

Irene Becci

**Imprisoned Religion.
Transformations of Religion during and after Imprisonment in
Eastern Germany.**

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The book combines several studies on prison and religion in Eastern Germany with a comparative perspective on Italy and Switzerland. It is an overview of five years of work on the topic of prison and religion. Irene Becci, a sociologist and anthropologist, conducted two projects in East Germany between 2002-2007. While “imprisoned religion” works as a metaphor for an institutional “prison” setting and an historical-social setting during and after GDR time, her theoretical interest is on religion and transformation under those specific conditions. The goal is “to offer insights into the way prison and religion are embedded and transformed in a post-socialist context during imprisonment and at release” (p. 167).

Imprisoned Religion consists of five thematic chapters, preceded by an introduction on theory and method. The summary uses study results from East Germany and compares them with results from other studies that Becci conducted in Italy and Switzerland. In the following summary, I refer only to the most important aspects in accordance with the topic because although the book has “only” 178 pages of text, it provides a thick description through a combination of empirical findings and already existing theories.

Summary of the content

The introduction sets the context of the study on current and historical studies on religion and prison, and on sociological theories dealing with the topics, “religion in modernity”, “religion and secularization” and “religion and state”. The author’s detailed presentation of theoretical references first operationalises religion as a term and second, embeds religion in the East German context as a place of Reformation but also as a secularised region. “Religion and state” operate as a relational perspective on establishing religion in legal and political issues. For a closer perspective, Becci takes secularisation and the establishment of religion into consideration with theories on the market model and state-centred approaches (p. 12). Together, the theoretical perspectives allow for an understanding of religion “as a dynamic force in power configurations” (p. 21).

The author also explains her levels of analysis, methodological standpoint and describes her

field sites. She operates within a multi-sited approach (contextual-structural, discursive) and triangulation of data (fieldwork notes, interviews, newspaper, letters, legal texts and statistical data). The methodological standpoint is rooted in constructivist ideas and ethnomethodology. Besides several informal visits, her controlled fieldwork takes place in two prisons and a halfway house. Her focal points are the perspectives of prison chaplains and (ex-)inmates.

The first thematic chapter contextualises religion in modern prisons in Eastern Germany. It is an overview of the bureaucratisation and routinisation of religion in prison and the various interpretations of religious freedom in different historical contexts (the eighteenth century and the German reunification 1989-90). Becci describes this development with a view of the prison chaplaincy. For this purpose, the analysis uses historical secondary data as well as primary interview material. The interplay of historical information and individual chaplain memories “continue[s] to direct and lend meaning to their social actions today, and thereby create continuity” (p. 40). It also shows the possibilities that the church and pastoral care system had in GDR prisons in terms of dealing with political change. The differences between official restrictions and unofficial possibilities become apparent later on.

At the “Wendezeit”, “[t]he pragmatic respect and recognition the chaplains obtained through their commitment during this important year was afterwards transformed into institutional recognition” (p. 55). Prison chaplains have “a much more comfortable position” (p. 65) in post-socialist society. In chapter two, Becci looks at the gap between the role of religion in prison before and after the “Wende” and localises religion in so-called post-socialist prisons and release programmes. Due to the prison chaplains, religion, religious affiliations and state institutions also transformed. Becci quotes Schmidt-Lux, Karstein and Wohrab-Sahr (“Forcierte Säkularität”, 2009) that East Germans have a more “agnostic spirituality” and “secular habitus”. This individual level is also common on an institutional level like religious organisations in the “third sector” (“Caritas”, “Diakonie”, “Kirche von Unten”). Becci states that the similarity between religious and secular institutions is typical for a secularised understanding of the way religious agencies relate to post-socialist society (p. 71). These religion-related shifts concern general changes while the German Basic Law and Penal Code were adopted by the “Neue Bundesländer” (the former GDR) and retained institutional changes which also concerned religion. Churches in the post-socialist German society are now prominent actors outside prison and have a neutral position inside prison (p. 63f.).

In the more voluminous chapter three, Becci analyses the logic of how religion is established in prison (p. 123). Therefore, she uses systematic patterns from classical prison studies like “The Prison Community” (Clemmer 1940 [1958]), “Asylums” (Goffman 1991 [1961]), and “The Society of the Captives” (Sykes 1971 [1958]). For the inmates, “the chaplaincy represents a wide range of possibilities: it is a space of freedom within the boundaries of the prison” (p. 120). This “space of freedom” has several facets: bureaucratic freedom, relational freedom, communicative freedom (p. 99), and freedom of movement (p. 103). The types of freedom are possible because the chaplaincy has an internalised logic of universalisation: “Universalization implies that God does not refer to one particular people any more, but to each individual as a person. For the prison chaplaincy, this translates into an openness to everyone [...], and it is this very openness that distinguishes it from other religions” (p. 110).

In chapter four, Becci worked out the functions of religion and the relations to religion for inmates and ex-inmates from interviews and prison magazines. To describe the individual “belonging” to religion, she uses the term “religious bricolage” according to Luckmann (“The Structural Conditions of Religious Consciousness in Modern Societies”, 1979) and asks about differences and commonalities in imprisoned situations (pp. 124-130). She notes that religion is a supporting factor in times of crisis and a possibility to work with typical feelings like guilt. Religion in prison is also “a way to resist prison authority [...] as a norm to structure their

lives, to give a meaning to it, or to tranquillize or self-rehabilitate" (p. 123). In accordance, religious conversion is one possible way of coping with prison and release (pp. 134-144). But religious belonging, understood as collectivisation, is more flexible.

"New religious belongings" are discussed in chapter five. Becci interprets Davie's "believing and belonging" ("Believing without Belonging", 1990) dichotomy as two separate parts while believing relates not mainly to belonging, but belonging relates to a visible community (p. 149). "Community-belonging" is an important factor for (ex-)inmates during imprisonment and release. Religious communities offer human recognition and not recognition as a defective person (p. 153), and they are open to everyone. In this sense, religious communities play an important role in framing the liminal phase in a halfway house, which is situated "in between" imprisonment and outside in society.

The last chapter is not only a conclusion of the East German case; Becci wants to place her East German observations in comparison to her other studies on Switzerland and Italy to have a more general perspective on the establishment of religion in prison and the meaning of religion for inmates and ex-inmates (p. 168). Generally, all three cases have commonalities in terms of the structural position of the chaplaincy in prison, but they differ in terms of religious composition, practice and the social significance of the church inside the prison and outside in society (pp. 168-174). The function of religion for inmates as well as the function of religious communities for ex-convicts (pp. 174-178) is similar in all studies.

Critical acclaim and outlook

The first sentence of Goffman's "Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates" defines the general framework of the prison world:

"A total institution may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life." (Goffman, *Asylums* 1961, XIII)

Becci also describes the conditions of imprisonment in the "East German" context, but even if the prison institution itself is "cut off from the wider society", as Goffman writes, Becci builds a theoretical and empirical bridge between social developments inside the prison institution and outside "the wider society". Starting from the perspective of (ex-)inmates and prison chaplains, she searches for "religion" and "transformations of religion" on an institutional and individual level.

Overall, the regional and time perspective is something new in the field of "religion and prison" studies and is a very good contribution to those studies in different social and national contexts. The connection of the sociology of religion theory with the empirical material is at this level and, in this detail, a novelty. The book can easily be understood as a current theoretical discussion about religion and modernity. In conclusion, it must be stressed that in this study, specific perspectives are prefixed. My own studies on the practice and understanding of religious freedom in current German prisons from a prison institution perspective modify the role of religion and prison chaplaincy in some aspects. But this is understood as an additional comment and another view on this exciting topic which offers further research potential.
