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Religions and religious freedom in Portuguese prison: notes from the ethnographic fieldwork

Francesca Cerbini

Based on the ethnographic research in a Portuguese women's prison, this article offers a first insight into a subject scarcely discussed in Portuguese academia: the management of religion and religious freedom and diversity in prison. Through differing and intersecting views and with constant reference to the academic literature on religion in European prisons, the article highlights Catholics and Pentecostals positioning and how religion in prison designates a field in which power relations and processes of legitimation are constantly redefined and in competition. They generate dynamics of inclusion, exclusion and adaptation to the prison environment, and also innovative impulses produced by local-global fast-moving religious scenarios, settled in one of the most rigid and controversial institutions of the state.

KEYWORDS: ethnography, Pentecostals, Catholics, secularism, prison management.

Religiões e liberdade religiosa na prisão portuguesa: notas do trabalho de campo etnográfico • Com base na investigação etnográfica numa prisão feminina portuguesa, este artigo oferece uma primeira abordagem sobre um tema pouco discutido no meio académico português: a gestão da religião, da liberdade e diversidade religiosas na instituição penitenciária. Através de visões diferentes e cruzadas e com uma referência constante à literatura académica sobre religião nas prisões europeias, o artigo destaca o posicionamento de católicos e pentecostais e a forma como a religião na prisão designa um campo em que as relações de poder e os processos de legitimação estão constantemente a ser redefinidos e em competição. Geram dinâmicas de inclusão, exclusão e adaptação ao ambiente prisional, mas também impulsos inovadores produzidos por cenários religiosos locais-globais em rápida mutação, implantados numa das instituições mais rígidas e controversas do Estado.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: etnografia, pentecostais, católicos, secularismo, organização prisional.

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THE ECUMENICAL SPACE

In the Portuguese women's prison where I carried out my ethnographic research,[1] it was difficult to find any religious symbols. There was not even a proper Catholic chapel. Mass was celebrated in the "ecumenical space" (a former visitors' room) and its traces were hardly discernible. A piece of wooden furniture held the cross, the monstrance and the saints. It was opened during the function and then closed to acknowledge the laical nature of the place, while protecting the sacred panoply.

This room had been imbued with multiple cultural codes recalling rehabilitation therapies, spiritualities and religions. A star of David drawn on a window and a corner with cushions expressed an oriental aesthetic. On the walls hung sheets of paper with some of pope Francis' messages alternating with other therapeutic-motivational content.

From the very first interviews, penitentiary staff members, the Catholic chaplain, and the other religious leaders present in that prison[2] seemed overwhelmed by the secularising impetus that Asad (1993) places in the context of the modern disciplinary project.

The secular state was not questioned. The ecumenical space suggested a blatant understatement of the majoritarian religion in favor of the equal rights of all denominations. However, according to Asad, secularism does not necessarily produce a neutral arena. It relegates religion to the private sphere and can foster biased dynamics of signification.

In the women's prison [3] around which this article is centered, such dynamics provided food for thought about the possibility and conditions of religious

1 The project "Religions and daily life within the prison: an anthropological approach" is funded by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT) – Individual Call to Scientific Employment Stimulus – 1st Edition CEEC 2017. Host institution: Centro em Rede de Investigação em Antropologia (CRIA) – Universidade do Minho. I am also grateful for the financial support offered within the framework of the CRIA strategic plan UIDB/04038/2020. To protect the identity of my interlocutors, names will be invented, places and institutions will be anonymous.

2 Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (IURD) / Universal nas Prisões (UNP), Missão Evangélica as Sete Trombetas de Jesus Cristo, Testemunhas de Jeová, Assembleia de Deus. To protect the anonymity of my interlocutors, I will not mention the name of the denominations in the text. I will only distinguish between Catholic, Pentecostal and Jehovah's Witnesses.

3 The first stage of the fieldwork within the prison began in September 2019 and ended abruptly in early March 2020 because of the covid-19 pandemic. During this period, I visited my interlocutors about four times a week. Access to the cells, the patio and other common spaces was denied to me except for the areas dedicated to the functions. In addition to the participant observation in the authorized places, I had contacts with the inmates and the religious leaders of different denominations, especially the Catholic chaplain and the Pentecostal ministers. Based on an initial analysis of the interviews, I also involved the management, staff members, prison guards and healthcare prison staff. I recorded about 60 interviews.

freedom and the role and meaning of religions in Portuguese prison nowadays, a matter scarcely discussed in national debates and academia.[4]

Regarding this general topic, some questions pinpoint the ethnographic exploration. Given the historical and ideological assumptions at the base of the naissance of the modern penitentiary institution (Foucault 1975), are secular and religious freedom consistent with a place conceived to prevent privacy and to hinder free will? To what extent are religious freedom rights fulfilled in the main arena of state coercion? Under what conditions? How is the historical state-Church pattern transforming under the pressure of secularism and religious pluralism (Martínez-Ariño *et al*. 2015; Martínez-Ariño and Griera 2018: 144)?

More than providing proper answers, in the following pages I want to draw attention to the way in which religion designates a field where power relations and legitimation processes are constantly redefined and in competition with each other. I examine epistemic assumptions for an anthropology of secularism, which is regarded as a political and governmental category (Asad 2003: 24-25; 189-191) that generates inclusion, exclusion, adaptation, and unexpected outcomes within and beyond the penitentiary environment.

Before exploring the related ethnographic material, I look at a more general theoretical framework rooted in the international literature that helps to introduce, from a comparative viewpoint, the main concerns of this study.

THE PRISON, SECULARISM, AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

At the outset of the modern institution, religion was considered pivotal to the re-education of inmates (Becci and Roy 2015) and intrinsic to the expiatory ideology of prison punishment, encouraging discipline, moral rigor, and a renewal of conscience (Becci 2015a). Following Sullivan (2009), this conceptual framework has been challenged only in part by the laicity and secularism of contemporary democracies. As the author underlines:

> "The modern state is perhaps at its most religious when it exerts total control over its citizens and attempts to coercively remake them into new human beings […]. Even when explicitly religious language is absent, the sacred haunts the prison and all who work there." (2009: 6)

As Becci (2015a: 13) remembers, in the Foucauldian approach to prison management religious and secular instances are not opposed, both forming

4 Along with the main theme concerning the presence in prison of people with different nationalities, Resende (2017a, 2017b) focused on religion in Portuguese prisons, reporting some interesting case studies.

part of individualizing "techniques" characteristic of the institutional power. It probably makes prison the least secular of the state institutions. Or it makes prison the place where "the concept of the secular cannot do without the idea of religion" (Asad 2003: 200).

In the Italian and Spanish prison context, different authors underlined the persistence of a pervasive Catholic legacy (Becci 2015a; Martínez-Ariño *et al*. 2015: 10). Similar to Italy and Spain, Portugal signed the Concordat with the Holy See (1940, revised in 2004), which renews the religious preference of this non-denominational state. The deal guarantees the Catholic Church the right to exercise religious assistance in penal institutions. As a result, Catholics are automatically integrated into the prison environment while religious minorities access prison through complex bureaucracy and a certain degree of arbitrariness. It shows how religious freedom does not foster an immediate radical transformation in those states rooted in strong traditional and majority religions (Martínez-Ariño *et al*. 2015: 4-5).[5]

A number of studies on religion in European prisons[6] (Beckford and Gilliat 1998; Becci 2011; Becci 2015a; Becci and Purdie 2012; Becci and Roy 2015; Fabretti 2014; 2015a; 2015b; Béraud, Galembert and Rostaing 2016)[7] have shown how religious freedom represents a sort of "stress test" for the prison institution, prompted by growing religious diversity. Beyond the widespread idea of the prison as a mirror of society, these works show how, within such an environment, there can be an acceleration of those trends (Saracino 2020: 70)[8] that increasingly characterize the globalized society and the urban landscape.[9] They also show how the "in-between" position of the religious leaders strengthens the identity continuity both inside and outside, reinforcing the idea of the prison as a "porous" space (Cunha 2002, 2008). Accordingly, the spiritual dimension, the ritual, and the sacred adapt to the prison context and, conversely, religion changes the prison. The institution must rethink spaces, security devices and the inmates' needs (Beckford 2015: 18). However, what makes a discourse and an action religious or secular (Asad 2003: 8, 201)? The

5 The Portuguese Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience, religion, and belief, which is legally enshrined in the Law on Religious Freedom (2001) aimed at all religious minorities. See: Law on Religious Freedom (Law No. 16/2001 of 22 June, Article 13); Code of Execution of Penalties and Measures Depriving Freedom (Law No. 115/2009 of 12 October); Decree Law No. 252/2009 of 23 September.

6 The works of Fabretti (2014, 2015a, 2015b); Béraud, Galembert and Rostaing (2016), Griera and Clott-Garrel (2015); Martínez-Ariño *et al*. 2015 are of particular interest for this study, also from a comparative perspective.

7 For a more exhaustive bibliographical overview on the topic, see Beckford (2015: 15-30).

8 See also: Beckford and Gilliat (1998: 11); Sullivan (2009: 4).

9 See, for example, Kong (2010). For the Portuguese context, see: Teixeira (2012, 2019) and Vilaça (2013, 2016).

recurrent impossibility of drawing a line between what counts as religion and what does not and the idea that religious liberty as an unsteady concept is inescapably context-bound (Sullivan 2005), offers a twofold result. It highlights what is meant by religious freedom in prison (Jahn 2015: 95) and how it is effectively practiced on a daily basis, moving from law to rights. In this regard, Fassin underlines (2017 [2015]: 215):

> "The move from law to rights is crucial because it shifts the focus of the investigation from a discipline, with its methods and its actors (law and jurists), to society in the broader sense."

This move implies a great deal of bureaucracy revealed under the considered democratic lens of laicity, the highest expression of both the secular and the "right to rite" within the contemporary State.

From the viewpoint of the secular state apparatus, it is a process that succeeds when it claims to transcend both differences and discrimination. "For me they are all users in the same way regardless of religious affiliation. I do not make a distinction on the basis of religion", states an educator interviewed by Fabretti (2014: 71) in the Italian prison context. Then again, as Fassin (2017 [2015]: 61) points out for the French case, this refusal to differentiate the population is, of course, laudable when it comes to instituting laws and norms applicable to all. It becomes problematic when it is set against the awareness of difference and inequality in access to rights (Cunha 2002: 22). It is also a kind of simplification that can hide a complex reality, leading to the "social production of indifference" (Herzfeld 1992), based on "procedures".

Matters of faith deployed in everyday prison life are also a reflection of the way in which a specific religious group is perceived outside. Religious diversity in prison, for example, is generally connected with the presence of foreign inmates and the phenomenon of migration (Casanova 2007), dramatically characterized by social exclusion, ghettoization and racism. As a result, religious minorities can be victims of prejudice and discrimination, as in the case of Islam which is often associated with fundamentalist terrorism.

This assumption leads to prison staff asserting their point of view on religious pluralism and freedom, a freedom that is considered an issue subordinated to security agendas. Consequently, beyond any legal guarantee, positive connections between religion, discipline and control are pivotal to securing the place of religious minorities in prison (Griera and Clot-Garrell 2015: 24). On the other side, security agendas can turn some religions invisible within the penitentiary institution.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE "CURIOUS ECLIPSE" OF RELIGION IN PRISON

As Becci (2011: 65) and others highlight (Beckford and Gilliat 1998; Le Caisne 2000; Béraud, Galembert and Rostaing 2016), many qualitative studies within the prison are very insightful, but they rarely pay any attention to religion.[10] Notwithstanding, the "curious eclipse" of religion in prison ethnographies [11] is not a symptom of a weakness of these investigations, which indeed fill the gap in prison studies in the manner indicated by Wacquant (2002). They rather indicate the need to go beyond the "ethnographically visible" (Farmer 2004: 305) in order to consider the religious phenomenon as a whole. It goes beyond the "visibility" of the topic perceived as a "problem", as in the case of Islamic radicalism, which predominantly occupies the academic literature on religion in prison.

As a matter of fact, religion behind bars has become a theme for the prison institution, the media, and academics after 9/11 and after the terrorist attacks in Europe. Since the first decade of 2000, the prison environment has been considered the main breeding ground for extremism, fanaticism, and radicalization (Khosrokhavar 2004; Beckford, Joly and Khosrokhavar 2005). This has resulted in an increase in the use of securitarian and sometimes discriminatory devices to the detriment especially of the Islamic faith believers, in France as well as in other countries considered a target for terrorists (Béraud, Galembert and Rostaing 2016).

The focus on religious practices in prison has therefore shifted mainly to the control of the mechanisms of Islamic proselytism because of a possible threat to society outside. This has triggered two main opposing consequences: on the one hand, the securitarian trend has turned the spotlight on Islam in prison while, on the other hand, it has led to the invisibilization of the rest of the religious panorama.

By the same token, Béraud, Galembert and Rostaing (2016: 46-54) point out that the increasing level of attention paid to Islam in French prisons is not accompanied by a real interest in the religion, whose presence is not formalized in any data collection or statistics, as if the subject were a real taboo. These authors, deeply concerned about the ordinary, everyday aspects of all the religions practiced within the French penitentiary facilities, describe (2016: 12) how their institutional interlocutors barely understood the object of their investigation since it was not specifically about Islam and the "implicit" radicalization problem.

10 Quoting Evans-Pritchard, Eriksen (2015: 264) underlines that "social scientists have themselves often been indifferent or even hostile to religion".

11 See Cunha (2014).

Although Islamic radicalization is not recognized as a threat to Portuguese society, during my ethnographic research, an administrator of the Portuguese prison suggests a similar underestimation of religion in this environment. After the formal interview, when I switched off the tape recorder, he questioned my interest in religion, considering the urgency of many other problems in prison. I answered by detailing the objectives of my work more precisely.[12] But at this point, he suggested that the work could be accomplished quickly: "all you have to do is read the prison regulations on religion. We simply apply the law".[13] This simplification is a sort of corollary of the impartial attitude and respect for privacy that the institution implements to avoid any kind of discrimination against its users. The risk, however, is that this measure could quickly turn impartiality into invisibilization. In line with this rationale, the episodes in Portuguese and French contexts highlight the limited vision that some prison officials have of a complex system and of the religious phenomenon behind bars.

Invisibilization can jeopardize the exercise of a religious right in one of the most vulnerable human communities, where hardship, injustice and exclusion are less subjected to the vigilance of civil society. It generates a ripple effect which strongly affects prisoners' agency, such as what Combessie (2002: 551) has called a "cascading process of relegation".

AN INDIVIDUAL ISSUE

The doubts expressed by French and Portuguese administrators disqualify religion from both the institutional and scientific interests. They tend to perform that "misrecognition", namely a soft and silent marginalization of religious issues, described by Fabretti (2015a: 26) in the Italian prison context.

In the Portuguese scenario, as emerged from interviews and informal talks, security staff is most acquainted with religions. Prison guards are "key" (Pereira 2018) because of their everyday closeness to inmates. They knew the times and days when the "meetings" (as many Pentecostals called their service in prison) took place better than anyone else. They knew the ritual operators' faces and names and the denominations' designations. They were also often aware of the inmates' life stories, as well as the "effects" of religion on their "behavior". Although this attention was mostly due to their security role, prison guards sometimes become the unplanned auxiliaries of a weak education and rehabilitation system, as confirmed by one of the re-education officials interviewed:

12 In every interview I explained the main topic of my research, the voluntary participation of the interlocutor, and the objectives of my study. Moreover, I presented myself as a university researcher detached from any religious group and penitentiary institution.

13 See also Fassin (2017 [2015]: 215).

> "I really think that we are in a privileged position to know the prisoners. We follow their affairs, even the most intimate aspects, although I recognize that the guards are also in daily contact, and they also help us a lot. Depending on the profile of each guard […] I believe that they can be very helpful. […] The main pedagogic and evaluation role ends up being ours. […] [However] we have programs to intervene, and we don't have time to do it […] we have so many inmates, so much bureaucratic work that I couldn't get myself organized for a programme, a group programme with objectives."

In this environment characterized by a lack of resources, I ask whether, in her opinion, religious practice in prison can help to understand the life path and possibly the change of attitude of the imprisoned person. She replies that she does not consider this aspect in her work but adds:

> "Sometimes inmates mention 'I won't do it again because my religion is against it. The cult [14] is helping me a lot'. But I really have little notion of who goes and who doesn't. I'm not very curious. It's a subject that some inmates need to mention but it's not a topic of conversation… no. I personally can say that it doesn't interest me much."

This reluctance to show interest in private circumstances related to faith, that the inmates themselves consider important for their own "change", immediately makes sense from the point of view of the secular state. I therefore turn the conversation towards a more general perspective. I ask if she has noticed a change in the religious sphere within the prison in recent years:

> "I think so; especially those who go to cults, which I think are the evangelicals. Because the Catholic ones don't say 'I went to mass'… yes… those who go to mass don't talk about it so much. But I hear the word cult a lot, 'I went to the cult, I go to the cult, it helps me a lot'. Yes, that's it." [Senior re-education prison staff member, 20 January 2020]

Later, I will illustrate the possible reasons for mentioning participation in the Evangelical-Pentecostal gatherings and for not considering it important to mention the attendance at mass during the interview with the rehabilitation officials. Besides noting the perception of the growth of religious diversity within the prison environment, I would now like to emphasize that religion is considered a highly residual facet of life inside the institution. The same

14 This is the translations of the Portuguese word "culto". This term is used to indicate a religious service other than Catholic.

emerged in Fabretti's research (2014: 72-73) within the Italian context: religion is not a "total social fact" involved in people's daily lives and choices.

As in the French, Spanish and Italian examples, the counterbalance of considering religion as a private matter to be preserved from the intrusion of prison procedures is the absence of systematic forms of data collection on religious affiliations. The privacy policy applied to the reconstruction of religious pluralism in the Portuguese prison leads to and is based on essentialist deductions, made almost exclusively on the existence of various religions connected to different "cultures", such as the Portuguese Roma population; or by nationality, such as inmates originating from traditionally non-Catholic countries. Moreover, formal access to religious practice is generally strictly dependent on the possibility that a spiritual assistant is officially recognized and available (Ajouaou and Bernts 2015: 31-32). These factors are not banal especially for those who belong to a minority group or do not speak Portuguese. Therefore, firstly it is crucial for inmates to be aware of having rights and then to have the resources to exercise or claim them. Both these aspects emerge clearly in the following interview with a prison guard:

> "Now we also have a lady who is Buddhist, the Thai lady, but she doesn't have any support that I know of. No religious leader, she has nothing. She eats her [vegetarian] food, she follows her religion within what there is [*dentro do que há*], there is no one from outside […] because of the contingencies of life she professes her religion alone. We already had Muslims that also did the Ramadan. They also didn't have an external support, but they did it on their own." [Prison guard, 21 November 2019]

The spiritual needs experienced outside "what there is" are hardly addressed.[15] The system is incapable of adequately accommodating prisoners and their "differences". Consequently, the exercise of a right depends mainly on guards' compassionate approach. They can act in favor of the resolution of a problem or the management of a discomfort, following their values and religious preferences. This often takes place in accordance with the social acceptability of a specific congregation (Martínez-Ariño and Griera 2020).

In the same interview, I asked about the mechanism of the official call for religious assistance:

> "Normally [the inmates without spiritual assistance] are all foreigners […] the request never comes from them. The request begins with the reli-

15 This was confirmed to me by the Thai inmate during an interview I requested after learning about her case. The inmate, who is awaiting trial, spoke to me about her situation in very poor English and Portuguese, helped by another inmate who spoke only English.

> gions coming to them, not with the inmates asking for religion".[16] [Prison guard, 21 November 2019]

On several occasions, the inmates told me about their desire to join a denomination, choosing it according to what was available inside the prison. Sometimes they have found religious affiliation experienced outside the prison. Nevertheless, in most cases they adapted without making any requests. Many inmates, both foreigners and Portuguese, consider that requests would challenge the internal balance of the institution, and could become a potential source of trouble.

"STAYING OUT OF TROUBLE"

Prison is a place empty of meaning and those who are locked up there experience this void (Fassin 2017 [2015]: 294). This assumption is a good starting point to understand some aspects of the religious phenomenon in prison.

Grafted onto this void, the search for meaning of the prison experience can be supported by faith. It was not unusual to hear such a sentence: "Sometimes God has plans for people, even prison". Through these words Maria Julia, a Roma Pentecostal convict, highlights the positivity of serving time as a consequence of an inscrutable divine plan for good, however strange it may seem.

The extraordinary effectiveness of religion in confinement can be a great advantage both for prisoners and the institution. In fact, apart from the Catholic chaplain, the other religious leaders consciously produced a discourse to legitimize their presence. They insist that their faith calms prisoners and transforms them into less impulsive people who are more concerned about their peers.

From this perspective, believing gives meaning to the time spent in prison, but also provides effective tools to manage one's own emotions. It changes one's way of dealing with others: inmates, family and prison guards, namely those who can make a difference in the daily life of imprisonment. Calmness and obedience are key words used by the Pentecostal leaders. Inmates internalize and reproduce these concepts during their formal evaluations and the interviews. In fact, participation in religious meetings other than mass was a persistent topic during the conversations with the social reinsertion staff, thus demonstrating the willingness to be embedded in the institution's rules. On the other hand, as we have seen, prison staff members do not consider this aspect: from the secular perspective, they refuse to consider religion an instrument of the institution. Nevertheless, the institution obviously takes

16 This mechanism is confirmed to me on several occasions both by ministers of religion and by various staff members of the prison institutions under analysis.

into account this aspect of "staying out of trouble" (Goffman 1961: 43) in relation to the activities offered.

Incarcerated seven years ago, Graça makes a connection between her old and her new behavior. Thanks to the strong commitment to the Pentecostal church, she has transformed herself:

> "I rounded on everyone, even the guards. They talked and I rebelled against them. […] They said no, I said yes […] I never kept quiet. I didn't want to do what the guards told me to do. I didn't think it was fair. Now they tell me things and I completely ignore them; I don't pay any attention to what they say […] now I am taking the jail as calmly as possible. […] If the inmates respond they are always punished… even if they are right, they are never right. […] Now it's 'yes ma'am, thank you very much, sorry, excuse me'. I turn my back and leave. […] Now I feel good because God wants it that way. If they speak to me or speak to the wall, it's the same thing. I don't give any answer." [Graça, ex-Catholic, Pentecostal convict, 7 January 2020]

RELIGIOUS CARE AS A TEMPORARY TOOL

Within the contemporary laical institution, the new prison management is characterized by a growing conception of the subjectification of punishment (Garreaud and Malventi 2007). In the Portuguese context, Cunha's pioneering ethnography (2002)[17] and Frois' recent ethnography (2017) have shown that the inmate is no longer the protagonist of the Foucauldian panopticon but a cog in a machine within which he/she has to play his/her part to survive and succeed. This theoretical approach shapes a subject in line with a neo-liberal model of managing one's own life from the perspective of freedom of choice (Brandariz 2018: 19), even in such a context.

The following interview is positioned with this framework in mind. Encouraged by the will to protect the *modus operandi* of the institution and her work, a member of the management staff of the women's prison depicts a kind of "free will" that associates the successes with the proper functioning of the institution and the failures with the inmates' "personal responsibility":

> "This is a machine of people and for the machine to work it has to be well-oiled. Everyone has to be in their role. This is an institution that works this way. Totalitarian in the sense that everyone knows their role […] and the better the inmate does it the better the inmate is. But that doesn't mean he's a better citizen. […] we leave seeds and whether they will flower one day depends on the person. We cannot feel responsible for what will hap-

17 See also Cunha (2013).

> pen to that seed. I am responsible for giving the seed to others and so is the pastor, so is the therapist, so is the technical worker, so is the guard and the priest. We give the best of ourselves […] what will happen do not depend on us. We can't evaluate our work to that extent, because otherwise it would be highly frustrating. So, if change were the measure, we use to evaluate our work we would all be unemployed, because we don't have the capacity to change anyone." [Prison staff member, 20 January 2020]

From this perspective, religion becomes a "temporary" tool, a form of care and help similar to therapy, useful for survival in a certain situation: imprisonment (Ajouaou and Bernts 2015: 43; Griera and Clott-Garell 2015).

One of the winning formulas of Pentecostals is precisely this facet. Their religious care is increasingly seen as "fast" shock therapies, causing Catholicism to lose ground, as Juliana clearly explains:

> "I had already done therapies here, but I had to connect to something stronger […]. I didn't need religion to talk to God. I started to ask God to forgive my sins, to ask forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ […] but then something happened here that moved me […] and then I decided 'I'm going to the cult' and I went to the cult, and I felt wonderful. […] Now I go every Saturday. […] I never went back to the Catholic Church […] because if I want to talk to God, I talk to God […] they [Catholics] are there doing nothing. […] They [the Pentecostal ministers] guide me, help me to understand the best ways, advise on the best ways, spend time with us to talk and give support, you know what I mean? It's something that the priest does for five minutes and then goes away. […] In the Pentecostal reunion there is always a friendly word, warmth, a word of strength to give […]. I will accept all the help that they can give me." [Juliana, Pentecostal convict, 21 November 2019]

Juliana clearly distinguishes two moments of her spiritual experience: at first, she claims an autonomous relationship with God; then she claims emotional and material help, given by the Pentecostal leaders she follows. The Catholic Church does not offer this support in the way she would like.

Catholics clearly distinguish between the ritual and the humanitarian action in order to respect the secular distinction between the sacred and profane, the secular and religious. As a result, they provide essential material benefits for most of the inmates through a complicated network of bureaucratic steps. It does not satisfy the need to create a human bond; something that goes beyond being considered a number on the register or an open file on the desk of some employee.[18]

18 See Rostaing, Béraud and Galembert (2015: 70).

BEYOND CATHOLICISM

Religion-therapy, flanked by the disciplining and control devices of the "classic" prison institution, represents a conceptual modernization, an ideological shift combined with the rewriting of the rights of the persons deprived of their liberty.[19] Above all, however, it is a modernization that has to deal with the religious pluralism, which *de facto* is breaking the exclusive link between the prison and the historical church in Portugal.

Though invested with constitutional guarantees and privileges unknown to other religions, the Catholic chaplain of the women's prison is trying to escape the comfort zone by claiming his competence and a specific way of understanding the pastoral mission within the penitentiary institution:

> "The way the women's prison [the administrators] understands the pastoral mission in prison is very reductive. They think that I… that the chaplain only has to celebrate the mass. […] The pastoral programs that I've been doing […] the training, the cultural aspect that is very important […], they don't think well […] first because they think it clashes with their activities, they have many activities. […] But religion pure and simple is maybe not the first thing to do. Anthropologically speaking, although the religious dimension is very important… but if the person has not deepened in certain human dimensions, religion can be a constraint. We are talking about religion, not faith… they are different things […]. We don't forget that many people here, in prison, didn't care about religion at all […] we know that Catholicism is getting lower and lower, outside they have discovered other things and the churches are getting emptier and emptier […]. Speaking about the Catholic religion today… things are complicated. Many of these people are not practicing Catholics. They believe in God, in Jesus, they're baptized, but it's a sociological faith. Curiously, in jail they discover us, our way of celebrating, and by chance they even like it. A different way of celebrating, the activities we usually do, very fun activities. That attracts them. They [administrators, prison guards] never liked it, saying that it's not my job. That's ignorance! Law 252/2009 [20] states that the function of the chaplain is training, not just religion. I had every 15 days a group of 12 artists from a famous museum of contemporary art […] to develop a project through art, but it was boycotted [by the prison administration]. Today I am forced to celebrate only the mass […]. I have to say that, it's a way of denouncing, of showing my displeasure […] in relation to our work.

19 With reference to Portugal: Law on Religious Freedom (Law No. 16/2001 of 22 June, Article 13).
20 *Code of Execution of Penalties and Measures Depriving Freedom* (Law No. 115/2009 of 12 October); Decree Law No. 252/2009 of 23 September.

> […] these people are anticlerical but when the priest comes, it's only mass! So, they are anticlerical, but they are also more papist than the Pope. It's very strange! […] the sociological affinity is the worst we have." [Catholic chaplain of the women's prison, 18 October 2019]

Seemingly, secularism implies limitations on his "chaplaincy style" (Fabretti 2015b: 106-107) and, *de facto*, it produces dynamics of marginalization of the religion privileged by the Concordat. By limiting its field of action, secularism does not allow Catholicism to keep up with the times, adapting to this particular context. In other words, to preserve the distinction of competences, the institution interprets the role of the Catholic religion in a conservative way "being more papist than the pope". Therefore, the chaplain has to comply with the "bare minimum": the mass. Any attempt of the priest to offer a thorough spiritual support is seen as a threat to the secular institution which considers his activities an unjustified overlap with those performed by the rehabilitation staff and other non-confessional professional figures such as those described by Griera and Clot-Garrell (2015). From this point of view, the Catholic legacy [21] or the sociological affinity the chaplain mentioned in the interview backfires: wishing to go beyond the mass, the chaplain's work is not recognized as "akin" to traditional Catholicism. On the other side, mass does not allow many options to overcome the rigid ritual protocol while the embeddedness of Pentecostals in everyday prison life and their counselling activity make them more attractive. The priest perceives this difference and the dramatically decreasing number of his followers. When I ask if he believes there is full religious freedom in prison, he replies:

> "There isn't any, not here [women's prison] and in the others [prisons] either. They don't let us do the activities that we should do. […] That is my vision after 10 years." [18 October 2019]

In many formal and informal conversations, the Catholic chaplain laid claim incisively, criticizing the management of this prison. He often interpreted the pastoral mission as a mobilization to challenge the unjust conditions of incarceration.[22] As a result, he attracted both the ostracism of the institution and the criticism of the prison guards; and also, occasionally, the discontent of the Catholic inmates. In fact, as some interviewees reveal, Catholic practitioners do not appreciate the small "innovations" the chaplain introduced while celebrating mass. These innovations are sometimes described as "antics": so called for the use of the guitar during the celebration, for the bread that replaces the

21 See again: Becci (2015a); Martínez-Ariño *et al*. (2015: 10).
22 See: Welch (2010).

wafer and for the space left for questions, answers and anecdotes. These new developments create an interaction with the participants that does not correspond to the classic course of the ritual.

In the face of the institution, Pentecostal rituals are much less subject to this confrontation with the local religious tradition. Indeed, they have to overcome other obstacles, first and foremost managing to gain a space in prison, as one of the ministers explains very incisively during the celebration:

> "If we can't enter on the left, we will try to enter on the right, if we can't enter on the right we will try to enter in front, if we can't enter in front we will try to enter through a little hole. It's very important to enter. You have to know that we do everything we can to help you." [Pentecostal leader, 24 January 2020]

However, once inside, they can easily alternate spirituality and "help". They have greater freedom to manage their services, offering personalized (often material) support in addition to the ritual. Pentecostal meetings are much less structured than the Catholic function and more open to the requirements of the inmates. Holding hands and hugging each other, their followers often communicate emotions and feelings. They "get it off their chest",[23] as many women expressed it, which had a positive, "therapeutic" effect on their ability to cope with imprisonment.

In spite of the priest's efforts, the hour dedicated to the mass left little room for expressing one's feelings and troubles; moreover, improvisation is largely frowned upon.

The Catholic chaplain seek to pursue a wider mission (see Ajouaou and Bernts 2015: 44) trying to establish a dialogue with the other religious leaders who celebrate in the prison:[24]

> "I have an ecumenical vision of the church; it is part of my training. From the beginning I have tried to establish links with the other ministers… they want nothing to do with me. They don't! They just don't! I invite them for coffee, 'Sorry, I don't like coffee'. The Protestants, the Evangelicals are closed, uy! […] We know that it is normal; it is a prejudice of minorities." [18 October 2019]

He attempts to diminish distances, but this is experienced as further abuse of power by religious minorities whose visibility, reputation and presence are hard to establish within the institution as well as on the outside.

23 "*Desabafar*".

24 See: Martínez-Ariño *et al*. (2015); Martínez-Ariño and Griera (2018).

MAKING ROOM

In a context characterized by religious pluralism, the management of the space is crucial (Gilliat-Ray 2005). The size, the type, the exclusive or multiple use of the place that hosts the celebrations are all very significant factors. They suggest the importance that the institution attributes both to religions and to its duty to provide a service.

Poor resources, overcrowding and security concerns open up a wide range of scenarios, including the possibility that the space originally designed to host religions may be sacrificed in order to satisfy logistical needs, as pointed out by Rostaing, Béraud and Galembert (2015: 66). This would also seem the case of the "ecumenical space":

> "When this prison started, one of the rooms upstairs was the ecumenical space […] an altar [for Catholic celebrations] closed precisely so as not to hurt sensibilities […] but then in practice, on a daily basis, we needed more space. We didn't have rooms to work in, so we moved the ecumenical space to a little corner in the back, the former visiting room. Now I can't say why the other denominations are not gathering there." [Prison staff member, 20 January 2020]

After this interview, I began to ask all the religious leaders if they would like to have a "proper" place for celebrations instead of the schoolroom they use to hold their meeting. I wanted to shed light indirectly on possible obstacles to sharing the ecumenical space. One of them replied in a particularly diplomatic way, which basically mirrored the others' opinions:

> "I already consider myself privileged to be here and to have a room, now if only we had our own space… because the difficulty at school is that we can disturb the classes. Sometimes I'd like to make these meetings friendlier because we have music, we have nice songs with messages, singing would help them… aaahhh… to feel lighter and make the atmosphere lighter… but I can't do it because I have lessons next door. […] But I feel privileged […] I do not ask, I am not the one who decides, I come to the house of people who have not offered me another space, I accept what they offer." [Religious leader, 10 January 2020]

I probed further about the use of the open-access ecumenical space. I emphasized it was particularly suitable because of its location in a more isolated area. Nevertheless, the minister answered that she did not know the space, nor did she know the priest. She simply preferred to accept what was offered by the institution.

Stunningly, the religious leaders choose to adapt themselves to any space granted, except the ecumenical space. Apart from preferences, strategies, and prejudices (which obviously do count for a great deal), the idea of a place dedicated to religions has probably been poorly supported by the institution. At the same time, the "right" to celebrate in prison is poorly perceived by religious minorities. They assume their presence as a concession subordinate to the dominant Catholic position. Following this rationale, despite the secularizing impetus, the ecumenical space was considered, *de facto*, in the same way as a Catholic chapel.

ADAPTATIONS AND DISRUPTIONS

Adaptation could not hide the traces of other activities that took place in the classrooms. Left on the walls, and in the arrangement of tables and chairs, these traces interfere with the specific sacred grammar at the basis of the religious experience (Rosati 2012). During every meeting, it was necessary to re-establish the codes. It requires a remarkable effort of concentration and determination to recreate a proper setting, mostly imaginary, placed at the intersection of the secular and the religious (Knott 2005). Despite this disadvantaged environment, the inmates seemed very skilled in this tricky operation of blending the sacred and the profane.[25] They also skilfully managed the holy time of prayer and the time to talk about their problems, granted by the ritual (Pentecostal) operators to "let out their feelings" (*desabafar*).

It is worth noting that the main obstacle was not the "transport" of the religious message[26] in this imperfect location but the frequent interruptions by the guards. In most of the ceremonies I attended during the research, the institution often intervened to "supervise", summon, and communicate, regardless of the confession, the stage of the ritual and the intensity of the moment.

The prison guards' manners made a difference. Depending on their attitude, they caused indignant glances or murmurs among the participants. In those moments, there was really no way of maintaining the balance of power forces at play. The institution always affirmed its supremacy over the sacred.

One day, during the Jehovah's witnesses' Bible study hour, a guard called away the only inmate participating in the session because it was her turn to buy food and products for personal and cell hygiene in the prison shop. Obviously, missing this opportunity would have caused great inconvenience for her. However, first and foremost, that call evidenced two related aspects: on the one side, the rigid functioning of the institution that allows for no exceptions; on the other, the institution underlines that its functioning is the more

25 See: Resende (2017a: 83).
26 See: Csordas (2009: 5).

valuable process to preserve. Accordingly, the one hour a week Bible study can and must be interrupted to adhere strictly to the prison schedules. No other chance to buy personal items would be offered. Therefore, the disruptions outlined the degree of "recognition" and importance the institution gives to religion and the right to rite, perhaps even more vividly than the allocation of space.

Left alone with the two Jehovah's witnesses' leaders, I asked them if these circumstances are seen as a lack of respect for their presence and commitment. They answered in a way that rules out a reply, by reading a passage from the Bible:

> "The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves." [Romans 13, 1-2]

CONCLUDING NOTES

The analysis of religious pluralism behind bars may represent a privileged point of view from which to study interfaith connections, "tolerance" and their complexities, intertwined with the secular project. However, the management of a narrow and multi-faith space is more demanding. It leads to a tight and inevitable confrontation, if not to a truly competitive attitude between religious groups. It leads to comparisons, to refining one's communication tools, to ongoing readjustments of language and gestures.

The task is hard: transport the timelessness of the rite and the comfort of the message of forgiveness and salvation into a profane and neglected dimension, along with economic aid, basic goods and services. It opens up spaces of ethical ambivalence embedded in a dominant and disciplining code of values.

The management of the margin of action develops in conjunction with a continuous game of mirrors between inside and outside; between the ethical, the spiritual, the therapeutic and the control spheres. In this scenario, the ethnographic perspective on the integration of the constitutional guarantees to religious freedom into daily prison life shows that all the key figures of the prison are directly or indirectly involved in adaptations and transformations. This is elicited by the totalizing nature of religion and its embeddedness in everyday life.

On the other hand, the spaces for the denominations' activities continue to be mostly "adjusted", the ceremonies interrupted, and the people subjected to the priorities of the institution. It questions the real possibility of religious freedom in prison (Sullivan 2005, 2009) and confirms that religious practices are organized not only around the rules but also around the personalities

involved, institutional routines and room available (Becci 2011). As a result, opportunities and constraints entail responses tailored on the social actors' agency and the power they can exercise inside and outside the prison. However, this ethnography reveals that this rationale can offer an alternative narrative, seen in the case of the Catholic chaplain, who is depicting an atypical situation.

In fact, despite the fact that he represents the majoritarian religion, despite his presence and legitimation being unconditional and out of the question in a Portuguese prison, he suggests a slightly different interpretation of his denominational influence and positioning. He definitely rejected the idea of a hegemonic and favored faith in prison while other religions are increasingly effective in providing spiritual, therapeutic and material support. Strikingly, in his opinion the sociological faith, as the priest called the Catholic influence on the local mindset, creates a kind of "cage" for Catholics who want to overcome "tradition", seen more as an obstacle than a benefit. It does not let the chaplain advocate for a new and original communication register, impeding the development of an effective strategy for the privileged religion to compete in the prison "religious market".

It is important to remark that he is the only religious leader who can speak out because of his solid position inside the institution. The presence of religious minorities is precarious. They "accept" prison conditions and unsuitable spaces, interpreting their presence as a kind of bestowal and defend their place inside, acting as a complement to the regulatory, disciplinary and re-educational efforts of the prison, without prejudice towards the safeguarding of the prison system's over-arching mechanisms.

Especially, Pentecostals offer a flexible service, "less" religious and more akin to a therapeutic and self-help approach, in order to adapt to this peculiar social and securitarian environment. Taking the chances offered by religious freedom and by the ambiguities of secularism (Asad 1993), Pentecostals penetrate this promising market, empowering their presence through a tacit commitment with prison discipline and order. In so doing, they seem to replace the historical Catholics in the maintenance and reaffirmation of the original function of religion for the normalization and the pacification of the Portuguese prison environment.

Seemingly, Catholics and Pentecostals are engaged in a counterbalance of powers that illuminate dynamics relevant to society as a whole, providing at the same time an in-depth view of the ways in which, in the move from law to rights, prison performs its contradictions and aporias.

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