners' accounts.

Firstly, they emphasised that prisoners as a group were misrepresented by the media as 'bad'. They challenged this assumption by arguing that if prisoners were taken one by one, all would have some goodness in them. This attitude came about when many realised that, although they felt different from other prisoners, there were similarities between them. Choosing to see them as individuals rather than a homogenous group allowed them to find people they could get along with,

*I still think of myself as different in the sense that I've got no criminal history prior to my offence... I didn't burgle houses and steal cars, I didn't mug old ladies, I was an honest everyday hardworking guy, so I didn't think I had anything in common with people who had spent their lives doing those things... Given the offence, I've committed a murder, I can't point the finger at anyone else and say I'm better than they are, so it was a case of you know I'll get along with those people I can get along with as individuals and leave alone those that err I don't like on an individual level.*

Prisoner 30

*...I think one thing you certainly can't afford to be, if you think about it in any way is judgmental because I mean we've all, we've all in the eyes of society at the very least done something wrong, so we're all, I would regard it as very much the same in here, there's no such thing as sort of a better class of con, err and I can have I think I, I, one of the advantages I found is that I think I can, I've been able to get on with people at all sorts of levels...*

Prisoner 1

Some of the negative effects of identification with the group were also alleviated by looking at fellow prisoners as individuals. Finding good in other prisoners allowed them to point out good in themselves,

*...I think if you treat 'em right there's goodness in, even in, I've met some really terrible people, you know who've killed six and seven people and there was goodness in them if you look, it's just the way they were... they got greedy and problems, mental problems...*

Prisoner 9

*...I suppose that's an assumption that courts and television programmes come to you know the people who commit these crimes are monsters and evil and devil-like people, but they're not really, they're not really. Err I've met several really nice people in prison who are serving life sentences for awful crimes, so err, but that, that takes a while, you think, I*

*mean I look around and I think well he's a really nice fella, I get on really well with him, I trust him you know, I can sit down, have a meal with him and feel quite good about that you know err, but it comes as a bit of a shock and I think well perhaps I'm like that as well, you know perhaps I'm really sort of, a reasonably nice individual as well maybe.*

Prisoner 32

*It's frightening more than anything else err, because obviously there's some people that you, you know, that are career criminals of you like you know, it's amazing, it's one of those things when you're going into a, when you go into a pad with somebody, first two things once you've established one another's names, err is basically what you're in prison for err, and it's quite odd because you're sat there and you tell 'em what you're in for and they go you know is that it? Oh why what have you done sort of thing and when they tell you, you think oh man... you daren't go to sleep on an evening, you know it's, it's really odd but you do, do, you do feel different yet in other ways some of these people that are classed as hardened criminals show more compassion to people like me than, than anybody else...*

Prisoner 6

The stigma arising from forced identification with the group 'prisoner' was partly alleviated by seeing prisoners as individuals, and thus challenging social assumptions about the group. Identifying good in other prisoners confirmed to them that the social attitude towards prisoners was inaccurate, and pointed to goodness in themselves. The stigma that individuals felt as a result of their crime was alleviated, in part, by the identification of positive attributes in those who had committed similar, or worse, acts. This process alone, however, gives rise to a problem identified by Goffman (1963). That is, as individuals become involved with others in the stigmatised group in order to challenge mainstream views, their identity becomes increasingly bound up with the group and set against society. As part of this group they can never fully overcome the negative effects that stigmatisation has on the self because, however hard they try, they are not allowed to present and sustain a 'normal' identity in interaction.

However, another element of this process was identified in inmates' accounts. This also provided a challenge to the stigmatised identity of the prisoner but centred upon identification with people in mainstream society, thus removing the problem identified above. Many of the inmates asserted that the crime they had committed could have been committed by anyone. They argued that those in mainstream society were deceiving themselves if they thought otherwise. This argument was used in relation to all crimes, from fraud to murder, although it was those who had committed murder who most often made reference to it. Through this process they constructed themselves as 'normal',

*...not many people like lifers sort of thing you know on the... I mean I can't understand it I mean there for the grace of God go they.*

Prisoner 9

*I think I mean I was looking for, not excuses, but I was looking to sort of rationalise what I'd done you know, and why I'd done it, you know for that moment I lost control you know whether I was evil or whether I was, well what it was, you know was it me or, and I realised obviously that the potential's there in everybody you see, err, there are people that deny that, but they'd be very unwise to deny that err, I think obviously I realise now that everybody's capable of anything in a way, I mean the worst sinner can become the greatest saint sort of and you know vice versa, you know and there's no, I would never do that sort of, because I do believe that everybody's got certain areas of their lives where they're vulnerable or people in a relationship, people use those areas as weapons really you know, sadly, and err, the wrong buttons are pressed and the wrong pressures that are there, people can just lose it, just react sort of violently or stupidly or whatever.*

Prisoner 8

*...you know not everybody that in prison's an animal you know because that, I think that's the broad view of other people outside think that's exactly what we are, you're in there and you should be kept there you know... but I feel sure that if people saw it for what it is then they would change their minds err, and what I'd like to do is to be able to do that, to be able to say look you know they're not all sort of you know murders and gangland people you know people get put in prison for, for things that any of them would do you know.*

Prisoner 6

The two elements of this process, hand in hand, performed a levelling function where those on the inside and the outside were brought together. The two groups no longer appeared polarised: the worst criminal had good in them; and those who regarded themselves as law abiding had the potential to commit the same crimes that got these individuals into prison.

This process was assisted, and complemented, for these individuals by involvement with religion. I have shown previously that being accepted by people from the outside helped inmates to overcome stigma and form positive conceptions of themselves, as did reading about people in the Bible who had committed crimes. I will now look at the way in which the Christian belief system assisted them in overcoming stigma and building a positive self-identity.

### ***Christian Belief and the Formation of a Positive Self-identity.***

The process outlined in the last section through which prisoners identified similarities between themselves and others, both on the inside and the outside, fed into Christian ideas about equality. Such ideas were therefore useful to them in continuing to

build a positive self-identity. Inmates' reflections on prisoners as individuals and on the capabilities of those outside were complemented by the Christian view that everyone is equal in the eyes of God. In the following quotes Prisoner 1 expressed how this view informed his outlook on himself and others and how adopting a Christian perspective enabled him to overcome feelings of stigma,

*We're all here because we've done something wrong in the eyes of society, religion would say that we're all equal, that as Paul says in Romans that we've all sinned and all fall short of the glory of God, that I'm no better than anybody else, that there is no scale of sin and no scale of forgiveness, that we've all done something wrong, if you had said to me ten years ago that somebody who perhaps takes something from the corner shop is in the same boat as Myra Hindley I wouldn't have agreed with you, now I've, I've moved all, I've moved to, to broadly speaking believing that, that we've all done something wrong, we're all in need of forgiveness... we have all done something wrong and think it makes you, it does make you far less judgmental because I would say that behind every person in here there is a story and while it might not excuse what they've done, that there is a reason for everybody being here, now I would say looking at it now from the sort of religious perhaps perspective I've, I've come to think that, that justice exists as society's answer to people who have done something wrong in society's terms, that divine justice offers us forgiveness for what we have, for what we, what we've all done wrong, and that what we have to do to receive that forgiveness is to ask for it and I think at the end of the day hell probably exists for people who are too proud to admit that they've done something wrong.*

*...I think I'm happy that I'm as good or as bad as anybody else and I think we all are, err but, in fact the strength you get from that is probably to be able to, because people are very judgmental and I mean I'm quite realistic that the fact that probably for the rest of my life there'll be people saying ah but you've been in prison, well I'm sorry I now regard them as no better than I am you know err so I think that, I think yes, you, you derive strength from that, you derive a much greater value of yourself and I think that's, that's something which, which a strong faith can bring to you.*

Prisoner 1

Replacing the perspective that was derived from everyday life in society with one derived from Christianity allowed stigmatisation by both self and others to be transcended. This new perception of self also informed behaviour,

*... the Bible always says, it's always, Jesus always taught compassion, he was a very compassionate man and he'd always sit down and he would listen, no matter who it was... to me nobody deserves any prison sentence, I know they break the law and it's man's law and they have to go to prison, I agree with that, I agree one hundred percent, I've broken the*

*law, I deserve to be in prison, I'm not saying I'm in here and I shouldn't be in here, I broke the law, I deserve to be here, but now I've got the chance now to get my life sorted out, following God's laws, not following man's laws, if I were to follow man's laws when I got out I'd be straight back because I'd have been bitter, violent, angry, I'd be wanting to take it out on somebody because man's, man's laws are stand up for yourself, be selfish err, when you get out there we're not going to forgive you, so if you're not forgiving me why should I forgive you, we're not going to give you a chance, as far as we're concerned you've got a criminal record until you're sixty five or well it is until the day you die, so until the day I die I'm always going to be classed as a criminal. Every job you go for, have you been in trouble with the police, well yes I have, well sorry... society's not going to give me a chance but I know I've got a chance because there's a lot of Christians out there that are willing to accept me whatever...*

Prisoner 23

The adoption of a religious perspective, which was regarded as superior to the attitudes of people in the outside world, gave a new set of parameters through which identity could be defined. A self-identity could be constructed over and above the identity which was previously tied to a stigma.

Participation in religious activities also reinforced inmates' perception of the value and equality of people. This was noted in terms of the way in which all those in the church were seen as equal and able to contribute to religious life,

*...everybody's got talents I do believe that, everybody can contribute something to the faith or to the church, some music, some preachers, some cleaning up, they're all equal, they're all, I believe they're all sort of priests and they're all err, saints for want of a better word, all on the same level.*

Prisoner 8

*I mean I noticed when I was a kid in church there was a bit of err middle class... and it was more like a fashion show, I thought it was when I looked around, I'm very observant, and it's not with them. You've got the, you've got the major's wife and the cleaner, it's, it's a level, it's a great leveller the Quakers.*

Prisoner 9

In the accounts of a few inmates, it was evident that their religious perspective had enabled them to transcend identification with the category 'criminal' and any stigma that went with it, even while they were still in prison. In the following excerpts it is apparent that these individuals no longer identified with a perspective derived from social values, or with the group with whom they had become identified,

*...before I came into prison err, sort of for want of a better word, the criminals I didn't want to know err, you know they was all sort of below contempt, whereas now I still see them as brothers and sisters err who have fallen and need a helping hand err, whereas before my view of them was lock 'em away and keep 'em there. You know and I don't think it's because I'm in prison that I'm, I feel any differently, I think it's because I'm a Christian that I feel differently...*

Prisoner 7

*...I've got non-Christian friends as well as Christian friends, I'm able to mix with the world and not be part of the world, I'm able to get myself down to their level, you see I can talk to the drug addicts here because I've been a drug addict, I can talk to the alcoholics because I've been an alcoholic, they know where I've been in the prison system.*

Prisoner 5

As a Christian, Prisoner 5 had not only been able to overcome his stigma and sustain a positive self-concept. It seemed that he was able to enjoy feelings of difference and even superiority over anyone who was not a Christian, whether in prison or outside.

Prisoner 32 also talked about the way in which being a Christian gave him a distinct identity, a means of distancing himself from both the prison world and the outside world. The dilemma he had in identifying with other inmates and the prison regime demonstrates how successful this change in perspective was,

*...the kind of shady reality of our world, our society, the corruption and the way things are done in reality as opposed to how they're done in theory, I mean I know a lot about that because of my professional background you know and I know about how law enforcement agencies work, really work, and how they actually bend the rules and fiddle the books and tell lies a lot. I used to kind of think well if that's what it takes to keep the place reasonably clean, well I suppose that's what we're going to have to do, but you know I can't sort of, I can't hold with that any more because I think honesty is the best policy, err and I think the truth about Jesus is that he is the truth, he is you know the way and being that he tells us, he tells us to be err, to adhere to the truth and to seek the truth and to not tolerate untruth. Err, in prison, prisoners tend to sort of band together and... certain things are taken as acceptable, you know I mean if, I dunno something was lying about... then it can be taken and it's not really stealing because we're in prison, so standards are different. Err, now I find err there's a terrific struggle for me because you know err, I want to be supportive to other inmates, I want them to think well you know he's in this with us, we're on the same course and we're all kind of rolling in the same direction, err but I also have this dilemma that I don't really*

*want to be dishonest and I don't want to behave badly... so there is a dilemma there.*

Prisoner 32

Religion, then, was used by these inmates to extend the process through which they sought to overcome the stigma of being in prison, and of having committed their crimes. Although I have alluded to it in the preceding discussion, however, I have so far ignored a fundamental part of Christianity that was key, for many inmates, in overcoming stigma and rebuilding self-identity: the Christian doctrine of forgiveness. I will now turn to a discussion of the way in which this aspect of Christianity functioned for those in prison.

### ***The Concept of Forgiveness.***

Perhaps unsurprisingly, inmates pinpointed forgiveness as particularly important in helping them to build a sense of self-worth and a positive self-identity. It was cited by many as *the* most important aspect of Christianity, especially those who were serving life sentences. From the accounts of these individuals it was possible to identify three different elements of the concept of forgiveness which were important to them.

The first one of these elements was forgiveness by God. For some, the doctrine of forgiveness was what attracted them to Christianity. Prisoner 2 was Jewish but decided to convert to Christianity,

*Because it's a religion of forgiveness.*

Forgiveness, for him, made Christianity a '*living religion*' that could inform and impact upon everyday life. Prisoner 10 also commented that forgiveness was one of the elements that made Christianity attractive and different from other religions, especially the religion that he had been involved with previously,

*I've found that the forgiveness and all that is really different with Christianity.*

Prisoner 10

Prisoner 7's conversion was prompted by hearing about forgiveness in the context of the Easter story,

*... as I say it was at the Easter service that err, in the lesson err of, on the crucifixion that it, it was as if I'd heard it for the first time and it was meant for me that Christ died for my sins and that I was forgiven and err, it was just from then on.*

Prisoner 7

The idea that they had been forgiven by God was what enabled many inmates to regain feelings of self-worth. For those serving life sentences, again the concept of equality played an important part in this process. The ideas that there were no grades of wrongdoing, that all have sinned and need forgiveness, and that, even though they regarded their crime as the worst that could be committed, they could still be forgiven by God, were fundamental in the experience of all those who had committed murder,

*Well it was just coming to realise that it didn't matter what my crime was, the price had already been paid if I was willing to accept that.*

Prisoner 7

This was demonstrated when I asked Prisoner 32 what had enabled him to regain a feeling of self-worth,

*...I believe it is my belief in forgiveness, err, and it may well be that it's taken an episode such as this, of this magnitude, to actually teach me what forgiveness really is, because you know my faith tells me that everyone is a sinner, but everyone can be forgiven to the same extent and there's no, err grades involved, there's no kind of levels of forgiveness, you are either forgiven or you're not, and that everyone can be forgiven subject to acceptance of Jesus into their lives, and I think in the past that, that would, my response would have been oh well all right then, yeah OK, you know that's, that's interesting you know, a reasonable notion if you're that way inclined kind of thing. But when you need, when you actually have that need for forgiveness placed at the forefront of your mind in the way that I have, it becomes so desperately important. Err, and I know that I need to feel forgiven, and the only way that, that can sort of happen and I can be reminded that I am forgiven is by, kneeling at the foot of the cross so to speak and think well I am, I really am forgiven.*

Prisoner 32

Self-worth was acquired from the feelings of equality and acceptance that came from a belief in forgiveness. It was also derived from the way in which forgiveness represented a new start in life. Prisoner 1 reiterated on a number of occasions that God forgives but also forgets what people have done wrong. This belief enabled him and others to break from the past, from negative opinions of themselves, and from old ways of acting,

*The strength which I mean I think has come from, from what it's given you is an increased sense of your own worth and the fact that, that you, that you can be forgiven and taken care of err and that, and this thing that I mentioned about being non-judgmental I think it broadens you tremendously and that you know, that life can make you feel like I did which was totally worthless and, and totally, and that everything you do was wrong, and I suppose one of the things that Christianity says to you is that there is somebody there who does literally I mean, it is very, very glib*

*to come out with this phrase well God loves you but what you're talking about there is that sort of love is something absolutely cosmic, something, something completely and all-embracing and says look you know you are a person, your sins can be forgiven, go away, start again, because I not only believe that God forgives your sins but forgets them as well, and what it offers you is this enormous chance to, to start again, to put everything right.*

Prisoner 1

*I was just, I was mad, I was involved, we was on about the riots, I've been involved in the riots and I've done a little bit here and there and, I dunno I've done some bad things in me time you know and at the end of the day I know I've been forgiven for it, only God can forgive you, you know, and I feel like I've made peace with God, I do you know and err, I couldn't believe I could deserve something like that.*

Prisoner 16

*I mean I've got to pay for it [committing the crime]... but it's not the end of the world, there is salvation of you make the breakthrough, if you take Christ as your personal saviour, all essentially that Christ did was say, you've got this chance, there is a way to return to God.*

Prisoner 30

The second aspect of forgiveness brought up by inmates was forgiveness by other people. This also changed the way that these individuals could define themselves. Part of their desire for forgiveness from the Christian community was to counteract the way in which they believed they were viewed by society in general. It was important for these individuals to have at least some others who would look upon them positively, and with whom they could interact. It was important that they saw themselves as forgiven by God, but forgiveness by others reinforced this definition of themselves and constituted part of the process through which they could overcome their stigma,

*I wanted forgiveness, I don't think I ever will be regarded as normal by any of the public, the most would say oh he killed his wife, all right say everybody fiddles the income tax, nobody would pay much attention to that, but if you've killed somebody you never ever will get properly forgiven, you'll always be a killer. Now I know it's difficult to accept but I thought that if I go with the church community, there's more chance of some form of forgiveness there than what there ever would be on the outside.*

Prisoner 2

*[The biggest benefit of Christianity is] I think, I probably think that the fact, the sense that I'm redeemable I think, I think that above everything else... I haven't done anything that hasn't been done before err, I'm redeemable as a person, as a human being you know, I'm worth*

*something... I think, I think more than anything else I learned about forgiveness which, I think that was the first thing that affected me, I was chatting to a nun once, and we chatted about the nature of forgiveness and I think I struggled with it initially, and then I realised that when people forgive you and you forgive other people then you become part of each other in a way you know because of that, that sort of connection... like people have forgiven me and that's very, a source of healing really, you know it really does heal wounds that sadly in many people don't heal, err and I think that sort of Christian forgiveness, that element of not pointing the finger, because I mean... everybody points the finger, the whole world's looking at you...*

Prisoner 8

The final aspect of forgiveness mentioned was the ability of inmates to forgive themselves. This again was particularly important for those who had committed murder. Most found that coming to the point where they could forgive themselves took a great many years. It was only through reference to Christianity that they could achieve it. From the accounts of these individuals it seems that this aspect of forgiveness, and the stage of their career as a Christian in which it was exercised, was the defining moment in their ability to regain their self-esteem and build a stable, positive self-identity. Inmates recognised the importance of forgiving themselves as well as feeling forgiven by God,

*...society's got a, and especially in the media they do so much damage to the prison population, everybody says when you come to prison, do your sentence and that's it you've paid your debt to society, but you haven't, you pay until the day that you die if you break the law, you always do, God will forgive you, society won't, and you've got to forgive yourself...*

Prisoner 23

Prisoner 8 found it difficult to forgive himself knowing that others, such as the family of his victim, could not forgive him. He recognised, however, that not forgiving himself might not only have prevented him from moving on and rebuilding a positive self-identity, but may have had destructive consequences,

*...I think forgiving myself seemed a bit, to people who, to people I've hurt, members of the family, my wife's family obviously had difficulty with hearing me say I'd forgiven myself, it doesn't necessarily mean the responsibility's not there, and the pain's still with you, but you get rid of the destructive element of it I think...*

*...I think forgiveness is probably at the root of it all, I think, I think being able to forgive yourself, err so that the remorse didn't ruin everything, including me, because it can you know, people committing suicide and that, something the psychologists don't understand, they look for the remorse, years after the event, but remorse is a killer of an emotion, you*

*know you despise yourself so much that you contemplate doing yourself in...*

Prisoner 8

This point was reiterated by the other lifers, who were able to overcome self-hatred through forgiveness,

*Well, when I committed my, the crime and err at that time I hated myself really, but now I'm, it doesn't worry me really much because there's, as far as I'm concerned I've been forgiven and given another chance to live.*

Prisoner 10

Prisoner 7 found it difficult to forgive himself, but his belief in a Christian frame of reference in which God was regarded as all powerful allowed him to finally get rid of the destructive emotions which prevented him from identifying himself in a wholly positive way. What he said also emphasises that the processes of accepting forgiveness from God and others are distinct from that of forgiving self, even though the former lay the groundwork for the latter to occur,

*...although I knew I'd been forgiven, I'd asked for forgiveness and I'd been granted it, err I had great difficulty in forgiving myself for what I'd done, and it would be some twelve, eighteen months afterwards that I was finally able to forgive myself and that was through err one of the ministers at err [prison], we sat talking and I was explaining to him that I couldn't forgive myself and he, he just said that I thought I was bigger than God and I said no way and he said yes you do, you've just told me, I said no I've not, he said you have, I said well how do you work that out, he says well has God forgiven you for what you've done, I said yes I believe so, he said well, so you wouldn't say that God can forgive you, I said yes, he said but you can't forgive yourself, I said no, he said well then you're saying you're bigger than God, and it took me a couple of days thinking about it but then I realised that what he was saying was right and I was able to forgive myself and that lifted a lot of the guilt that I had and, I mean it didn't make the crime right but it lifted it and since then I've never looked back err I've just accepted it, come to terms with it...*

Prisoner 7

Prisoner 32 had yet to fully forgive himself for what he had done, but a belief in God's forgiveness seemed to provide hope that one day he would. I asked him if his belief that he had already been forgiven by God would enable him to eventually forgive himself,

*Yes. I say yes, I'm hoping it will but I'm not sure whether I've, that's totally happened, but I'm feeling better about myself than I ever did, than I have done since I was first in prison, err, and I think that that's a major, major factor, a sense of forgiveness.*

Prisoner 32

All three elements of Christian forgiveness were important to these prisoners in helping them to form a positive self-identity. This positive self-identity could not fully develop until they had experienced forgiveness from God and others *and* forgiven themselves. Once this occurred, and a positive attitude to self developed, these individuals were able to participate in relationships on the basis of this new, positive self-identity. The effect of this was particularly marked for those who had always had a negative attitude towards themselves,

*... slowly but surely you know I'm starting to feel good about myself you know and, and I still have the habit of putting myself down all the time you know and err, err you know there's something in, I don't know, I mean you have no feelings towards yourself it's hard to feel for anyone else sort of thing, but once you start loving yourself you know you can start to love again you know.*

Prisoner 16

I will return to the way in which changes achieved through conversion were put into practice in interaction later in this chapter.

Using the accounts of those who were interviewed, several ways in which their self-identities underwent change have been identified. Some of the positive effects that involvement with Christianity had on the self-identity of prisoners were also seen throughout the discussions in Chapters 4 and 5. Having looked at examples of these changes, a pertinent question to ask in relation to them is what made religion, or more specifically Christianity, such a successful agent of change for these particular individuals?

During the interviews a great many individuals made reference to the role of psychological techniques within the prison. It seemed to be important for them to point out why they chose religion over psychology as a vehicle through which to deal with some of their problems. By comparing the way they talked about psychology with the way they described Christianity I will now outline why religion was considered to be a preferable and more successful agent of change, and what ingredients a perspective might need to promote effective personal change.

### ***Religion versus Psychology.***

There were numerous opportunities and demands for prisoners to come into contact with psychological techniques. All prisoners had to undergo psychological assessment at regular intervals and were offered counselling or therapeutic intervention from psychologists where it was considered necessary. In addition to this, a variety of courses were run in these prisons, some mandatory such as the Sex Offenders Treatment Programme, and others recommended or voluntary such as Enhanced Thinking or Anger Management. All those who were interviewed had, therefore, come into contact with the

prison Psychology Department in one way or another, and were able to offer opinions on psychological techniques and their effectiveness. Without exception the opinion of this service was negative. Information was gained from the interviews which allowed me to compare religion and psychology as agents of personal change, and to isolate those features of religious involvement which were defined by the inmates as central to the change process.

Several themes were identified in this material, some of which reflect aspects of conversion that have been discussed in previous chapters. These themes provide additional evidence that the factors isolated earlier were indeed important aspects of the conversion process for these individuals. This discussion also provides supplementary insight into the conversion process, and processes of personal change more generally.

Both Psychology (in all its various guises) and Christianity provide a theory of the individual. As theories about the constitution of the individual and their relationship with the world we might expect them to provide recipes for change (if such change is defined as possible). The sole purpose of a whole range of psychological techniques is to effect change in the way that individuals think or behave.

In prison, psychology and Christianity were not merely seen as two distinct agents of change that prisoners could choose between. The way that these two competing discourses were defined was radically different. Psychology was defined as rigid, imposed, impersonal and seeking to force a specific kind of change on the individual. Christianity by contrast was interpreted as voluntaristic, providing a means for self-analysis and a way to effect change as desired by the individual. Several prisoners objected to the way in which psychology seemed to be text-book oriented, giving a prescribed method through which to examine and change all individuals,

*...she's [psychologist] very much a text book person, she's got a very limited experience of the outside world...*

Prisoner 4

*I think the Quakers is more therapeutic than a psychologist you know a psychologist is looking at you with rose tinted glasses on, why do you pick your nose, why did you look at the ceiling, you know she's going off the book, she's read Bono and that's the way she's going, each, each person's an individual I mean I, I could sit and pass comment on somebody and she could come in and get an entirely different comment. They see things that aren't there, they sit there and say oh you've been, I've been married three times me, err why do they commit adultery and all that are you, is there something wrong with you and all that and I go well not really you know what I mean they're looking for something that isn't there...*

Prisoner 9

*Where somebody comes along and says I know the cause of that problem and progress is measured in terms of how much you do or don't agree with that view, that's counterproductive, that's damaging, I mean I've developed a very serious dislike of psychologists of late...*

Prisoner 30

According to Prisoner 9, psychologists treated everyone as though they were the same, looking for features of individuals that fit their models. In contrast, Christianity seemed to provide a much wider model of the individual which was not imposed but was offered as a means for self-examination. Change was something to be worked out between the individual and God. Prisoner 22 also saw psychology as a discourse which was imposed upon individuals regardless of their individual attributes or circumstances. For this reason it was not helpful. I asked him why he thought psychology had not been an effective catalyst for change for him,

*...because they're pathetic little individuals that read a text book and think that everybody's exactly the same, they ain't right, I'm sorry but I've got really strong feelings about this because they sit there and they're so self-righteous and pompous saying well the text book says you're supposed to behave like this so behave like it, and they try and use a text book to change your life, you can't, how can a text book be the same for twenty guys, each of 'em's individual, and they just think that by talking your problems out it's gonna help, it isn't gonna help. While I was getting abused right, I was talking to a psychologist who was trying to you know see why, how I ticked, they wanted to know how I ticked and they're trying to say right we want to look at this, we want to look at that and I'm like that isn't the problem, I've got this as a problem and you're just, you're strolling, when are you gonna help me, you ain't helping me, and well they never did.*

Prisoner 22

What seems to be significant about inmates' views on psychology is that, irrespective of whether a particular technique provided a method for changing oneself, what was of paramount importance was that the theory of the individual, and consequent discourse of change, was defined by the individual in question as relevant to them. It was also important that the discourse could be easily understood and taken on voluntarily for the purpose of self-analysis, as and when the individual defined this as appropriate. The comparison between Christianity and psychology made by prisoners demonstrated that they held this view.

Prisoner 8 regarded the desire to change as particularly important. He believed that Christianity gave rise to this desire because of the content of its belief system, and the theory of the individual that it encompasses. For him, like many lifers, change was worth pursuing because of the belief that a new start is possible for everyone,

*I think the spiritual aspect gives you... a desire to change probably, err, because, I don't know why, perhaps forgiveness... in a faith context we're redeemable...*

Prisoner 8

Prisoner 30 defined motivation for change as the definitive factor in his ability to change himself. This motivation stemmed from both the need to evaluate his crime, and the way in which Christianity provided answers to his questions, as discussed in Chapter 4. I asked him if he could tell me the most important factor that had contributed to his being able to change,

*Motivation to change because I'd done something really terrible and I needed to know why.*

Prisoner 30

He maintained that regardless of the discourse used to effect change, it is the individual's desire to change that is important,

*...oh it's the desire to change, you cannot force change on somebody, you can have, you can know exactly, or you can claim to know exactly, what's wrong with somebody and what they should do to change and resolve it, but you can't force it, the need to change has got to start from within the individual, and only when they're ready to do that will change take place, all the prison service can do is create an environment which fosters change, encourages it in those that want it.*

Prisoner 30

According to Prisoner 29, this motivation must also be accompanied by some individual effort; change will not just happen by itself,

*...he's entered me life... through the Holy Spirit, he has, I can see a marked difference in myself... way of living, it's got to me... but it's no good attending church unless you're putting a little bit of effort into your everyday life.*

Prisoner 29

Christianity was defined as relevant to inmates for various reasons: because of the way in which it provided answers to questions (see Chapter 4); because of the theory of the individual which comes from its theology (see earlier in this chapter); or because it provided effective ways in which to orient towards everyday life (see Chapter 5). It was also defined as useful, and gave rise to motivation for change, because change through Christianity was defined as something which could actually happen. This definition arose from a belief that God could change people. It was this that convinced Prisoner 33 of the efficacy of Christianity as an agent of change. After initial involvement in chaplaincy activities others started to notice some changes in his behaviour. Their comments led to a belief that change through Christianity was possible. This belief gave

him the motivation to turn to this perspective for help when circumstances also gave rise to a desire to change,

*... we used to have some good meetings, some good Christian meetings, some good fellowship, and we used to have bands coming in from outside and I was actually chaplain orderly for eighteen months... I met some beautiful people up there and err, I really start getting, and it was then, it was round about that time I thought 'ay up, because me family were saying to me you're changing, you're changing, I said what do you mean I'm changing, I'm no different, I'm still the same arrogant person, but me family noticed a change in me before I noticed it, I thought I'm just the same me, I'm just getting on with me jail, but the violence stopped, err, I had one setback when me Dad first took badly, had a big heart attack and a stroke and I lost it err, battered a couple of screws, and I was in the strip cell and I actually got on me knees and said I cannot take any more of this, I says if you're there change me because I need changing... and I cried for three days in the strip cell and when I come out things just started to change and change and change, people were taking the mickey and I weren't jumping up and nutting them I was saying, just get on with it, if you're slagging me off you're leaving somebody else alone... and just over the years I've changed, I've mellowed right out, I've matured a little bit and, it's true what they say what goes around comes around, I used to slag people off for getting up and doing readings and singing songs, and it's muggins getting up and doing readings and singing songs.*

Prisoner 33

A discourse of change must also be understandable to the individual if they are to define it as relevant and useful. This was mentioned repeatedly in the interviews. Those who mentioned it often added the point that the perspective must be taken on voluntarily, rather than being forced upon the individual,

*I think it's err sitting and talking to people who, who are talking like that on a level what's understandable you know I mean, the guys I've been talking to and that and err, it's like they're not forcing religion on me you know...*

Prisoner 16

*...psychologists and psychiatric treatment, they can tell you how to change yourself but they can't change you, no matter what they do they can't change you but err, becoming a religious and religion, following it depends how strict you keep yourself and if you start following it will definitely change you to be a completely different person because it's not imposed onto you it's of your own free will and err Lord always welcomes anybody who wants to know him, he won't reject his followers...*

Prisoner 10

This point relates back to the discussion in Chapter 5 where I identified the decision to participate in religious activities as an important exercise of autonomy in the prison environment. Psychological techniques were often imposed upon individuals in the prison context and so did not give them this opportunity. In addition, prisoners often felt that there was a stigma attached to being referred to a psychologist, or that they were referred needlessly. This also gave rise to resistance towards the definition of self which was offered by that perspective,

*Last time I saw a psychologist in here I think err I told her to go away like, I've err, she started filling my head with loads of things what I didn't even understand about and like, you know what I mean, because like I was told that I needed to see a psychologist and I thought no I don't, I think it only lasted about a couple of hours and that was it, I've never seen a psychologist ever since.*

Prisoner 14

In making a choice to change, and to use Christianity to do it, these individuals felt that they were in control of their lives and could manage their own process of change rather than having a specific type and amount of change forced upon, and expected of, them.

The prisoners' negative views of psychology were derived from many sources. They considered it to be imposed upon them, they may have felt stigmatised by being referred for psychological treatment, and they often did not fully understand the perspectives that were used. The overall effect of these views was that they defined psychology as unhelpful, in contrast to Christianity which they perceived as a discourse that offered them an effective way to change themselves.

The general dislike of psychology, and the opposing emphasis on the positive nature of religion, can also be accounted for with reference to the fact that all of these inmates were converts and so were likely to paint a positive picture of religion. An overly negative account of psychology might have been given either because of a wish to portray Christianity as superior, or because of their total allegiance to their Christian perspective and consequent derision of any alternatives.

There is also another reason, however, why these very polarised views might have existed. I have already mentioned that psychology was experienced by prisoners as imposed upon them. Reference to the role of the psychology department within the prison as opposed to the perceived role of religion sheds further light on why inmates held such negative views on psychology and gives us further insight into why it was religion which they defined as helpful.

In Chapter 4, whilst discussing the role of the prison chaplain and the chaplaincy in conversion, I pointed out that rather than being seen as part of the system, something impersonal, repressive and controlling, inmates saw the chaplaincy as a kind of haven within the prison, and the chaplain as an ally, different to other officials of the prison. The chaplaincy exists within the prison to provide a service to inmates, to facilitate

continuing or novel participation in a chosen faith (Beckford and Gilliat 1998). Neither the chaplaincy as a department, nor the chaplain as an official of the prison, has any day to day role in the assessment or governance of inmates. The Psychology Department on the other hand, especially in category C and D prisons where inmates might be getting ready for release, going on town visits, home leave or working outside the prison, has a major role in their assessment.<sup>39</sup> All those who were interviewed had experienced this side of the Psychology Department and it therefore had an impact on the way in which they defined it. Prisoners regarded this role as incompatible with any activity which might be directed towards helping them. They felt that they could not share all their thoughts with the psychologist as they would be 'taken down and used in evidence',

*I feel I can't trust that psychology department, anything I say to them gets twisted.*

Prisoner 2

*...it's almost as though... they're there to catch you out if there's any reason at all that you shouldn't be released... it's more than risk assessment because you can't divorce the individual from the job they're doing and to me, I'm being held hostage to exaggerated fears...*

Prisoner 30

*...well they're, they've got a vested interest you see, they're interested in risk assessment, they're not interested in you as a person, certainly not you as a spiritual being, because most psychologists are atheistic, err, there's no communication level, there's nothing there, no common ground to step on... and I honestly believe that change has to be personal change and I honestly believe that no amount of psychology will change anybody, only a, my belief, only a spiritual motorway crash can stop people dead, and I believe that if the pain sometimes isn't enough, people never change, you know they just hop over little blips and never really change.*

Prisoner 8

This last quote again underlines the importance of motivation for change in the accounts of prisoners.

Prisoner 10 also commented on risk assessment, he could not understand why he was being kept in prison and blamed the Psychology Department because of their role within the prison. He interpreted their actions as an attempt to break him down and get him to take their view of himself. It was through his religious perspective that he was able to discount their definition of him which might have left him with a negative label and a negative perception of himself,

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<sup>39</sup> Conversation with a member of the Psychology Department at one of the prisons I visited confirmed that this aspect of her work took up a large percentage of her time.

*I don't have to worry about anything at all and err that's err that's something else I'm glad about because err since I've been at [prison] the probation and psychologist department down here, they think there's something wrong with me, but err as far as I'm concerned I'm a very happy man because I don't have to worry about it, they try to wind me up but it doesn't affect me in any way, I just take it in my stride and laugh it off and err things like that it's err, and err they think that I, they keep winding me up and keep keeping me longer and longer that I might break down one day but err I don't think I will break down now because the strength I've got is tremendous.*

Prisoner 10

The emphasis on risk assessment, on confronting the crime, on remorse and so on that was involved in inmates' encounters with psychology allowed them to draw another contrast between psychology and religion, providing more evidence as to why the latter was preferred, and how it might facilitate change. The aspects of the individual which were confronted by psychology were often those which inmates felt they had already dealt with, and which involved negative definitions of themselves. To have to continually reflect on the past and on negative aspects of self was difficult for the individual, and may be defined as detrimental to their self-development. Christianity by contrast, as demonstrated in this and previous chapters, concentrated on the positive aspects of individuals, allowed them a separation from the past, and had a future orientation, providing not just a means of reflection but new ways to think about and organise life and self. Prisoner 8 felt strongly about this point, I asked him if he thought conversion to Christianity had therapeutic effects,

*It is therapy, it's very deep, yeah but it's the best kind of therapy because err, if, I suppose self-analysis is, but you've got to have the intellectual sort of means to do it, without being nasty, you know I'm not being nasty to people but you know I sat down and got on with it a long time ago err, a lot of people don't, I think that's where they should have more chaplaincy involvement, err you know, or whatever religion, because I, you know, in a faith context we're redeemable creatures, you know we've got good in us and capabilities and potentials... that sort of thing you know, they're looking to redeem the good, and my belief is that with prison in general I think the whole system falls down because it doesn't look to redeem the good, it looks to punish the bad, there is no good you know...*

Prisoner 8

So whereas psychology was perceived as focusing on, and trying to root out, bad or destructive elements of the individual; Christianity focused on a break with the past, and on the good, redeemable nature of individuals. Seen in this light, and taking into consideration all the elements considered here, it is possible to appreciate the meaning that these discourses had for inmates, to see which one gave rise to increased self-esteem, and thus how the definitions of these two elements of the prison system arose.

It is interesting to note that several inmates became involved in courses run by the Psychology Department following their conversions. At this time they found such courses useful. This finding underlines the point that individuals must both define activities or perspectives as useful, and take them on of their own choice in order for them to contribute to the process of change. It seems that having already become involved in religion, interpreting the courses run by Psychology from within the religious perspective allowed individuals to define them as useful and worth pursuing. They did not, however, wholly adopt the psychological perspective of themselves but seemed to use some of the techniques and activities to assist a process of change which was rooted in the religious definition of themselves.

Prisoner 16, after having been in and out of prison for twenty years, only asked to go on a course after he had converted to Christianity. He was already committed to changing himself and asked to go on the course as part of this project of change. In his account he identified two of the key aspects needed for change, that he was motivated by religion and that he was attending the course for himself, to try to change himself rather than to attempt to secure early parole,

*...you've got to give it 100%, it's no good going in, into a course like that thinking it's going to get you a parole, it helps because the prison officers, because it's prison officers who run the course with the psychologist who's like overseeing it like, err they're told to make sure no one goes in with the understanding that it's definitely going to get them parole, it will help towards swaying it a bit... because it's obvious you're trying to do something with your sentence, you're not like just tossing it off you know and err, so if you go in thinking like I'll do this for myself, if I can get something out of it that's fair enough, if it helps me with parole that's even better, it's a bonus you know, but if you do it for yourself it happens, it opened my eyes you know... at one time I would have though like you know go on the floor like you know I'll go in there and have a laugh with the rest of 'em and just take the mick out of them or whatever, but you know from day one I knew, I knew I wanted to try and, I wanted to try and better myself you know...*

Prisoner 16

Prisoner 7 found seeing psychologists and attending courses useful because of his commitment to changing himself and his belief that attending such courses were part of God's plan for him. He believed that God was leading him to those courses that would be useful. Although he still defined psychology in negative terms, a belief that God was working through such courses gave him a reason to attend them and gain as much from them as he could,

*[Psychology] just doesn't work err, I think the Lord has helped me to get through them.*

Prisoner 7

*... well it's the psychologists I've seen and I've also err been on err relationships courses err, anger management course err, but err yeah I've had help but I think I've been guided to the prisons where I could get the right help and you know I suppose if I've asked the Lord, I know I've not been able to do it myself so he's guided me into the ways of doing it.*

Prisoner 7

His motivation for change continued to be derived from religion. The use of psychological techniques was secondary, and were only defined as useful from within the religious perspective. Change was negotiated between himself and God and psychological techniques were selectively taken up as part of this process, but without taking on board the definition of the individual offered by psychological theory. The way that these individuals defined themselves, and the framework through which they organised their process of change, was firmly anchored in their religious faith. This was also demonstrated by Prisoner 5,

*That's right I still have to work on the risk areas, I still have to work and say wait a minute ooh this could be a very dangerous situation, I've still got to work on all these things, it's just that I've got more confidence in Jesus than what I have in the system.*

Prisoner 5

He also mentioned that he had a strong support team derived from contact with religious groups. This aspect of involvement with religion had an important role in the convert's process of change. The importance of support from others was stressed by inmates, and underlined as another important difference between Christianity and Psychology.

Inmates defined the existence of relationships with those who shared their Christian beliefs as important in the process of change. Change, in their view, was assisted by relationships with Christians in which they felt accepted and cared for. Psychology, in their opinion, was unsuccessful because of the lack of this type of relationship between prisoner and psychologist<sup>40</sup>. In the prisoner-psychologist relationship, individuals had no sense of continuity in the relationship, or of being valued for their individual attributes. This point picks up two earlier themes. Earlier in this section I discussed the perception among prisoners that psychologists treated them all the same, rather than looking at them as individuals; and in Chapter 4 I asserted that one of the most important attractions of Christianity was that inmates felt accepted and valued by Christians, who were interested in them as individuals.

Several inmates associated the start of their change in attitude towards life and self with the experience of being cared for by another. Prisoner 9's first experience of

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<sup>40</sup> It is interesting to note that outside the prison setting the formation of relationships with therapists has been linked to successful personal change. The therapist becomes a significant other for individuals, teaching the perspective and then supporting it. Shibusani (1961) stated that the content of different schools of therapeutic thought probably has little to do with success rates. Success, according to him, can be attributed instead to the formation of 'warm personal ties' (p. 530).

this did not involve religion. This emphasises that it was not religion per se that changed people, but the individual ingredients that it offered,

*I think I got someone to love me sort of thing you know the woman teacher she like took an interest in me, nobody took an interest in me, I was just going along sort of I'm worthless and she put interest in me which is, unfortunately she died she got breast cancer and died, that was two years and then I laid off education for like up to '91 then I went back into it, got me credits so you know I've been doing it ever since 'till now I'm at the end...*

Prisoner 9

His process of change started with someone taking an interest in him. Although he had a gap in the process after his teacher died, in 1991 when he met the Quakers and felt that someone was interested in him again he resumed his studies and the process continued. Not only did he have people that believed in him and gave him a positive view of himself and a sense of worth, these relationships represented a reason for him to change: he had someone to change for, who was interested in his progress,

*There's no, it's got to be personal with me, I've got to know somebody cares, that there isn't only, I'm not alone on earth sort of thing.*

Prisoner 9

Psychologists were not experienced in this way,

*...they're not interested in you as a person... there's no communication level, no common ground to step on...*

Prisoner 8

Adopting the psychological definition of self did not further a relationship with the psychologist, who still only regarded each individual as a client. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, adopting the Christian definition of self fostered not just relationships with those who shared the same perspective, but relationships which were seen as unique and special, as akin to family relationships. The way in which inmates talked about psychologists was in direct opposition to their views about Christian relationships. All of those who were interviewed emphasised the professional nature of the psychologist/prisoner relationship, the way in which the psychologist acted towards the prisoner on the basis of their professional role. This was seen to hinder change,

*It's a job, it's a job, it's, at the end of the day they've got no feelings towards me, daft as it sounds, I don't mean this nastily or anything but I've felt more off you than what I have off one of them, you know you seem genuinely to want to know what happened in my life and what's happened to me and all that lot, them, they don't even want to know, it's a job, half of them are like that (looks at watch), yeah right when you finishing, you know I've just got no time for 'em... they're just after filling their books*

*in, there's nothing there, there's no care, there's no emotion and at the end of the day if you want to help someone you've got to get alongside 'em through the good times and through the bad, and none of them want to, none of them want to, it's just a job...*

Prisoner 22

*... every day to them is new because, I suppose they, at the end of the day they must be like a computer, they turn it off and they go home and that's it and turn it on again for the next morning.*

Prisoner 17

*... she says I assign roles to people and yet she assigns more roles than anybody else, she wants me to be a person rather than a prisoner but she still wants to be a psychologist...*

Prisoner 4

By contrast, the Chaplain and other Christians were seen as bringing something of themselves into interaction rather than just acting on the basis of a role. As a result of this, prisoners felt that these individuals cared about them and relationships with them could be built upon and continued,

*He [chaplain] is someone to confide in err, the psychologist... I think she would like people to confide in her but it's not a two way thing, I think, you don't, I don't feel as though I'm confiding in [psychologist] the person as such, though [chaplain], I could confide in [chaplain] the person, I feel as though I'm confiding in [psychologist] the psychologist.*

Prisoner 4

*They [psychologists and psychiatrists] don't care and you go in the room and you know they don't care, but with the Quakers they care.*

Prisoner 9

*... what made me change and stop and go on the right track, I think it was err the length of the sentence, and also that I've got the help and the people who care about me and are going to help me when I get out there, which I've never had that before and now I've got it and I'm like, I've got so many things to look forward to, to get out, and like life's just going to change altogether.*

Prisoner 14

Many inmates regarded relationships as of paramount importance in changing themselves. The lack of such caring relationships was regarded by some as the reason why they had not been able to turn their lives around before,

*It was, it was towards drugs like and it also was towards me family like you know what I mean, like after a while me family didn't really want me to be happy or anything like that you know what I mean...*

Prisoner 14

Relationships with Christians provided Prisoner 14 with a replacement for the lack of care and support from his family. He regarded such relationships as the reason Christianity was able to promote personal change,

*Err, I think with Christianity you can meet a lot of new, new people you know what I mean a lot more, err new friends and everything like that, you feel safe you know what I mean, especially with God like you know what I mean, if you're safe when he's about and everything like that.*

Prisoner 14

Part of the importance of having a support group of like-minded people was that change was worked out and maintained in interaction as well as through feelings about self. I will take up this point again later in the chapter. The relationships that were built up through involvement with Christianity provided a source of ongoing support and continuity as each prisoner sought to maintain his new self-identity.

I have pointed out, through the comparison that inmates made between religion and Psychology, some of the ingredients necessary for a perspective to become an agent of change: there must be motivation to change on the part of the individual concerned; the perspective must be understood by them and defined as useful; the perspective must be taken up by the individual of their own free choice; it should not be composed of a set of rigid 'techniques' but act as a vehicle for self-evaluation, and should take into account differences between individuals; positive aspects of the individual should be emphasised over negative; and some sort of relationship should be negotiated between the individual and those mediating the discourse to them. Also apparent from the discussion is the importance of taking into account the position of a discourse of change relative to the context or situation that the individual is in. Some of the ingredients for change that I have identified might be particular to the prison context. For instance, treating inmates as individuals rather than as a group seems particularly important to those who are stigmatised by both society and themselves because of their status as prisoners/criminals. Similarly, those living in a repressive institutional regime are likely to define voluntary participation as particularly important. I have also shown that the status of psychology within the prison involved close associations with risk assessment and the governance of prisoners. Those individuals involved in such activities were therefore unlikely to be trusted, and the perspective was unlikely to be defined as helpful.

Throughout this chapter and previous chapters, numerous references have been made to changes in self-identity. It seems from the evidence presented that self-identity did change as a result of religious conversion and yet this, I contend, was not the primary change that occurred. Looking at what it was that changed for these individuals provides

us with another way in which religion is different from other discourses of change such as Psychology. Prisoner 32 began to uncover this in the following excerpt,

*I think that err, psychologists tend to focus on err, practical changes in attitude you know trying to re-educate, alter the thinking patterns and styles, cognitions, err whereas I believe that a faith leads you into a deeper understanding of what you are as an individual and what you are capable of being as an individual on a deeper, spiritual level...*

Prisoner 32

Prisoner 9 also made reference to the point that psychology did not affect life in the same way as religion, it seemed to rest on prescribed responses and did not appear to be relevant to everyday life,

*I've done enhanced thinking, anger management, I've done every course under the sun, but it's not like the Quakers, it's just writing what they want.*

Prisoner 9

Rather than altering ways of thinking about various issues, religion locates a theory of the individual and change within a much wider 'theory of everything'. As discussed above, and throughout the last chapter, conversion involves not just a change in the way that self is defined, but a thoroughgoing change in perspective. I will now turn to an analysis of this change.

### ***What Changes?***

The changes in self-identity that have been identified throughout this discussion were, I contend, part of a more pervasive process of change. This change is usefully analysed using Berger and Luckmann's (1966) concept of the *symbolic universe*. They defined this as,

...an all embracing frame of reference, which now constitutes a universe in the literal sense of the word, because *all* human experience can now be conceived of as taking place *within* it.

(Berger and Luckmann 1966, 114, original emphasis)

Symbolic universes are apprehended as 'full-blown and inevitable totalities' (Pg. 115) which order reality, bestowing meaning upon it in such a way that even solitary experiences, and the entirety of the biography of the individual, are conceived of in its terms and 'Experiences belonging to different spheres of reality are integrated by incorporation in the same, overarching universe of meaning.' (Pg. 115). The individual who adopts a certain symbolic universe locates him/herself in the world, and in reality in general, in terms of the interpretive framework it provides, and it becomes the taken-for-granted mode of existence within the world.

These prison converts had adopted a new symbolic universe through which to interpret their lives: that of religion, or more specifically, Christianity. Their religious world view provided an overarching framework through which they interpreted reality. In this section I will look at the evidence for this change and what it meant for these individuals.

Conceptualising this change as one which involved adopting a new symbolic universe takes in all the aspects of change which were mentioned by the prisoners, some of which were cited at the outset of this chapter. During the telling of their stories, the prisoners made reference to a change of this sort, most were aware that it was not just one aspect of their lives that had changed,

*I honestly can't describe it, I just know it's changed me, the, the way of life and the way I think about things...*

Prisoner 34

*I've changed the way I look at the world...*

Prisoner 9

*I mean my outlook on life is totally different...*

Prisoner 33

*I see the world in a different light... nature err, I mean you look at a tree and it's not just a big green thing that's in the garden or in the field, but you think it's all, you know it's just all part of God's plan to make the world beautiful for us, and so many people they, they never even looked at flowers, they can tell you oh that's such and such a flower but they never really look at them or animals and birds.*

Prisoner 7

By adopting the symbolic universe of Christianity these individuals attained a new framework through which to interpret every aspect of reality, a framework which integrated all spheres of life. Christianity is not just a set of beliefs but a way of living life and being in the world. Some of the inmates made this point with regard to the differences between Christianity and psychology, for example,

*...psychology is just words where Christianity is action, you actually live Christianity, but you don't live psychology, I prove psychology wrong time and time again, like I wrap them up in knots, tie them up in knots with psychology, so psychology does have its usefulness, but religion, there's not a man that can disprove it to me yet... that was the biggest challenge when I tried to prove it wrong but I couldn't.*

Prisoner 33

Others made similar comments about Christianity being a way of living,

*... it's a case of sort of living God's words and not just saying them.*

Prisoner 6

*[It is] a way of looking at things and a way that we don't want to think about I suppose, Christian morality, Christian ethics in relation to how one is living one's life...*

Prisoner 1

Throughout the section in the last chapter concerning prisoners' orientation towards the future, I concluded that it was their lifestyle and way of organising life that had changed. This can be conceptualised as the result of the adoption of a new religious symbolic universe.

Berger and Luckmann's (1966) perspective concurs with the viewpoint of these prisoners that psychological theories by themselves do not constitute a symbolic universe, something which orders, and gives meaning to, life in its entirety. They viewed psychological interpretations as grounded in a wider universe of meaning. Psychology cannot be viewed as a 'grand narrative' in the same way as religion or science. This is another reason why Christianity was seen to be more effective in promoting change. The changes that resulted from the adoption of a Christian symbolic universe were more extensive than would be possible through the use of psychological techniques.

Throughout the discussion in this and the preceding two chapters I have presented evidence of the way in which the adoption of a religious symbolic universe, a 'sacred canopy' (Berger 1969), impacted upon attitudes to self, relationships, and life in general. The way in which self and relationships could be interpreted in a new way was demonstrated in the accounts of inmates,

*I'm more, I love this new person, this person I want to get to know him more err, the old person I hate you know because now I realise that that isn't the person that God wanted me to be, this person I could get to like you know, there's something about this person which is good. I see people in a different way, I see women, particularly girls, I see them as people with their own rights, able to say no, you know and I respect them straight away, I accept the person, like speaking to you this afternoon... I respect you as you and that is a big difference in me...*

Prisoner 5

*I think the major thing it's [Christianity] taught me is life's not just about yourself, it's about getting things in order, not being too greedy, not being too gullible, and not being self-conscious... simplicity is what Christianity is all about, don't just think about yourself, think about what your actions might do to other people before you do it, that's what I've learnt, I'm more thoughtful of what, if I do this who's it going to effect, if I do that who's it going to effect, hang on a sec, and I think things through, it's*

*taught me not to be so gullible, that's another thing it's taught me, because no matter what actions you do or what action you take, I can always involve other people, whether you care for 'em or whether you don't care for 'em, it always effects somebody so spare a thought for them, that's what I think Christianity's taught me, it's opened me up to be a lot easier with myself and a lot more thoughtful before I act, where I didn't before, I just acted and thought sod the consequences, and I think I'm a hundred times better than what I was and before I finish I'll probably be a thousand times better than... because you always improve, things are always changing.*

Prisoner 33

Within this religious universe exist the particular rules and guidelines for action which it advocates. Many of those who were interviewed talked of feeling more in control of their lives since becoming Christians. This can be attributed to having adopted a perspective that has an interpretation and an answer for all eventualities. I discussed previously how decision making and problem solving were rendered less problematic after conversion. This was because converts acquired taken-for-granted recipes for action and places to go to seek guidance such as the Bible, the chaplain, other Christians or directly to God through prayer,

*...he almost set a set of guidelines down now that, that because I know he's there err, I know where I'm going sort of within those guidelines you know, me rule book of things but I, I feel, I just genuinely feel that I, err, there's a heaviness about you when you're upset about anything i'nt there err and it's not there anymore, it's not there anymore, that's probably the best way to describe it because it isn't, I can't... you know and say how it's changed it's just that the, the things that normally, everyday things that get on top of you don't matter really.*

Prisoner 6

*...it's [Christianity] given me a, what's the word, a sort of course to go along, to sort of stay within the parameters of normality...*

Prisoner 2

*...it's [the Bible] shown me err, you know what I mean it's err saying which ways to go in life you know what I mean and you know what I mean, I'm going to go this way in life, it's took me back, it's really stunned me you know what I mean.*

Prisoner 14

*...it's a freedom in that, how can I put it err, to enjoy nature, to enjoy God's world err, to know that you're never alone because God's always with us, he's always supporting us err, there's no holes in life err, it's just a matter of asking the Lord and he's there, he always answers out prayers err, whereas before it was how can I do it, how should I do something err,*

*how would Jo Bloggs do it you know whether I'm doing it right, now I just trust in the Lord and he will guide my footsteps and it's that sort of a freedom...*

Prisoner 7

These rules, codes and ways of interpreting reality which belong to the symbolic universe of religion were useful to prisoners because, as Berger and Luckmann (1966) stated, they incorporate different spheres of reality into the same universe of meaning. The role that Christianity had in the lives of prison converts provides a good example of the way in which a religious symbolic universe was able to integrate spheres of life that might be regarded as incompatible: inside the prison and the outside world. I have already outlined various ways in which this occurred, it is necessary to briefly summarise these in order to provide a clearer picture of the changes that occur as a result of the adoption of a new symbolic universe.

In Chapter 5 I noted that, for prison converts, future orientation, role and purpose in life, relationships and group membership were based not on prison life or on life outside but were rooted in beliefs about God's plan, doing God's work and membership of the Christian community. Life was not lived with reference to prison rules, to how they organised their lives prior to their sentence, or to what would happen on the outside after release. Rather, it was organised according to God's rules and plan for their lives. This provided an important break with the prison regime and an important psychological advantage in coping with prison life and, for some, uncertainties about release.

I also outlined, at the beginning of this chapter, the way in which religion impacted upon the definition of self and how this too transcended the prison environment and the prisoner status. With reference to their identity as converts, or Christians, these inmates were able to overcome negative feelings about self and imputations about self made by others, substituting for these evaluations of themselves derived from interaction with the Christian community and theories about humanity in Christian doctrine. They were able to conceive of themselves and orient themselves towards the world on the basis of their 'master role' (Snow and Machalek 1983) as convert/Christian.

The symbolic universe of Christianity provided such an all encompassing canopy of meaning for these individuals that it even had ready made ways to discount competing definitions of reality. I demonstrated in the last chapter that this was primarily done by discounting the opinions of those who were not Christians, regarding them as misguided and not in possession of the Truth. Those people regarded as significant, and who had a nomic function for the individual, providing confirmation that reality was as they saw it, were reordered so that those who shared their beliefs performed this function. In many cases God was placed at the top of this hierarchy of significant others.

So, the change in symbolic universe gave rise to a canopy of meaning under which all of life was lived and all of reality was apprehended. The negotiation of a new self-identity using the new interpretive framework was just one part of this. Self-identity was maintained and continually negotiated through reflection and interaction. The

following section looks at how this was achieved and how the new symbolic universe gave rise to the changes described by inmates.

### *Change in Everyday Life.*

#### *Negotiation of Self-Identity in Interaction.*

It is possible to see, by considering the stories told by prisoners about changes in themselves and their actions, the way in which self-identity was put into practice as an 'acting out' of the new way in which they interpreted themselves and their actions. Their stories also demonstrate how self-identity was continually negotiated in interaction.

The evaluation of self gained from the new symbolic universe not only made individuals happy, giving them a new sense of self worth, but led to different presentations of self in interaction,

*I've just totally changed, I'm a better person err, I don't go out of me way to harm people now, don't go out me way to just survive, you know I just trust you know it's a lot better, it's a lot better, I'm a lot happier in myself err, I've got a lot more beliefs, I've got a lot more understanding about myself and I'm actually worth something now, whereas before I wasn't, I wasn't worth anything, you know I was just an object that certain people played with when they wanted to and just abused, did whatever they wanted to.*

Prisoner 22

The fact that Prisoner 22 believed himself to be of worth led to different ways of interacting where he didn't abuse others or let himself be abused. Many of the inmates talked about how they had grown in confidence due to the new way of looking at themselves, and consequently engaged in different behaviour,

*... more bubbly, more outgoing, more confident because I didn't have any confidence, things like that, and I was really shy you know, and then when I was told once to, if I could read a sermon at the front in front of everybody, a passage out the Bible, I thought I can't be doing that, that's not me, and I just seemed to get up and, in front there, and I just said the passage you know like I'd been doing it all me life and I couldn't believe myself I'd done it, and just sat down again and thought is that really me?*

Prisoner 34

*I mean basically I'm measuring how I've come on by, by the things that I'm able to do that I wouldn't have thought of doing before this happened...*

Prisoner 6

It is helpful here to draw from the theory of Goffman (1959) regarding the way in which the self is negotiated as it is presented to an audience. That audience, whether physically present or imagined, either accept the self that is presented and collude with the individual in their perception of themselves, or do not accept it, prompting forced re-evaluation of that perception. As a result of the reinterpretation of themselves that followed conversion, these individuals were able to present a new self-identity to others. This self-identity was maintained by positive reinforcement from their audience, and individuals grew in confidence as their new identity was accepted. Goffman (1959) was clear that this audience can be made up of real or imaginary, present or absent, others. In this case the new self-identity was accepted in the eyes of converts by both the Christian community and God, the latter giving a powerful means of affirmation at times when appropriate others were absent. Goffman (1959) regarded this as the way in which self is continually negotiated in everyday life. It is something which is practised and modified according to an ongoing interplay between the individual and the audience,

The individual stakes out a self, comments on having done so, and comments on his commenting, even while the others are taking the whole process into consideration in coming to their assessment of him, which consideration he then takes into consideration in revising his view of himself.

(Goffman 1972, 396)

The prisoners also talked about the way in which their behaviour, and attitude, towards others had changed. Here again we can see the way in which the adoption of a new symbolic universe gave rise to a new interpretation of situations and the presentation of a revised self-identity. The new symbolic universe allowed situations and other people to be construed in a different way, leading to a change in behaviour. This was particularly evident in the stories of several inmates who stressed that they had changed because they no longer acted violently towards others,

*I could tell you loads where God's really, he's really blessed me in here. Another one, a guy chucked a cup of tea straight in my face, followed by the cup straight of a hot boiler, yeah, so like that's trying to obey God because I won't fight back, because like you're called to turn the other cheek now, now at one point I'd have just done him there and then, but like I won't do it now, I won't fight back...*

Prisoner 22

*...I got nicked eighty five times you know in the first couple of years but I haven't been nicked for fourteen years now, I've never, and I find that I'm a good talker now, I've got confidence, I never get in a fight or nothing I dampen it down, I always knock the window out and give 'em a cigarette, whereas before I'd have blew, I've got tranquillity in me now that wasn't there.*

Prisoner 9

*[I've changed in] every way, completely, my life has completely changed now... I can walk out in the street now and somebody will swear at me or slap me and I'll just walk away from it and at one stage I couldn't do that.*

Prisoner 10

*...I'm on D wing, 65% of my wing are in for sex offences, now I'm in for killing a sex offender, right now a few year ago you wouldn't have put me in a jail like this because I'd have gone round setting cells on fire and everything, shows how much I've changed, I actually help people who are sex offenders, now I couldn't have done that years ago, that's how big of a change it is, I try to help people.*

Prisoner 33

Prisoner 33 emphasised the extent of this change in attitude,

*I never thought me I'd get down on me knees and pray in front of people like I actually have done, and since then... everything about me has just changed, every single thing about, the way I do things, the way I treat people, the way I treat screws, I hated every screw, I wouldn't speak to the screws, I hated them, the way that I treat sex offenders, the way that I treat granny bashers, the way I treat drug dealers, the way I treat all different types of people, everything just changed, they's exactly the same as me, they's nay different.*

Prisoner 33

He came to define others using the Christian beliefs about equality mentioned earlier. This change in the definition of others led to changed definitions of situations, and therefore changed behaviour. A change in behaviour represented the presentation of a different self-identity in interaction.

Other people responded to inmates on the basis of this new identity. As a consequence of this, these individuals, their actions being more sociable and conforming, found that their new identity was accepted by others and attributed positive regard. It was thus maintained as both subjectively plausible and successful in interaction. Prisoner 14 gave an example of the way in which the new self he was presenting had been accepted positively by the prison officers,

*I think I look back now err, I think err if I didn't come a Christian in here I think I still would have been the same person I was err aggressive, I couldn't give a monkey's really about things. But err becoming a Christian has changed me all, has changed me you know what I mean, me attitude and everything has just changed you know what I mean. Err with the officers and that who are here, well they've seen a lot of change in me you know what I mean, since I've come into church, and they couldn't*

*believe it you know what I mean like, they've really praised me you know what I mean for what I've done and that so I've never looked back.*

Prisoner 14

Through this change in attitude and action, these individuals came to view themselves as better people. The change in perspective was *experienced* as a change in themselves. Prisoner 6 told of how he had experienced a change in himself, demonstrating the way in which adoption of a new perspective is so closely linked, even in mundane consciousness, to the adoption of a new self-identity,

*...I think I have a lot more time for others err, I try and , oh how shall I put it, basically I'm not, I try and help anybody who's in here err, if they were asking me to do something that weren't illegal basically err, but as far as it's changed me outlook on, on, on me life err, don't know err, I don't know if it's me outlook on life or the outlook on the way I intend to be for the rest of my life, that'd be a better way of putting it...*

Prisoner 6

Although the new self-identity was informed by the new symbolic universe and the perception of inmates that they were valued by both God and those in the Christian community, it had to be acted out in interaction in order to be recognised by others, fully experienced by the individual and thus confirmed during everyday life.

Dealings with others also gave prisoners a chance to act out the roles they believed they had in the Christian community. Prisoner 7 talked about how he had come to define others differently from his new perspective, in relation to his perceived new role. The self-identity which he presented in interaction was informed by this role and by the pervasive master-identity of Christian that he had adopted,

*I see them now, they, as brothers and sisters instead of just sort of, err bodies walking down the street... and I just want to go and tell them all about the Lord.*

Prisoner 7

Since the adoption of a new way of defining himself, the interests with which he entered interaction had changed. He thus saw every interaction with a non-Christian as a chance to act out his new identity as Christian, and his role as someone who could introduce others to the Christian faith.

As shown in Chapter 4, interaction with God was an important part of the conversion process and continued to be important in the everyday lives of individuals. This interaction worked in the same way as with concrete others in the prison. The way in which self-identity came to be defined as a result of interaction with God was then acted out in interaction with others,

*So I'd gone to church, chapel one Sunday and was having a little prayer and I thought well I'm not going to listen to their prayers, I'm going to say me own prayer, I said right I'm going to ask for forgiveness, it's up to you, you say you will forgive me, I'll ask for it, and again there wasn't no big flash of lights or anything, wasn't no voice in me head saying oh yeah great you're forgiven slap you on the back, right but I did feel better. Err, gradually over a few weeks a change came over me and instead of wanting to be, instead of me being bitter and angry and resentful and wanting to strut about and prove something to everybody, I'm now err, for want of a better word I'm compassionate and so I've even helped guys on the wing themselves.*

Prisoner 23

*...I had no self worth and now, since I've known God like he's changed me, he's turned me around. I now care about people, I now love... I now can give love, I might find it hard but I can give it... because I've experienced it from God.*

Prisoner 22

*...I'm starting to feel good about myself you know... I mean you have no feelings towards yourself it's hard to feel for anyone else sort of thing, but once you start loving yourself you know you can start to love again you know... I mean I've got a little lad there, he's coming up to eleven and err for seven of those years I've been in prison you know so I've got to make it up to him now you know so.*

Prisoner 16

I have demonstrated that the changes in self-identity talked about by prisoners were part of a much wider change, that of adopting a new symbolic universe through which to interpret self, others and situations. I have also shown that the adoption of this new interpretive perspective was not the end of the change process. The new self-identity was presented in interaction and underwent constant negotiation as others commented upon it. This new self-identity was maintained through the use of a Christian symbolic universe, but was also sustained through participation in the social world. Identity, even if stable, cannot be conceived of as a static entity, it is constantly evolving and undergoing negotiation.

From Goffman's (1959) perspective, I have now reached the end point for analysis, showing how self-identity was presented and negotiated in interaction in the lives of these prisoners. Examination of their stories, however, reveals that another process occurred in the negotiation and maintenance of their new self-identity. Unsurprisingly, given the analysis in Chapter 4, this process involved self-reflection.

## Reflective Processes in the Negotiation of Self-Identity.

The new interpretive framework which came from the Christian symbolic universe provided prisoners with a new way in which to reflect upon themselves and the changes they experienced as a result of conversion. It also prompted them to reinterpret their biography as a whole. In this section I will look at the way in which inmates reflected upon the changes they had experienced and the way, following conversion, they conceived of their whole biography. Firstly, I will look at how they talked about their past and present selves, and whether this had a function in terms of the ongoing negotiation and maintenance of self-identity.

### *The Discontinuous Self.*

Examination of the stories of these individuals revealed an interesting split between the way in which they talked about their pre-crime, pre-prison selves and the selves who committed their crime. It is not surprising, especially for those serving life sentences, to see a radical discontinuity in self-narrative at the point of committing the crime, throughout this thesis I have shown that this was the case. Talking about themselves in the present, the prisoners still distanced themselves from the self who committed their crime or crimes,

*It's unbelievable the way things have changed, I, I, when I'm thinking now, when I look back and I think no that can't have been me you know, it's hard to sink in it's like well I did do that but you know, it wasn't the same person who was doing that you know.*

Prisoner 16

In this way they continued to dissociate themselves from the person who committed the crime. They had, however, also found religious interpretations of these events which allowed them to be incorporated back into biography. Prisoner 5 experienced a complete split between who he was when he committed the crime and who he was following conversion. He even expressed dislike for the former individual, but could successfully incorporate that period of life into his biography using a Christian interpretation of why this former self was bad,

*I'm more, I love this new person, this person I want to get to know him more err, the old person I hate you know because now I realise that that isn't the person that God wanted me to be, this person I could get to like you know, there's something about this person that is good.*

Prisoner 5

The good that he was able to see in himself was rooted in a Christian interpretation. This new way of conceiving of himself constituted the most important aspect of his conversion,

*The benefit for me is being the true me... Being the person that Jesus wants me to be, being the person that's created in God's image, the person that he wants me to be, that is me.*

Prisoner 5

Others also gave explanations for their crimes which had clearly been interpreted from their new Christian perspective, and which allowed them to be incorporated into biography and the narrative of self running through it,

*I don't think he [God] brought me in here, I think it's the Devil that brought me in here, possibly because he knew it was getting time for me to become a Christian, and it's the way I see it anyway that, at the time the Devil was, got the upper hand, unfortunately resulted in a death, but I think the Lord's put it all to good use for his praise, you know I, it's just so hard to explain without trying to make excuses you know because I'm not trying to excuse myself, I think it was the Devil's work obviously, and that the Lord's just used that to his advantage now.*

Prisoner 7

*... it was a slow process, people had been praying for me for a number of years, of course Jo Muggins here didn't know about it, I was the last one to know about it but, you know all these things happen for a specific reason, I believe they all happened for a specific reason, that was to get me to the point where God could actually speak to me so I could actually hear his words, and that's exactly what happened...*

Prisoner 5

This way of talking about themselves not only provided them with continual confirmation that they have changed, but might have been highlighted during the interview to emphasise change and to present a positive self for acceptance and confirmation. Biography was thus reinterpreted using the new interpretive scheme, allowing a continuous self-narrative to be constructed. Their crime could then be successfully incorporated into each individual's story.

### ***The Continuous Self.***

At the same time as prisoners sought to incorporate their criminal acts into biography, they reflected upon life before their crime and imprisonment. As they did this, they identified positive attributes that might provide a sense of continuity in their self-narrative, and a sense that they had possessed positive attributes before. The way in which some inmates talked about this almost seemed to indicate the experience of a core self.

Links were made between the way they conducted themselves prior to their crime and the self that had been constructed through Christianity,

*I think I had a tendency to behave as the textbook Christian's supposed to behave in any case. I've always liked doing charity work and err helping people and things like that.*

Prisoner 2

In making this link Prisoner 2 made the path he had chosen seem an inevitable and understandable choice, thus legitimating his decision to both himself and those to whom he told his story. His behaviour had to some extent remained consistent, and Christianity gave him a reason to act as he did and a set of guidelines on how to continue.

Similarly, Prisoner 33 felt that he had previously acted in a way which was congruent with Christian ways of living. He believed that, through Christianity, he had found guidelines which would enable him to do this more successfully,

*...I've always been one to help people, but I used to, I wasn't organised enough to help people in the way I should be helping them, being a Christian and seeing how certain individuals help certain individuals do certain things right, there's been a few ideas I've brought up in different prisons...*

*...my future plans is I want to help people when I get out, I mean before I come away, when the lads used to go drinking or boozing or whatever they wanted to do, I used to go round to old peoples' paths in winter time and shift the snow from their paths... I used to go across to the woods, saw trees down, you know get plenty of wood for 'em over Christmas, even then I had err, just something about me that I like to help people, I could help anybody but I couldn't help myself, and I think being a Christian's taught me how to help myself as well as other people, before you can help somebody else, get your own life sorted out first and then try to help somebody else.*

Prisoner 33

Many of those who made a link between their Christian lives and their pre-crime lives seemed to concentrate on how they had acted in relation to others,

*...I know I've always had good inside, I'll do anything for anyone, I've always been that way, if anyone asked me to dig their garden I'd dig it you know and err, I'd do anything for anyone you know but, but there was one part of me, another part of me that used to fight against it you know, it was a conflict in my mind all the time you know and err... and people have told me I've got good inside me you know and err, the lady I call me Mum, she's been like a step Mum for coming up twenty year now and she's never turned her back on me you know...*

Prisoner 16

*I see a better life for myself now, err, like you know I don't class myself as a bad villain you know what I mean... you know I'm a gentleman, or was a gentleman you know what I mean I looked after people, people respect me and like me... I've always been good to people, always, always been good to people, everybody tells me that...*

Prisoner 25

The focus on how they had acted in relation to others shows that inmates previously attempted to find good in themselves through their actions. It seems that Christianity not only gave them a rationale for the continuation of such action, but also provided additional ways to find self-worth that did not rely solely on their actions towards others. Their attempt to find continuity between their pre-crime selves and their Christian selves was aimed at the same goal as their explanations for criminal behaviour. Both were attempts to construct a continuous self-narrative, a story about their lives that was understandable to both them and others.

These, however, were not the only prominent features in the talk of prison converts that indicated how self-identity was reflexively negotiated. The positive way in which they talked about themselves and the changes they had experienced also contributed to this negotiation.

### ***Emphasis on the Positive.***

The way in which prisoners emphasised the good in themselves, and the positive nature of the change they had experienced, took two forms. Firstly, they emphasised positive personal characteristics that had been achieved through Christianity. Secondly, they compared the changes they had experienced, which they perceived as positive, with negative changes that they feared could have befallen them as a result of living in prison.

It seems natural for people who have made major life decisions to want to stress the positive nature of these decisions to others. Thinking about the way in which conversion to Christianity seemed to function for these individuals, it was not surprising that they spoke of their decision and themselves in a positive manner. It also appears that the process of talking about, and reflecting upon, self and change actively maintained their new conception of self. The act of concentrating on the positive aspects of self in reflection, bringing to mind ways in which the present self was an improvement on the self that existed before, led to increased commitment to the Christian way of life and an ongoing favourable perception of self.

As these individuals told me their stories they might also have been presenting a particularly positive version of themselves in order to convince me of the efficacy/plausibility of their decision and to persuade me to define them in a positive way. The more people they could persuade to evaluate them positively, the bigger the community that could be brought to mind during self-reflection to confirm their own definition of themselves. Although there was a physical community with whom they had

regular contact and who confirmed their self-identity in interaction, according to Mead (1967) individuals also make reference to an invisible reference group in the negotiation of self during reflection. This reference group is made up of individuals with whom they come into contact regularly and who can be easily brought to mind, individuals with whom they have had one off contact like myself, collectivities such as the church community as a whole, and those such as God who have a special role in negotiation of self-identity through self-reflection. Mead's (1967) theory of self allows us to appreciate how self-identity can be negotiated through such reflection.

Some inmates talked as if Christianity had allowed them to uncover positive characteristics they hadn't realised they possessed,

*... inside I'm very compassionate, I'm, I'll sit down and talk to people, I'll listen to people. Inside I've got a lot of love that I didn't realise I had...*

Prisoner 23

Others regarded these positive attributes as something new,

*...I couldn't argue politics, I couldn't argue nowt, I were just a thick local yob basically, and now there's not a debate where I cannot enter and I know what I'm talking about whether it be politics, down to earth problems... I'm brilliant at solving things and... sorting things out, that's what Christianity's done for me, it's helped me sort problems out, instead of trying to do everything at once, slow down, one day at a time and just plan things out properly.*

Prisoner 33

*... it's made me come out of myself, made me want to get to know people a lot more and made me more friendly towards people... I'm saying thanks and please a lot more so I've become more pleasant in that way, I have noticed that and err, because I've noticed that it's err, made me stick wi' Christianity more err, because there is something there that I've noticed in my life that has changed.*

Prisoner 24

Some of the attributes they identified as important were linked specifically to religious activity,

*... [I] can hit home where certain other people cannot hit home, and I've talked loads of people into coming to church...*

Prisoner 33

All were statements of pride in themselves. Prisoner 9 summed up the sentiment that seemed to be common to all those who were interviewed,

*I like the way I am now, I really like the way I am.*

Prisoner 9

Reflection on what had happened to them, and emphasis on the positive aspects of themselves, was juxtaposed in converts' stories with the negative changes which prison life might have exacted upon them without the protective function of religion. As discussed in Chapter 1, there is a general tendency for prisoners, especially those serving long sentences, to fear detrimental changes in themselves which may be an irresistible part of living in prison. Those who had converted seemed to regard Christianity as something like an antidote to these attacks on the self. Their imaginings of what might have happened constituted an important part of the reflexive negotiation and maintenance of self-identity.

Some based their evaluation and their fear on observations of others who had been imprisoned at similar times to them,

*...I'm here for a reason what the Lord wants me to be here and I'll be here for as long as he wants me to be here for, there's a reason for it and err, I'm not err, I'm glad I haven't suffered that much because I seen err, seen from other people who at the time who started sentences with me and err they way they ended up and I ended up, I'm quite happy and relieved to know that I didn't end up like that... because err you might have heard this saying that there's only two ways of doing sentences you become either a cabbage or a junkie... it's a good job I've got Christianity to go onto or otherwise as I said I would have become a cabbage...*

Prisoner 10

Prisoner 32 regarded his conversion as an antidote to the effects of prison. The focus of his problems had been the crisis in self-identity resulting from killing someone. This was alleviated by his adoption of a religious symbolic universe. He considered the way in which people perceived him prior to his crime and the way that they would perceive him in the present, concluding that they would not recognise much of a change in him. He then compared this seeming lack of change to the way he might have been without his faith,

*I think I have changed in as much as I am err, more faithful now, I am, more deeply committed to my faith and more willing to talk about the fact that I have a love for Jesus, I have a personal relationship... on the surface as a kind of man, as a person to meet in the street, person to see in the pub or you know at a party or something, I don't think I've changed with regard to how people perceive me, I think other people would say that I haven't changed, people do say that, they say oh you haven't really changed you know we thought that prison would have you know made you round shouldered and depressed and you know, err and it is a bit depressing sometimes but you know I don't let it get me down, so I don't, other people don't see me as being a changed person... but I know, I'm*

*conscious of how I would have been by now, as a result of this imprisonment, without my faith. So I have changed really, in real terms I think a politician would say... I think I would have been a wreck by now, but my faith has grown in relation to the negative effects of the prison upon me... an antidote.*

Prisoner 32

It was particularly important to inmates that they were not affected by the prison environment. Those who were most concerned about it were individuals serving life sentences,

*We're not professional criminals... most lifers aren't, most lifers have never committed a crime in their lives before this and wouldn't commit another one, we're an odd bunch because we really don't fit into this institution and it doesn't like us because we're all, a lot of the lads are fairly intelligent, and a lot of professional backgrounds and it doesn't, it doesn't sit quietly with institutionalisation you know err, we reel against it because we've still got a semblance of you know a real person, normal person left I suppose...*

Prisoner 8

It appeared to be important for the maintenance of a new positive self-identity, that the source of any change that inmates experienced was derived from something other than the prison system. This was reflected in their accounts of change. Most of the changes were, of course, attributed to conversion, but some were acknowledged as being influenced by other processes, also unrelated to the prison system, such as ageing. None were ever attributed to life in prison, and so it seemed an important part of the construction of a tenable self-narrative that this should not be the case. Changes resulting from imprisonment could not have been defined positively by inmates and would have had a detrimental affect on the construction of self-identity. It was therefore important for prisoners to attribute any changes they had experienced either to their own decisions, for example, the decision to convert and the consequent influence of God and Christianity (defined as entirely positive), or to natural processes such as ageing. Changes which came about due to life in prison or their prisoner status may be seen as directly opposed to these criteria: as enforced, negative, unnatural and the result of a regime that they sought to transcend.

Accounting for change, then, involved stressing these points. The following are three replies to a question about what had influenced the changes they described, was it Christianity, prison or something else?,

*...I think it's to do with the Quakers and age...*

Prisoner 9

*Because of Christianity yeah, it's changed me an awful lot.*

Prisoner 18

*Because I'm a Christian, no prison wouldn't have changed that, because I've got a different set of beliefs now...*

Prisoner 8

I have shown, in the preceding three sections, that prisoners constructed a narrative of self and negotiated self-identity through reflexive processes. The rewriting of the self-narrative was part of a larger process of rewriting biography. This happened as a result of the adoption of a new symbolic universe which gave rise to new ways of interpreting not only life as lived in the present, but experiences in the past and how they fit together in storied form. In the following section I will consider how this reinterpretation of biography was demonstrated in converts' accounts.

### ***Biographical Reinterpretation.***

The reinterpretation of biography following conversion has been discussed in a variety of literature (Berger and Luckmann 1991, Berger 1977, Snow and Phillips 1980, Snow and Machalek 1984, Taylor 1978). Biographical reinterpretation has also been regarded by some (e.g. Bruner 1995, Gergen and Gergen 1983) as a process which is ongoing throughout the life course, being most obvious at turning points in life such as marriage or retirement. This process is most thoroughgoing, however, following the adoption of a new symbolic universe that provides a new scheme through which to interpret past experience. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued,

The old reality, as well as the collectivities and significant others that previously mediated it to the individual, must be reinterpreted *within* the legitimating apparatus of the new reality. The reinterpretation brings about a rupture of the subjective biography of the individual... Everything preceding the alternation is now apprehended as leading towards it... everything following it as flowing from it's new reality. This involves a reinterpretation of past biography *in toto*, following the formula, 'Then I *thought*... now I *know*'.

(Berger and Luckmann 1966, 179. Original italics)

As biography is reinterpreted, new links are made between previous events and stages of life as they are fitted into, and reconceptualised by, the new interpretive scheme. Some events acquire new significance and meaning in the light of conversion, and biography is constructed as a story telling of the 'road to conversion'. The various elements of biography are ordered into a meaningful whole which attains the status of ultimate objective reality for the individual.

The stories of those who were interviewed for this study upheld the assertion that to convert means to reinterpret biography. There were three main themes which constituted this biographical reinterpretation and fit in with what Berger and Luckmann (1966) asserted above.

Firstly, life was reinterpreted by converts as a gradual progression towards conversion. Events acquired new significance as evidence that God was working in their lives prior to their ability to recognise that this was happening. There seemed to be a belief that God had singled them out for conversion and had been working towards that goal. Prisoner 7 believed that this process was occurring in the lives of all those who were not Christians,

*...I think the Lord's made use of it [his life before conversion], yeah I mean I think even to the complete atheist he's working in them and setting a framework knowing that one day they will become Christians, coming to know the Lord and it will help them.*

Prisoner 7

Because he saw his life as a journey towards conversion, he did not see a link between imprisonment and conversion. He believed that wherever he had been at that particular time, he would have converted because the time was right. Conversion happened at the point at which God's preparations were complete. I asked him if the experience of his crime and imprisonment had been a major factor in why he had converted at that particular time,

*...no I don't think it was, I think it was just that err, I think I was ready to hear the word for the first time err, whereas before you know the Lord used his preparing the way so that when I did hear it I still knew all the basics of the Bible you know you, err, I had it all in my head and it's just a matter of moving it down err fifteen inches.*

Prisoner 7

Here, as in other parts of his interview, he emphasised that his life, both in the present and before conversion, was lived in 'God's time'. This, again, demonstrates the efficacy of the religious symbolic universe in allowing the individual to transcend the various spheres of life in which they live, or have lived, and to construct a coherent, ordered and singular reality. Aspects of life became integrated according to the new interpretive scheme leading to a situation where *'Everything fits into place'* (Prisoner 7) as individuals looked back upon and considered life from their new perspective. As a result of this process converts were able to look upon their conversions as inevitable rather than driven by particular experiences. This is another example of the tendency of inmates to regard changes in their lives as unconnected to their imprisonment, and therefore untainted by the negative elements associated with it.

Prisoner 5's account also gave a sense that his whole life had been built around a journey towards conversion. He was more adamant than Prisoner 7 that God had been calling him throughout his life. He regarded the fact that he had not converted before as a result of his inability to recognise that this was happening. Of course, he was only able to recognise this once he had the conceptual apparatus with which to do it, after conversion. His story provides a good example of the way in which events and stages of

life can acquire new significance as a result of conversion. Following conversion he was able to see his life as a succession of calls from God that he did not respond to,

*...so over the years God was trying to call me and call me and I was just so deaf, so, so deaf, and I just didn't listen. But through the faithful prayers of... I believe in the end that I needed a very traumatic experience for me to grasp hold of the fact...*

Prisoner 5

Unlike Prisoner 7, he did see a role for his crime and imprisonment in his conversion. It was not, however, that his conversion was caused by these events, but rather that it allowed him to stop and hear God calling him, a process that had been ongoing throughout his life. In this way he could define conversion not as a reaction to committing a crime or being imprisoned, but as something which should have happened before, was part of God's will, and was a natural and inevitable part of his life. Like Prisoner 7, he felt that God was continually preparing him for conversion,

*So you know it was very strange for me, err to say I used to go to the church there on a Sunday afternoon for something to do you know, so somewhere along the line the word of God was being fed into me all the time, it's just that I didn't, wasn't capable of recognising what was happening.*

Prisoner 5

He recognised events as part of God's plan, but only after conversion had given him the vocabulary and way of viewing the world to recognise, or more precisely, reinterpret events in this way.

The new symbolic universe seemed to give such an all encompassing and novel way of looking at the world that converts experienced the process of reinterpreting biography as a process of seeing their life with new insight, seeing what was really there all along. Christianity provides an all encompassing reality which is so total, and provides order and meaning so successfully, that it is experienced as objective reality. Part of this success comes from the interpretation of alternative realities included within this reality. This was also demonstrated in Prisoner 5's story. He had previously been involved in a competing spiritual universe, witchcraft. The way in which he referred to this following his conversion to Christianity demonstrates the way in which past activities were reconceptualised and competing discourses were interpreted in such a way that they did not represent a threat to the new reality. Witchcraft is not merely devalued by the Christian perspective but actively defined as dangerous,

*Err for many you know wicker, they actually go into the wicker side of it, err and they think that's a very safe side, it's not, there's no such thing as a white witch, white witch and black witch are exactly the same err, they get their power from the same source, they don't get it from God, they think they do but they don't.*

Prisoner 5

The second theme that demonstrates how converts reinterpreted their life following conversion is their tendency to view events prior to conversion as divinely influenced. It seems that, following conversion, they began to apprehend previous events as being affected by God. They regarded this as evidence that he was always looking after them and waiting for them to become Christians. Many perceived the fact that they were still alive as solely God's doing,

*...I think God works in mysterious ways you know so, but it, I've always believed deep down someone has been looking after me for some reasons you know because like err, I should have been dead a number of times you know and err, I think anyone else would have been dead err, I've been stabbed three times, I've been ran over three times, I've had fifteen overdoses, accidental, I had a bad one in 1987 and err, it was me and two friends, we used to steal doctors bags you know at one time and, one time I had this bag of err, it had some morphine and pethadine and the full monty in it like you know and we were just digging for fun and, one of the guys died you know and err I was in a coma for five days... five days I was out you know and I died four times in five days, me heart had to be started again, and I think that should have shut me up for ... but you know it didn't like, I think it made me worse you know and err, I wasn't afraid of dying because I thought I was indestructible (laughs)... I don't know but for some reason I just kept getting back up you know and err I'm thinking like maybe that someone is looking after me you know and err, it's only been the last, since I got confirmed and you know I started opening me eyes a bit and think there really is a power greater than me own you know...*

Prisoner 16

*I can honestly say if I wasn't a Christian I'd be dead by now, I've tried suicide, that was before I started going to church and everything that... had a real bad patch and didn't tell anybody... luckily enough I'm not very good at making nooses, I'm still here, wasn't my time to go, or that's the way I look at it now.*

Prisoner 33

*... going back about fifteen year now... I'm sure to this day that I died right... it was the first time ever I'd wore a wet suit, never, ever, I just used to ski in shorts you know and err, I had this wet suit on but it was all zipped up and it was cut where the propeller had cut it, but all I had was*

*one scar there, and one there on me head. That, somebody saved me that day without a shadow of a doubt, and that's stayed with me all this time now, because if there's a time when I shouldn't ever be here it would've been that, and I can't say why that wet suit was all cut up and I weren't, I shall never answer that, I don't think anybody can, everybody said I should've been dead.*

Prisoner 25

*...he [inmate in army prison] tried to kill me several times quite bad actually, it was only through God now that I'm alive because there was a few bad times.*

Prisoner 22

In retrospect, using their new interpretive framework, these individuals felt that they could now work out what had *actually* happened to them. It was not their time to go, God had intervened on their behalf and so on. This process gave converts a sense of continuity. They felt that, even though they failed to recognise it, God had been at work in their lives before; he had always been with them, and their conversion represented the point at which they realised this. This again made conversion seem natural and inevitable. Inmates saw it as a process of coming to see the world as it really is, as having discovered ultimate truth. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) asserted, conversion involved the formula 'then I thought, now I know', the new symbolic universe providing assurance to individuals that they were in possession of the objective truth about themselves and the world.

Prisoner 22's story was full of instances of 'realisation' about what had *really* happened in the past. I asked him why he had asked for a Bible the first time he was in an Army prison,

*I honestly can't answer why I asked for it, I know why now because it was God, but for me myself there's just no reason why I was asking for it, there's just no reason...*

Prisoner 22

This demonstrates the way in which conversion to a new symbolic universe allowed previously inexplicable events to be explained and incorporated successfully into a coherent biographical narrative. Another example from Prisoner 22's story concerned reflection upon his arrest and imprisonment. He found it difficult to explain why he did not shoot at the Police when they came to arrest him, but constructed a plausible explanation by reinterpreting the situation from his new perspective. Again, he regarded his reinterpretation of events as a process of discovering objective reality,

*...looking back on it God's peace was there, but I didn't know it at the time...*

Prisoner 22

It was not just the major events in life that were reinterpreted and fitted into the new way of construing biographical experience. Prisoner 8 reinterpreted his encounters with other individuals both prior to and following his conversion in this way,

*...people cross or seemed to cross, well in my experience have crossed my path at times when I probably I needed them more, perhaps it was divinely meant to be, sounds corny but when you look back at your life and you see so many very strange meetings, and you couldn't really, you couldn't really set them up to happen err, it makes you wonder you know, it made me wonder, you think oh... I call them God incidents...*

Prisoner 8

A series of meetings with various people may not have appeared to have any structure or link prior to conversion, but following the adoption of a new way of interpreting events, they gained a coherence, a new meaning, and served as a legitimation of the very beliefs which formed the basis of the new interpretive framework. Christianity, through this process, tends to be self-legitimizing as discussed at the end of Chapter 5.

The process of retrospective reinterpretation continued after conversion. As events occurred they were gradually incorporated into the biographical narrative, were given meaning derived from the Christian symbolic universe, and biography was reordered so as to make them fit neatly into the individual's story. Everything that happened to converts could, at some time, be reinterpreted as an answer to prayer. This was experienced as a realisation about what has *really* happened,

*...well I always think that by giving God the praise and asking him for help, it's always there and he answers prayers in one of three ways I think, yes, no, or wait, and although the human side of you might think err hurry up with an answer or I don't like the answer you've given me, err it can be years later you look back and you think yes Lord you were right, it worked out err, whereas the human side of you would have gone down road A, the Lord's guiding you down road B and then you find you get there a lot quicker and a lot easier...*

Prisoner 7

Converts tended to continually look back at events and 'uncover' answers to prayer, incorporating them into a coherent narrative.

According to Bruner (1995) we all engage in the process of biographical reinterpretation throughout our lives. Studying the talk of converts, however, particularly highlights the way in which this process happens. This is due to the distinctive language used by converts to define situations, and because the way of perceiving biographical experience undergoes major changes following conversion rather than more minor adaptations akin to those which may occur at various stages of the life course.

All the themes which have been identified from the way that the converts talked about, and reconceptualised, their past lives are related. They all constitute ways in which conversion was legitimated both to the converts themselves and to others. I will now address a third element of biographical reinterpretation that also made conversion seem an understandable and inevitable part of the life of the convert.

There was a tendency among converts to reconceptualise their former lives as incomplete, and to view Christianity as the missing piece of the jigsaw. As already shown, inmates regarded conversion as an experience that they would have eventually had, even if they had not been in prison. They also talked about their lives before imprisonment as if Christianity would have benefited them equally then as in their present situation. They believed that Christianity was what was missing in their lives and had made them complete. The words of Prisoner 7 conveyed this belief particularly well,

*...I dedicated my life to the Lord and since then I've had no err real problems, no problem that I couldn't overcome err, just handing them over to the Lord, he's taken them and I've been freer in prison than I ever was outside err, outside there was always a hole in my life, I tried all sorts err to fill that hole but nothing ever did, but now I realise that that hole was Jesus-shaped, Jesus has filled it, so now I'm completely free and at peace and I would say, very happy.*

Prisoner 7

Many talked about their former lives as times when they had been searching for something, although they were unable to say what it was. After conversion they were able to conceptualise Christianity as the missing element of life. They therefore felt that their lives had been made complete. This gave rise to a sense of stability and order. The missing element of life was something which, again, they could not define adequately before conversion. Some referred to their former lives as a series of attempts to find what they were missing. It is probable, however, that actions at the time were not experienced in that way. It was only in retrospect that they could be defined as such,

*I knew there was something missing from my life err, my wife died err several years ago err, before I came into prison, several years before and I was always err doing things to fill this emptiness, err I don't mean the emptiness from losing my wife but the emptiness in my life err, I got really involved with a lot of charity work to try and fill the space and it did work for so long and then the hole would reappear err, something I'm not proud of now but I got involved with women, I was sleeping around a lot err, that worked for a time but there was never anything that would fill the hole err whereas now I've got Jesus he's filled the hole and everything's fine.*

Prisoner 7

The missing element of life was only identified once an 'answer' had been found and they had new language through which to talk about their experience,

*I felt life there was, like I was before when I was younger, there was always something that was missing in life and, not something quite, I dunno it's, how can I put it, it's always as if there's not, there's something that should be there, that's missing in your life, and you're not quite sure what it is, but it's obvious what it is... it's just earthly things that get in the way isn't it you know.*

Prisoner 18

Prisoner 25 reiterated throughout his interview that he had always been looking for something, that he had never been happy, and that something had been missing in his life,

*I know when I was out there I was looking for something, without a doubt I was looking for something, and I think with me coming here that has definitely, maybe it's God's way of showing me this is where I want you to be you know, not in prison but the Christian side of things...*

*... when I'm out there I've been successful like money-wise and business-wise and I've had, I've had everything, I've had all the nice cars, everything to go with it, but I've never really been happy err, and since I've been, like prayed to God and that I sleep better, I feel better and I can cope with everything you know what I mean, it's not problem.*

*There was something missing err, could never, I didn't, well I wasn't happy anyway, and I don't think I was, I don't know err, being here now, I think this is all a big lesson for me... I've found all what I've been looking for really, maybe it's always been there, because Christianity and err Jesus and things that's always been in me mind, not every day of the week but it's always been there, I've been, I've actually found out that's where I want to be you know...*

Prisoner 25

His story is a good example of the way in which biography can be reinterpreted so that it gains a sense of objectivity and inevitability and so that conversion seems to fit in with life in its entirety. This demonstrates the tendency for people in general to construct a coherent biographical narrative which gives order and meaning to life (Berger 1963, Bruner 1995), and the more specific tendency of these prisoners to conceptualise their decision to convert, and the changes they experienced, as connected to their lives as a whole rather than their imprisonment alone.

I have shown, throughout this section, that Berger and Luckmann's (1966) assertion that conversion represents a powerful method of reordering life into a meaningful and coherent scheme was realised in the lives of these individuals. Part of this reorganisation and reinterpretation involved a reinterpretation of the narrative of the self which is always a part of biography. Its power was rooted in the adoption of a new

symbolic universe, a 'sacred canopy' (Berger 1969), which provided an all encompassing way of conceptualising reality.

### **Conclusion to Chapter 6.**

In this chapter I have discussed the accounts of change given by prison converts. These accounts demonstrate that Christian doctrine provided a particularly successful framework through which the self-identity of prisoners could be reconstructed. Ideas about the equality of individuals in the eyes of God, and about the opportunity for forgiveness fitted successfully into the way in which prisoners had started to try to reconstruct their self-identity following their crime and imprisonment. These Christian ideas enabled individuals to make a break with their past lives and the ways in which they were perceived by themselves and others as a result of them. They were thus able to construct new, positive self-identities and regain (or build for the first time) a sense of self-worth.

By making a comparison between inmates' attitudes to Christianity and psychology as agents of change, I identified several criteria that they regarded as important in ensuring that a particular discourse was a successful agent of change. Although some of these criteria were related directly to imprisonment, several of them may be regarded as applicable to personal change in any arena.

The criteria that were identified were as follows: there must be motivation to change on the part of the individual involved; the discourse of change that is available must be defined by the individual as relevant to them and their situation; for this to occur, it must be mediated to the individual in a way that is understandable to them; the perspective should then be taken up by the individual of their own free choice, not imposed upon them; it should also facilitate the individual's own self-evaluation rather than imposing impersonal, rigid standards upon them; finally, a supportive relationship should be negotiated between the individual and whoever is mediating the discourse of change to them. It is also necessary to consider the position of the discourse of change in relation to the context or situation of the individual. Religion was preferred by prisoners as a direct result of its position in the prison as unconnected to governance, and the connection of psychology to risk assessment and monitoring of inmates. It was also preferred because of its concentration on the positive attributes of inmates who needed a way in which to overcome negative evaluations of self made by both themselves and others.

The changes described by inmates not only concerned their self-identity, but their behaviour and the way they oriented to the world more generally. Changes in self-identity were theorised as part of a larger change, that of adopting a new symbolic universe. The symbolic universe of Christianity provided converts with an interpretive framework that was used to reinterpret not only self-identity, but relationships with others and perception of the world. This framework gave converts recipes for action, and a new basis from which to construct a coherent and plausible biographical story.

During the course of this chapter, as in Chapter 4, I emphasised the importance of both interactive and reflexive processes. The new self-identity and way of orienting towards the world was acted out and maintained in interaction. New definitions of self and others gave rise to different behaviour. The new symbolic universe and way of conceptualising self was further maintained by reflexive processes as individuals were able to rewrite their self-narrative using their new perspective. This perspective allowed them to emphasise some aspects of themselves, whilst making a break from those actions or traits that were seen as negative. The self-narrative which resulted was coherent and positive. This was also the case for the entire biographical narrative that individuals constructed. The new symbolic universe led to a thoroughgoing reinterpretation and reorganisation of life events in such a way as they attained order and meaning. In this way converts also constructed their conversions as events that were not dependent on their imprisonment, but applicable to their lives as a whole. Their decision to convert thus gained subjective plausibility and could also be accounted for in conversation with others.

The changes that I have detailed in this and previous chapters were all a consequence of the new interpretive framework. This informed both interactive and reflective processes of identity construction and maintenance. It was this new framework that also allowed converts to orient themselves successfully to life in prison and project themselves into the future. Accounting for their experiences in reflection, in everyday conversation, or in a situation like an interview, allowed continual negotiation of self-identity as a coherent narrative was constructed. According to, for example, Bruner (1995) and Glover (1989) this negotiation continues throughout the life course as slight modifications are made to the story to give it increasing coherence and meaning.

## Chapter Seven

### Concluding Remarks.

This thesis has been focused upon the question 'How can religious conversion in prison be understood sociologically?' In this section I will briefly sum up what was found by this study and how it contributes to sociological knowledge about imprisonment, religious conversion and personal change. I will also address the limitations of the study, and make reference to further research that could be pursued in order to extend our knowledge of some of the issues that this study has brought to light.

The objectives of the research were:-

- 1) To consider the processes through which self-identity is rendered problematic for those in prison.
- 2) To provide an account of the process of religious conversion in prison, particularly with regard to the meaning that conversion has for prison converts.
- 3) To analyse the way in which conversion to Christianity impacts upon the everyday lives of prison inmates and the processes through which commitment is maintained.
- 4) To analyse the process of personal change that can be seen as a result of conversion in the prison setting in such a way as to enhance our understanding of self-identity and personal change more generally.

These were explored by examining the stories told by prison converts. The themes that were identified in these accounts were discussed in Chapters 3-6.

In Chapter 1 I highlighted some of the problems with previous studies of imprisonment and religious conversion. Both fail to adequately consider the way in which the biographies of converts impacted upon the processes under investigation. Even those who considered strategies of adaptation brought into the prison from outside (Irwin 1970, Heffernan 1972) focused solely on the way that these strategies assisted life in the institutional environment. By focusing on the accounts of prison converts, this research identified various ways in which self-identity might be questioned prior to imprisonment, for example, in family relationships or as a result of committing a crime. Such problems may be felt by individuals more keenly than the problems of adapting to prison life, and therefore the strategies employed to assist them as they begin their lives in prison can be seen as a response primarily to non-institutional factors.

In Chapter 3 I identified a variety of ways in which self-identity was questioned for these individuals, both before and during their imprisonment. Such processes occurred throughout the lives of individuals, as a result of poor family relationships, situations which led to their crimes, the crimes themselves, the effect of the sentence, and an inability to satisfactorily project self-identity into the future. Such experiences

prompted reflection upon self-identity that occurred alongside the effects of the institutional regime. Not one of those who was interviewed was affected by the institutional regime alone; all talked of other ways in which their self-identity had been called into question.

The self-identity of prison inmates can therefore be understood as constrained by both reflexive and external processes. This research has built on the perspective of Cohen and Taylor (1972) who considered the role of ideology in adaptation to imprisonment, and the reflexive construction of successful ways of interpreting the prison and existing within it. This study has emphasised the importance of reflexive thought, not just in order to come to terms with the prison environment, but in considering a range of other issues brought to light by pre-prison events. For many of the individuals who were interviewed for this study, especially those who were serving life sentences for murder, the crime they had committed posed a bigger threat to self-identity than imprisonment. For many others, who had been in prison before, the way they were defined by family members, the impact of the sentence they were given, or the problems they perceived in successfully projecting themselves into the future, gave rise to problems where living in prison did not. The prison environment merely gave them time to reflect upon such issues and constrained the way in which self-identity could be reflexively reconstructed.

Although the importance of reflexive thought can be seen as the most important finding in Chapter 3, the stories told by inmates also shed light on the way in which the restrictions of the prison environment affected inmates. The institutional environment seemed to have the biggest effect on those serving their first sentence. They described problems relating to their loss of autonomy, feelings of impotence, loss of outside roles, difficulty in making and maintaining friendships, lack of privacy and the different experience of time in the prison environment. These 'pains of imprisonment' (Sykes 1970) had important effects on the self-identity of many inmates. However, the importance of taking into account the meaning of imprisonment for different individuals was attested to by the different attitudes of inmates. Those who had been in and out of prison all their lives defined it as a haven, a home, or somewhere where they could get together with people they knew. Others defined imprisonment as an opportunity to sort out their lives or to pursue educational activities.

This research has therefore highlighted both the need to take the stories of individuals into account in research in prison, and to fully investigate the context in which conversion takes place. The factors emphasised here provide the background and context in which conversion took place. It was necessary to investigate the experience of imprisonment, and the other ways in which self-identity was called into question, in order to fully appreciate the process of conversion and its meaning for prisoners.

In Chapter 4 the process of religious conversion in prison was considered. Again, the methods used for this study made it possible to obtain rich data that uncovered aspects of the conversion process ignored by previous studies. Conversion provided prisoners with solutions to some of the problems identified in Chapter 3. For some of

them it began with the crisis of imprisonment and a direct appeal to God. Others were searching for ways in which to interpret the crimes they had committed. In particular, those who had killed sought to understand why they had committed such a crime. Questions about themselves, and about the meaning of life in general, were raised by their actions and they experienced a radical disjunction in the story they could tell about themselves. Christianity provided answers to their questions, and ways of rebuilding positive self-regard.

Others were not seekers (Rambo 1993, Lofland and Stark 1965, Straus 1976) but came into contact with Christianity more by chance. Some visited the chaplaincy as a way of filling time, or in order to take advantage of various privileges that could be found there, others were invited by Christian inmates. They did not initially define Christianity as something that was interesting or appropriate for them. Still others visited the chaplain because of the way in which he/she was defined by inmates. The chaplain appeared to be regarded as someone who had time to listen to inmates and who was understanding and supportive. In this respect they were defined as different from other staff within the prison. This finding underlines the importance of considering the position of the religious orientation in question within the society or context in which the potential convert lives. Individuals who came into contact with Christianity without first defining Christian beliefs as worth investigating, converted as a result of participation in chaplaincy activities and interaction with those who had Christian beliefs.

Various processes had an impact on the self-identity of inmates as they participated in chaplaincy life. They were evaluated in a positive way by those they met in the chaplaincy. They were accepted, and valued as part of a group in a manner that many had never experienced before. Conversion that was prompted by such relationships also, therefore, ministered to some of the problems with self-identity identified in Chapter 3. Contact with Christians also resulted in particularly positive definitions of both Christians and Christian relationships. This led to either individuals or the ideal type 'Christian' being used by inmates as role models for personal change. Such processes, for some, accompanied prior reflection upon their lives as a result of imprisonment and a desire for change. Only after a chance encounter with the chaplaincy and consequent participation, however, did this project of change acquire a religious dimension and culminate in conversion.

Elements of the theories of conversion outlined in Chapter 1 can be identified in my findings. Some individuals experienced what can be defined as crisis situations, others sought out religious solutions to their problems. Given the variety of other ways in which prisoners became involved in religion, however, these cannot be seen as necessary for conversion to occur. Neither can a model of conversion be identified, a sequence of stages through which converts progress. What is important in the stories of these inmates is that, however they came into contact with religion, at some point they came to define Christian beliefs as plausible and appropriate for themselves. Conversion was worked out by each individual in response to their own interpretations, biographies and needs; this was demonstrated in the accounts of inmates by the way in which they each emphasised different aspects of the conversion process.

In particular, this study has emphasised the role of both reflective and interactive processes in conversion. Reflective process have been underplayed in previous studies of both imprisonment and religious conversion, and must be taken into account if a full picture of the variety of ways in which conversion can be achieved is to be produced.

Chapter 5 considered the post-conversion lives of prison converts. Accounts of the way in which life is experienced after conversion are absent from other studies, and this chapter has therefore made an important contribution to knowledge in this area, providing a base from which further research can be constructed. As has been stressed before, it is important to consider the way in which religious beliefs are rendered continually plausible to individuals after conversion. The way in which commitment to a perspective is maintained is just as important as how it came to be defined as plausible at the outset.

The accounts given by converts demonstrated the effectiveness of having a Christian perspective in the prison environment. It seems that, after the initial stages of conversion, when some of their pre-prison, or immediate problems were tackled, Christianity provided ways of coping with life in prison. This legitimated it to individuals during their everyday lives. Choosing to participate in the wealth of religious activities available gave prisoners ways to mark time and a chance to construct a new life in the mundane prison environment. It also allowed inmates to exercise self-determination in choosing which activities to become involved with. For new converts, participating in religious activities also provided an opportunity to spend their time in meaningful ways, which involved learning more about a perspective that they had defined as relevant for their lives. Involvement with the prison chaplaincy also gave many inmates the chance to play a practical role in the prison, helping to organise chaplaincy activities, assisting the chaplain and so on.

Christian belief also gave inmates effective ways of conceptualising their time in prison, giving them a sense of purpose, a sense that God had a plan for their lives and work for them to do. Individuals were able to overcome problems concerning how to organise day to day life in prison, lack of identification with both those on the inside and those on the outside (Shaw 1991), and uncertainty about release (Sapsford 1978, 1983). They did this with reference to their new master status (Snow and Machalek 1983) as 'Christian', the roles that they constructed based around 'doing God's work' in the prison, and with reference to a belief in God's plan for their lives.

They were also able to overcome some of their fears about life after imprisonment with reference to both their Christian beliefs and the relationships they had formed with other Christians. Relationships with individuals visiting the chaplaincy from nearby churches not only conveyed to individuals a positive conception of themselves, allowing them to effectively reconstruct self-identity, they also represented a network of Christians who would provide friendship and support to inmates when they were released. Involvement with Christianity also provided inmates with assurance that their future lives would be positive; an improvement on the lives they had led before.

Their beliefs allowed them to reflect upon their crimes and the reasons for their imprisonment, leading to confidence that they would not go back to criminal lifestyles and would not commit further crimes. Those serving life sentences were able to assure themselves that they were not capable of killing again. All, regardless of length of sentence, formulated goals for the future that were based around religion. Even those serving life sentences were able to project themselves successfully into the future.

The effective way in which Christian beliefs, relationships and activities assisted inmates with everyday life in prison, and allowed them to think positively about the future, provided constant legitimisation of the Christian way of life. As shown in Chapter 5, beliefs were also confirmed and maintained as they were continually mediated to prisoners during meetings with other Christians, by converts observing positive changes in themselves and attributing them to Christianity, in the way that events were interpreted as answers to prayer, and because reality in general was defined from a Christian perspective.

In Chapter 6 I considered the personal changes that were described by inmates and attributed to their conversions. Again, the literature concerning religious conversion does not go into much detail about the changes that occur when individuals convert. This chapter has built upon the work of, for example, Bankston, Forsyth and Floyd (1981) who talked about conversion as an instance of identity change but failed to adequately describe how such changes take place. It has also addressed the problem, highlighted by Thumma (1991), that studies have failed to come to a conclusion about how we might conceptualise conversion. In this chapter I explored how we might theorise the changes that inmates described, incorporating social theory into the study of conversion.

The role of Christian beliefs in overcoming negative evaluations of self, resulting from stigmatisation by self and others, has been discussed. The efficacy of Christian beliefs in eliciting such change was conceptualised as one of a number of factors that led to Christianity being an effective agent of change for these individuals. By comparing the perception of Christianity in prison with that of psychology, an alternative discourse of change, several ingredients that might be necessary for a perspective to be an effective agent of change were isolated. Other perspectives might be defined as more appropriate for change in different circumstances and by different individuals. Conversion can therefore be viewed as a process that does not have to involve religion.

This is reinforced by the way in which conversion can be conceptualised as a result of this study. I concluded that the process of conversion can be seen as the adoption of a new symbolic universe (Berger and Luckmann 1966) through which reality can be interpreted. The changes in self-identity, in the way that converts perceived others, and in behaviour that were described by inmates can be seen as inter-related and part of this more extensive change.

I have demonstrated how the new symbolic universe informed action as individuals acted out their new self-identity, negotiating it in interaction; and how it informed reflexive thought as self-identity was negotiated through the reorganisation of

the self-narrative, and re-ordering of biographical events. The processes that occurred during conversion give us an insight into the way in which self-identity is continually negotiated in everyday life. The self-narrative can be seen as continually open to change as the individual tells stories about themselves and tries to give them coherence and meaning (Gergen and Gergen 1983, Bruner 1995, Glover 1989). These changes, once conversion has been achieved, however, take place within the same symbolic universe and are therefore only minor revisions that serve to give a sense of stability to self-identity. The way in which self-identity is negotiated throughout everyday life can be seen as driven not just by how the self is presented in interaction (Goffman 1959) but also by the individual's ability to reflect upon themselves and their actions (Mead 1967) and to project themselves into the future (Giddens 1991, Heidegger 1962). Throughout this thesis the importance of both the interactive and the reflexive dimensions of conversion and self-identity have been emphasised.

Since this is an exploratory study, enquiring into an idea that has not been widely researched, it has been impossible to consider all possible avenues of enquiry. The findings and omissions point to several areas of interest for future research.

Due to restrictions of both time and length, only the stories of converts were used in this study. In order to construct a fuller picture of religious conversion in the prison context it would have been beneficial to analyse the accounts given by the chaplains at each prison. Since only seven prisons were visited for this study, it would be interesting to conduct qualitative interviews with a number of other prison chaplains to supplement the material already obtained. Those chaplains who have already been interviewed were working at prisons where there had been a number of conversions to Christianity. Others who were approached were not willing to participate in the research because of a lack of inmate conversions in their prisons. The role of the chaplain and the chaplaincy in prison, the process of conversion in prison, and the role of the chaplain as a facilitator of conversion could be explored further in interviews with both chaplains who have witnessed prison conversions and those who have not. This work would build upon the present study and upon recent work concerning the role of the chaplain in prison (Beckford and Gilliat 1998, Potter 1999). Future research might also investigate the particular position of the chaplaincy within the prison, through interviews with both prison staff and inmates. It is unlikely that all inmates have such a positive perception of the chaplaincy as those who were interviewed for this study. In order to fully appreciate the role and position of the chaplaincy in the prison it is necessary to explore the perceptions of a variety of inmates, looking at how their perceptions are formed.

Although this research has considered the process of personal change, it has done so within a particular context and at the same time as discussing other processes that occurred in the lives of prison converts. In order to gain a fuller understanding of the process of personal change further research is required. In Chapter 6 I isolated some key ingredients of the change process for prison converts, advocating several factors needed for a particular discourse of change to be successful. Since the Christian perspective provided ways to change that were very particular to the prison environment, providing inmates with successful ways in which to overcome negative evaluations of self and to

live their everyday lives within the prison, we must also consider the way in which both Christianity and other discourses of change are taken on by people in other situations. It would also be interesting to consider other discourses of change that give rise to change within the prison setting. This research might be pursued by conducting interviews with individuals who perceive themselves as changed, and attribute this to their involvement with a specific agent of change. It would be useful to consider the role of various psychotherapeutic techniques both inside and outside the prison, and to look at conversion to other religious orientations in order to ascertain whether the ingredients identified as necessary for change among prison converts are indeed important for change in general. Further research of this nature will allow us to better understand processes of personal change. The findings of such research might have implications for the rehabilitation of those in prison, and also more generally for individuals who wish to make changes in their lives.

This research has conceptualised conversion as a process through which a new symbolic universe is adopted. In this respect it is not confined to the adoption of religious beliefs. In order to enhance our understanding of the processes through which symbolic universes are adopted, it would be useful to consider other changes that may be conceived of as conversion. Following Greil and Rudy (1983) and Denzin (1987) we might consider the change in perspective that occurs when an individual converts to the perspective of Alcoholics Anonymous. We might also consider conversion to new ways of seeing the world through the adoption of political ideology. Our understanding of conversion might also be enhanced by considering conversion to spiritual, rather than conventionally religious, perspectives. Such symbolic universes are interesting and distinct from Christianity because they often lack particular rules of conduct, and may be seen as perspectives that are personally constructed out of many alternatives rather than existing as distinct, prescriptive bodies of belief (Heelas 2000).

In order to fully assess the extent of change in the lives of prison converts it is also necessary to conduct further research as a direct follow-up of this study. My findings have provided insight into some of the ways in which a new self-identity is maintained and the new symbolic universe continually legitimated whilst in prison; but we cannot know whether these processes continue after release. We can only assess the full rehabilitative potential of conversion to Christianity by considering life after imprisonment. Such research would need to address whether the same processes of identity negotiation and maintenance are applicable on the outside as on the inside, asking whether the Christian perspective truly provides an orientation to life that is equally applicable on both sides of the prison walls. We must also look at the processes through which the new symbolic universe is continually legitimated in everyday life, whether it provides ways of organising life outside the prison that are as effective as those which allowed individuals to successfully exist within the restrictions of the prison environment. In order to get a full picture of the conditions which give rise to continued commitment to a symbolic universe, individuals who have converted in prison but rejected Christianity after release should also be considered.

Although this research seems to be crucial to enhancing our knowledge of some of the issues brought to light during this thesis, it is necessary to acknowledge the potential difficulties in doing such research. It is difficult to know how the sample for this research would be found. Prisons do not give out information concerning the whereabouts of former inmates, so participants could not be isolated in that way. Trying to find prison converts through the churches might give better results, but a sample obtained in this way would be made up solely of individuals who had continued with the Christian faith and continued to view it as plausible and helpful. It would be very difficult to isolate individuals who had rejected their former religious orientation after release. If such a research project was being considered, the first port of call would need to be contact with prison chaplains who may keep in contact with some ex-prisoners, and might have information on how such individuals could be found.

The last recommendation for further research concerns the recent introduction of the Alpha Course<sup>41</sup> into prisons. My research has provided some insight into why prisoners might be interested in such a course, and recent research (Hunt 2001) has discussed its appeal outside the prison context. According to the co-ordinators of the course, it has been introduced into nearly all the prisons in London and the South East, represents an upturn in religion in prison, and has been successful in prompting inmate conversions<sup>42</sup>. Only one of the prisons I visited had hosted such a course, and inmates there did not consider it relevant in relation to their conversion process<sup>43</sup>. Further research in prisons where this course has been run could assess the extent to which inmate conversions are engendered by such an approach, the reasons that inmates attend these courses, and whether their introduction really does represent an upturn in religion in prison.

In conclusion, the process of conversion in prison, for those who were interviewed for this study, can be summed up as follows. Each individual had experiences that either led to difficulties in establishing a positive self-identity, or functioned to question self-identity. These processes occurred, not just during imprisonment, but from childhood, as a result of relationships and events. For many individuals it was the experience of committing their crime or of being sentenced that questioned their self-identity. Some of these experiences led to direct contemplation of religious ideas, others provided a backdrop against which Christianity came to be experienced as useful following participation in chaplaincy activities. Interaction and participation increasingly drew individuals into Christianity, and a variety of processes made beliefs increasingly attractive and plausible. These processes were assisted by reading the Bible and perceived interactions with God. Through both reflection and interaction, involvement with Christianity helped inmates overcome problems with self-identity. The adoption of the symbolic universe of Christianity also assisted individuals

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<sup>41</sup> The Alpha Course is an introduction to Christianity aimed at prompting conversion. It was first introduced into churches by Holy Trinity Brompton, London, and has now been adapted for use in prisons.

<sup>42</sup> This assertion was made in Alpha News No.19, July - October 1999.

<sup>43</sup> The only inmate to mention Alpha during the interview complained that it lacked relevance for prisoners. In addition to this, he had only become interested in the course after he had already experienced a conversion and wished to find out more about Christianity.

in their everyday lives in prison, the way they could orient themselves towards the future, and provided them with ways to change their view of the world and their behaviour. Identification as 'Christian' allowed inmates to transcend the restrictions of the prison and also the negative way they might be defined by the outside world. It also gave them ways to organise activity that were based neither on prison routine, nor on ways in which they organised their actions outside. Christianity can perhaps be viewed as providing a substitute society for inmates. Martin (1990) observed this function of religion during his study of Pentecostalism in South America,

[Pentecostalism] offers participation, mutual support, emotional release, a sense of identity and dignity... [it] provides a substitute society.

(Martin 1990, 256)

Commitment was maintained because of the efficacy of their new perspective in overcoming problems and assisting day to day life. Beliefs were legitimated through the way in which prisoners continually interpreted reality from their new perspective; during continued interaction with those who shared the same view of reality; and as a result of the perception that they had changed and the hope for the future that this engendered. This is a simplistic summary of the processes outlined during this thesis. It is clear from the stories of inmates that no single career of the prison convert can be identified. Certain processes were more important in the conversions of some inmates than others. For instance, those serving life sentences experienced conversions that were based much more on reflective thought, whilst those who had been involved in criminal activity throughout their lives, and had been in prison a number of times before, only came to define Christianity as interesting as a result of participation in the prison chaplaincy. It is important to note that each individual's conversion involved interaction between their situation in prison, their biographical experiences, their interests at hand and interaction with religious ideas and individuals.

Conversion in prison can be understood as a process of adopting a new symbolic universe through which life and self are defined. This change in perspective allows self-identity to be reconstructed and former negative evaluations of self to be overcome. The change in symbolic universe has an effect on the social construction of the past, the way in which life can be organised in the present, and projections of self into the future. Conversion can be seen as a process that ties together diverse aspects of an individual's biography as the biographical narrative of converts is reorganised in a way that gives it a sense of inevitability and order. Although self-identity continues to be negotiated in interaction and through self-reflection, the establishment of the Christian perspective as taken-for-granted reality enables this negotiation to proceed unproblematically in everyday life. The dramatic re-writing of self-identity that is an integral part of conversion serves to remind us of the processes, both reflexive and interactive, through which self-identity is constructed and maintained on a more mundane level everyday.

The adoption of a Christian symbolic universe appeared to have a rehabilitative function for these individuals, allowing them to overcome problems in self-identity, to reinterpret their experience of imprisonment and criminal activity, to find ways of

successfully living day to day life, and to formulate goals and orient themselves towards a better future. Other studies have linked religion with the rehabilitation of prisoners, stressing the way it gives them purpose in life and different goals, allowing them to turn away from criminal activity (Skotniki 1996, Timor 1998, Silverman 1983). In his 1964 study, Glaser noted that clergy had more rehabilitative influence on prisoners than any other members of staff. Outside consideration of the prison environment, researchers have noted the potential of religious involvement and belief for increasing happiness and purpose in life (French and Joseph 1999) and improving mental health (Dept of Health 1999, Garner 1999).

During this thesis I have considered the processes that might contribute to such rehabilitation, and highlighted some of the problems with which inmates need help and that a successful rehabilitation programme might need to tackle. There is no doubt that the participants in this study considered themselves to be changed for the better. All intended to turn their backs on criminal activity after release. The extent to which conversion to Christianity can really be regarded as a successful method of rehabilitation, however, can only be assessed in an analysis of rates of recidivism among those who converted whilst in prison.

Overall, I have provided a discussion of religious conversion in prison that has taken into account the biography of prisoners, the meaning of imprisonment and religion for them, and the role of both interaction and self-reflection. I have considered the lives of prisoners before and after conversion, and have explored the process of personal change that they experienced. I have therefore presented a full and sociological account of religious conversion in prison.

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## Appendix 1

### Interview Questions for Prisoners.

#### **Introductory Questions:**

- How old are you?
- What is your marital status?
- How often do members of your family or friends visit you?
- Who is it who visits?
- Have you ever been in prison before?
- How many times?
- How long were the sentences?
- Did you experience your conversion here or in another prison?

#### **Previous Experience of Religion:**

- Could you tell me about your experience of, and attitudes towards, religion as a child and before your conversion?

Prompts:     *Family involvement?*  
                  *Knowledge of standard religious stories?*  
                  *Attitudes of friends and their influence?*

#### **Sentencing and Imprisonment:**

- Could you tell me about your experience of being sentenced and imprisoned?

Prompts:     *Is this the epiphany / turning point?*  
                  *Feelings about self, life, world, others?*  
                  *Role of relationships?*  
                  *Removal from home environment?*  
                  *Experience of time?*  
                  *Adaption and change as time goes on - for those*  
                  *with long sentences?*

## **The Conversion:**

- Could you tell me about your conversion and what led up to it?

Prompts: *Relationships - chaplain, family, other inmates, friends, visitors.*

*Role of chaplaincy?*

*Role of self-reflection?*

*The crime?*

*Therapy / treatment?*

*Length of conversion process?*

*Stage in sentence?*

*Ways of spending time / keeping occupied?*

*Role of spoken testimony?*

*Use of language?*

*Status / role in prison life?*

*Crisis point?*

*Power/Empowerment through religion?*

- Do you think you have changed since your conversion?

Prompts: *Have others noticed a change?*

*Ways of spending time?*

*Attitudes to self / others?*

*Life goals / perspective on future?*

*Group associations?*

*What is regarded as important in life now?*

## **The Crime:**

- Could you tell me about the events which led up to your imprisonment?

Prompts: *The crime?*

*Feelings about self and others?*

*What was regarded as important in life?*

*Criminal career or one off?*

*Alone or in a group?*

## **Other Issues:**

- Do you feel that religion has benefited you?
- In what way?
- Have you spoken to other inmates about your conversion and your faith?
- Is there anything else that you would like to say that you haven't had the opportunity to up to now?

## Appendix 2

### Interview Questions for Prison Chaplains.

#### **Introductory Questions:**

- How long have you been a prison chaplain?
- Which, if any, other prisons have you worked at?
- During this time have you seen any prisoners convert to religion?
- What are your views about conversions generally?

#### **General Questions about Prisoners and Religion:**

- Why do you think prisoners might be attracted to religion?

Prompts:     *How does imprisonment effect the individual?*  
                  *How do prisoners adapt to being in prison?*  
                  *How do they spend their time?*  
                  *Do they reflect on themselves a lot?*  
                  *Childhood experience of religion?*  
                  *Family connections with religion?*  
                  *Stage in sentence?*  
                  *Nature of crime/ length of sentence?*  
                  *Particular situations which arouse interest or make someone want*  
                  *to talk to a chaplain?*

### Questions on Conversion and Change:

- What do you think has happened when a prisoner tells you that they have been converted?

Prompts: *function of conversion?*  
*changed ways of thinking?*  
*changed use of language?*  
*changes in behaviour?*  
*changes in group allegiances?*  
*changes in aspirations for future?*  
*adoption of new way of looking at the world and at self?*  
*ways of spending time?*  
*timescale?*  
*similarity to other personal changes eg. in therapy?*

- Do you think there are any problems associated with conversions in the prison setting?

### Questions about interaction and relationships:

- Do you think the relationships which the prisoner has play an important part in conversion? For example.....

Prompts: *relationships before conversion?*  
*changes in relationships after conversion?*  
*frequency of visits?*  
*family/ friends/ other inmates/ chaplain/ church groups?*  
*inmate religious groups?*  
*impact of r'ships on perceptions of self?*  
*fostering ties with the outside?*

### Questions about the maintenance of commitment:

- What do you think are the most important factors influencing the maintenance of commitment within the prison context?

Prompts: *moves to other prisons?*  
*involvement in chaplaincy activities?*  
*Involvement in inmate groups?*  
*acceptance of new faith by family?*  
*ways of spending time?*

## Other Issues:

- There have been reports of large numbers of conversions occurring in prisons recently, for example, in Exeter and Lewes. What do you think is happening here and why is it happening now?

Prompts:     *type of religious input?*  
              *Holy Trinity Brompton - prison minister/ alpha courses?*  
              *Toronto Blessing?*  
              *prison conditions?*  
              *personal needs?*

- Conversion is understood in the literature as many different things, for example as rhetoric or as identity change, how do you understand it?
- You have said that there are some inmates who you would define as appropriate for me to interview, could you say on what basis you have identified these particular individuals?
- Are there any individuals who have converted to religion but who you would consider it inappropriate for me to interview?
- Can you tell me why this is?
- Do you have anything that you would like to add that you feel you have not had the opportunity to say so far?

## Appendix 3

### Statement for Research Participants.

I would like you to participate in my research about people who convert to religion whilst serving a prison sentence.

If you agree to participate I will wish to interview you about your life up to now and your experience of conversion to religion.

I will tape record the interviews, but the recordings will only be heard by myself and then erased.

In any material which I write on this subject all the names of people involved, prisons, towns etc. will be changed to protect your identity.

If you agree to take part, please sign the agreement below.

Thank you for your help.

Louise Goodwin, University of Sheffield.

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#### Agreement

I agree to be interviewed for the above research, to have these interviews tape recorded, and to have what I say used in written work by the researcher, provided my anonymity is maintained.

Signed.....

Length of Sentence.....

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