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Evangelical Belief and Nonviolent Behavior in Chilean Inmates

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Abstract: This study examines whether religious beliefs motivate nonviolent behavior and lower rates of recidivism among Chilean inmates. We collected data through in-depth interviews with 174 inmates using open and close-ended questions. The research used a proportional random sample to select participants, principal component analysis to identify similarities and differences between groups, and content analysis to examine answers to the open-ended interview questions. Its findings indicate that evangelical inmates in Chilean prisons are less violent, more likely to follow internal jail regulations, and more cooperative with professionals and officials. This study contributes to the literature because there was no previous evidence in Chile that religious association, religious conviction, or a desire to change criminal behavior is instrumental to achieving better security during inmates' stays in prison. The results also demonstrate that the presence of a peer group, with its emotional support and provision of a daily routine, is fundamental if inmates are to successfully handle their anxiety and be less violent.

Keywords: religion; prison; nonviolent behavior; evangelical religion; inmates

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1. Introduction

Seventy per cent of Chilean inmates say that they feel less safe in prison than they did before they went to prison (UNDP 2013). This is partially attributable to the high levels of violence seen in Chilean prisons—43.1% of Chilean inmates report that they have been beaten by other inmates (UNDP 2013). These statistics from the United Nations Development Program are corroborated by the First Survey of Perception of Quality of Penitentiary Life, conducted by the Human Rights Unit of the Gendarmerie of Chile (Espinoza et al. 2014). Moreover, 30% of deaths occurring inside Chilean prisons are attributable to violence between inmates (Escobar et al. 2008). However, social workers and psychologists who work in Chile's prison detention centers have long asserted that inmates who are practicing evangelical Christians are less violent during their time in prison. They also assert that these inmates are more likely to follow the prisons' internal regulations more closely and be more co-operative with professionals and supervisors. We note that they have observed nonviolent Evangelical inmates under the same prison conditions as other highly violent inmates.

These professionals' assertions have long lacked the backing of empirical evidence demonstrating whether religious belief influences inmates' nonviolent behavior. Moreover, there is no evidence that this religious association is instrumental and temporary, i.e., there is no indication that inmates adopt or associate with this religious belief because of safety issues alone. Furthermore, the Chilean prison system provides rehabilitation and social reintegration programs in the form of education, job training, psychosocial support, and various recreational, cultural, and sports activities (Peirano and Cáceres 2002). However, religious counselling is not part of these programs.

Chilean inmates represent a wide variety of behaviors, ranging from aggressive behaviors to nonviolent behaviors to various mental illnesses (Villagra 2008). These aspects are aggravated by various cultural and social characteristics of the prison environment. For

instance, criminal reclusion sparks struggles between inmates, sexual assaults, smuggling of illegal goods and substances, and riots. These aspects of prison life have been found to be associated with the rotation of inmates, inadequate infrastructure, overpopulation, and inequality in the distribution of scarce resources, and have been found to contribute to inmates' feelings of insecurity (INDH 2018). In this light, this study seeks to identify whether religious beliefs motivate inmates' nonviolent behavior during their time in prison and examines how the Evangelical inmates explain their nonviolent behavior.

Religious Influences on Nonviolent Behavior in Prison

The literature on religion's influence on inmates' violent behavior is inconclusive. On the one hand, Christian inmates have been found to be significantly more likely to demonstrate empathy than nonChristians, and often exhibit higher quality relationships with other inmates (Armour et al. 2008). In addition, Christian religious conversions have been found to improve inmates' outlook and their feelings of empowerment to manage, change, and reflect on their situation (Chui and Cheng 2011; Fernander et al. 2005; Kerley and Copes 2008). Religious activities have also been found to break inmates' monotonous and dehumanizing daily routines (O'Connor 2005). The absence of prison activities has been found to increase inmates' stress levels and increase the potential for conflict (Tomar 2013), but inmates who pray in private, watch religious programs on television, and attend religious classes are less likely to engage in deviant behavior than those who do not (Kerley et al. 2010). Indeed, religious engagement has been found to be associated with lower levels of depression and to facilitate inmates' adjustment to prison (Dye et al. 2014).

Religious belief, in general, has also been found to improve the likelihood that inmates do not fall into recidivism. For instance, Hallett and McCoy (2015) found that inmates who had undergone a religious conversion marked a break with their past and described being born again into a new identity and life. Religious support has also been shown to have strong and robust prosocial effects on both inmates' post-release employment and substance use. However, previous studies did not differentiate between faith groups or traditions (Gerace and Day 2010; Stansfield et al. 2016). Furthermore, inmates have many reasons for attending religious services or going through the motions of conversion, such as getting out of their cells, getting refreshments, meeting female volunteers, and hanging out with other inmates (O'Connor and Duncan 2011).

Despite this lack of a unified consensus in the literature, many scholars believe that religious exposure and training could be instrumental in lowering the inmates' number of criminogenic needs (Bhutta and Wormith 2015) and recidivism (Fernander et al. 2005). Indeed, some studies have indicated that inmates who participate in Bible studies at a high rate are less likely to be detained two and three years after release; however, this effect has been shown to decrease over time (Johnson 2004). In short, the effect of faith-based interventions may not result in long-term behavioral change (Schaefer et al. 2016). In the light of this uncertainty, this study hopes to contribute to the literature by contributing some evidence regarding Evangelical belief and inmates' nonviolent behavior.

2. Material and Methods

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative methodologies because its novelty in the Chilean context necessitated that the authors attempted to exhaustively explain their quantitative results using qualitative data (Creswell 2013; King et al. 1994; Putman 2000). The authors conducted in-depth semistructured interviews with inmates from two detention centers—a state prison (Santiago Sur) and a privately-managed but state-staffed jail (Santiago 1)—in one of the largest metropolitan areas in Chile. In this Chilean region, inmates account for one third of all Chilean inmates (33.2) (Gendarmería de Chile 2019). The interviews were conducted in Spanish, the native language of interviewers and participants. Inmate participation was voluntary, anonymous, and not compensated. Before the interviews, the authors received a list of inmates who had exhibited collaborative and nonviolent conduct. The authors drew their proportional random sample sizes from this list. Each respondent was

invited to share an in-depth account of their life story and relate their nonviolent behavior to their religious faith. The study focused on the individuals' perception about how they explained their nonviolent behavior and if they related it with their religious faith. This research was approved by The Social Science and Humanities Ethical Board at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, No 151228002.

Religiosity was operationalized as the frequency with which an inmate attended religious services, whether they considered themselves religious, and how strongly they believed that their religious beliefs influenced their behavior (Fernander et al. 2005). Inmates' attendance, salience, denomination, and prayer and Bible study were all included as measurements in the study. A descriptive statistical analysis was carried out using SPSS 22 computer programs, and indices were established via principal component analysis. Bonferroni correction was used to organize the data, and the tests for all pairwise comparisons within a row were adjusted for each innermost subtable. This analysis resulted in standardized, one-dimensional variables, allowing the authors to compare Evangelical and nonEvangelical inmates to one another and to construct an average study respondent. In addition, the qualitative interview data were sorted, categorized, and coded in order to reveal links and connections within the data. Such analysis allowed the authors to build codes, categories, and relations that accurately reflect participants' opinions and motivations (Paillé 2006; Wetherell et al. 2001).

The authors also conducted an interview with an Evangelical bishop in order to understand how Evangelical religious activities are implemented inside the two centers. The bishop, who has long experience working in the prison system, explained that the authors could identify Evangelical inmates by their acknowledgement of certain Evangelical beliefs. Evangelical inmates were asked about these beliefs to identify if they knew the basic principles of the Evangelical religion. In addition, interviews were conducted with four different Evangelical inmates who were in charge of the prison sections, and six professional practitioners of the prisons that worked directly with inmates (four social workers and two psychologists).

Sampling Description

A total of 174 male inmates participated in the study—87 Evangelicals and 87 nonEvangelicals. Members of the latter group were not active practitioners of a religious belief, but 11.4% said that they believe in God or a superior entity, 23.4% described themselves as Catholic, and 15% described themselves as atheists. Of the participants, 24% said that they belonged to another religion. A majority of the 174 participants professed some form of religious belief.

In addition, 22% were married before entering prison and 72% were single; however, taking time in prison into account, 58% of respondents were married. Participants' average age was 36 years old (SD = 12) and participants' ages ranged between 18 and 76. About 60% of participants had not completed high school, and about 70% were employed before entering prison—of this latter group, 83% worked as laborers. A slight majority (54%) of respondents were in prison for property-related crimes, and almost all of them (93%) had been in prison for more than one month.

3. Results

Evangelical inmates develop a highly structured, pyramid-shaped social organization in prison. Power is concentrated in the pastor at the top of the pyramid. Chaplains train inmates in Biblical studies, and these inmates then supervise and assist other Evangelical inmates. The chaplain-trained inmates are placed in charge of modules of approximately 200 inmates. Of these, maybe 50 actually profess Evangelism and participate in religious activities. Prison officers usually place Evangelical inmates in a single module because they exhibit less violent behavior. Prison authorities stated in interviews that inmates often declare themselves as Evangelicals regardless of their actual religious beliefs because they know that Evangelical groups are relatively safe.

The four inmates who head Evangelical groups described their routines to the interviewers. They stated that they follow the prison pastor's strict rules regarding daily Bible study, prayer, and no smoking or fighting. These rules also include defending other Evangelicals and providing them with cleaning supplies when these are not provided by the prison. Other rules include: do not threaten their own life or the life of other inmates; do not say bad words; follow a strict daily routine, and participate in trade workshops that are mainly provided for the Evangelical congregation. They call their fellow believers "brothers" and work hard to provide them with emotional support. They also supervise other inmates within their module or group, and those who do not follow these rules or abide by daily routines established by prison authorities risk being expelled by the group. Thus, it is clear that the Evangelical population in these prisons constitutes a tight-knit community and takes the safety and regimented behavior of their community very seriously.

3.1. Exposure to Violence and Criminal Behavior

Some 46.6% of respondents had been in prison over the last five years, and half of them had a prior conviction. Of this latter group, 37.4% had entered juvenile detention centers before turning 18 years old. Half of all respondents said they had a relative who was serving a prison sentence. In addition, many had been exposed to violence: 23% had a gunshot wound, 46.6% had been stabbed, 69% had carried a weapon at one point, and 32% had injured someone. In short, most study participants had been exposed to a high degree and volume of violence whether they were Evangelicals or not. However, 76% of respondents reported that they do not see themselves as violent.

Most of the participants had been exposed to drug use as well. Some 82.2% reported using drugs throughout their lives. Marijuana was the most common drug used (75%). There were no significant differences between Evangelicals' and nonEvangelicals' drug use. However, fewer nonEvangelicals (57.7%) than Evangelicals (72.4%) reported that they had used less drugs in the past six months, whether they were in prison or not. Of those who had been in prison six months or more (n = 130), there were no significant differences in the drug use of Evangelicals (51.9%) and nonEvangelicals (48.1%). In addition, more nonEvangelicals smoke cigarettes (67.8%) than Evangelicals (47.1%). Interviews also revealed that more Evangelicals (27.6%) assist in prison drug treatment and rehab facilitates than nonEvangelicals (14.8%). This shows that Evangelical inmates seem to be more likely to recognize the problems with their drug consumption and seek professional help. Overall, both groups do not present important differences between them. Indeed, both sides have the presence of similar criminogenic factors.

3.2. How Do They Explain Their Nonviolent Behavior?

The authors asked respondents to explain their nonviolent behavior in prison by using open-ended questions. Figure 1 indicates that both Evangelical and nonEvangelical inmates explain their nonviolent conduct in the same way. There were no significant statistical differences between the two groups' explanations; most try to avoid conflict and suggest that their personality helps them respond in a level-headed way. In describing why they are nonviolent, inmates did not refer to their religious belief. Indeed, a huge majority of the nonEvangelical inmates stated that they wish to serve their sentence as calmly as possible (95.2%).

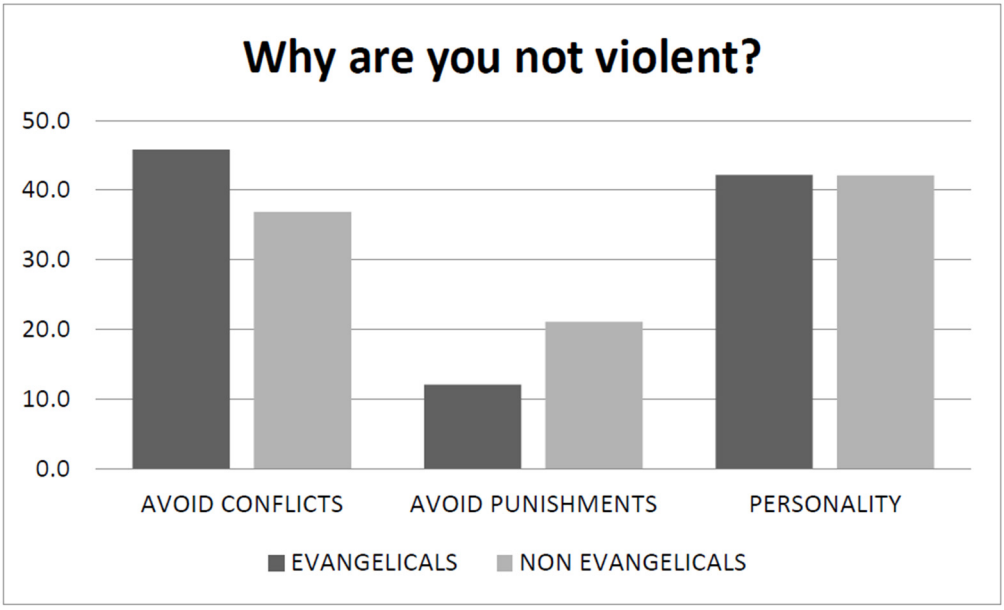

Figure 1. Why are you not violent? $n = 83$, $n = 76$.

Even though prison authorities report that both Evangelicals and nonEvangelicals exhibit nonviolent behavior, the authors asked about the frequency with which inmates exhibit aggressive behavior or break the prison's rules. Figure 2 demonstrates that both Evangelical and non-vangelical inmates' behavior follow similar patterns, and that both groups of inmates engage in verbal aggression more than any other behavior.

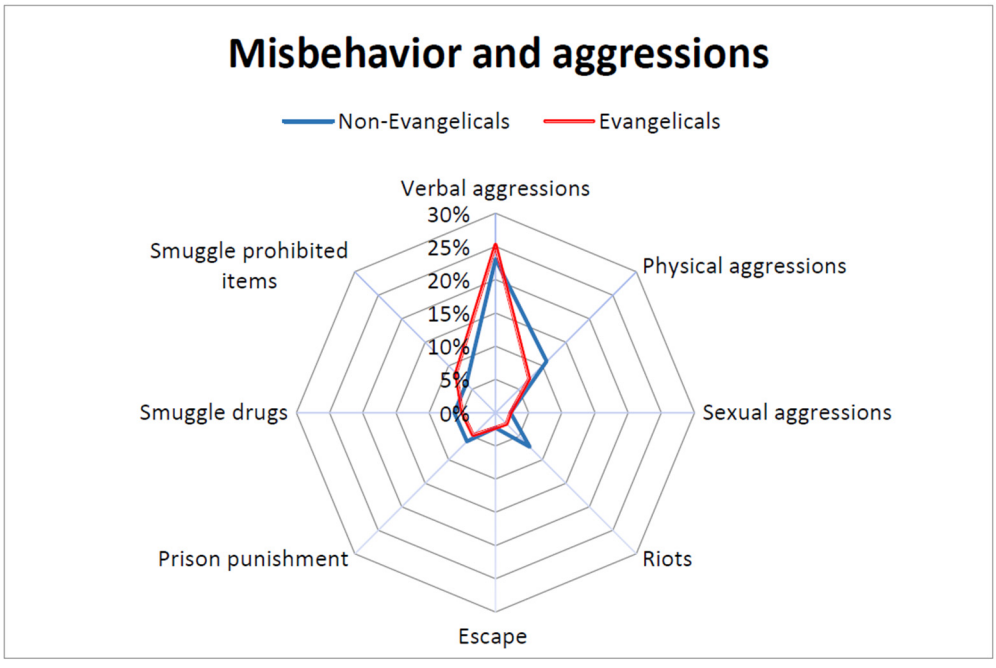

Figure 2. Misbehavior and aggressions. $n = 84$, $n = 84$.

3.3. Participation in Prison Activities

This section examines differences in Evangelical and nonEvangelical inmates' daily routines and reflects on how these routines could prevent them from being exposed to violence. Evangelical inmates have structured activities outside their rigid daily routines, including Bible study, group prayers, and participation in a furniture-making program financed by the church. They can sell the furniture they make through this program

to provide some income for their families. However, nonEvangelical inmates tend to participate in many more activities ($\chi^2 = 17.998$, $p < 0.05$), as detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Activity attendance in prison.

Activity Attendance	Evangelicals		NonEvangelicals		χ^2
	n	%	*n*	%	
Attend workshops	71	86.6%	39	55.7%	17.998 *
Attend prison activities	59	72.0%	49	60.5%	2.393
Attend religious services and activities	80	90.9%	53	60.9%	21.571 *
Collaborate with the activities organized in prison	79	89.8%	74	88.1%	0.123
Follow the prison daily routine	86	97.7%	81	98.8%	0.272
Cleaning cell daily	83	95.4%	83	96.5%	0.137

Note: (*) Values in the same row and subtable that do not share the same subscript are significantly different at $p < 0.05$ in the test for two-sided equality of column proportions.

3.4. Evangelical Religions Motivation

Here, the authors asked the 87 Evangelical respondents to describe why they profess Evangelism in prison. The results are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Inmates' motivations for professing Evangelism.

Why Do You Profess Evangelism in Prison?	Evangelicals	
	N	%
In this prison, people who profess my religion are less violent	75	87.2%
I identify with this group	79	91.9%
I have an affective commitment with this religious group	69	80.2%
I have affective commitment with the leader of the religious group from this section	58	67.4%
I feel pressure to be part of the religious group	9	10.3%
I feel pressure from the religious leader to participate in activities	7	8.0%
In order to make common cause with my religious group	70	80.5%
I perceive inmates who do not profess my religion negatively	33	37.9%
I perceive inmates who profess my religion positively	70	83.3%
Religion helps me manage feelings of guilt	62	72.1%
Religion helps me handle various losses (family, freedom, etc.)	71	81.6%
Being imprisoned is a test from God	50	57.5%
Religion helps me dream about a different life	78	89.7%
I do not feel alone because I feel the presence of God	83	95.4%
Religion motivates me to make changes in my life	81	93.1%

A few things stand out from this table. For instance, many inmates only became Evangelicals once they arrived in prison, and some 30% professed Evangelism for less than a year. In addition, it is clear that professing Evangelism gives inmates a sense of community, which helps them to feel less isolated and depressed and motivates them to care for and support one another. Indeed, some inmates felt pressured (rather than motivated) to profess this religion because they perceived the Evangelical inmate community to be less violent and more secure. This supports the idea that religious belief in prison is instrumental—70% of respondents stated that membership in the Evangelical community

effectively grants them a form of protection, 80% stated that being Evangelist affords them contact with people outside prison, 82.4% stated that it reduces stress in their relationships with other inmates, and 64.8% stated that religious affiliation provides material benefits (e.g., cleaning supplies).

In addition, most respondents agreed that they felt less lonely as a result of their religious belief, whether through a sense of God's presence, dreams of a different life, or the benefits of community. These elements could be central to reducing their stress levels and reducing their aggressive behavior. Evangelicals' heavily regimented daily routines maketheir days more structured and predictable, and the group's informal rules make their social lives more predictable and supportive of one another as well. In short, religion appears to have great instrumental value as a form of peer support.

3.5. Group Needs versus Religious Needs

These same traits—feelings of community, solidarity, sociality, safety, and the material benefits of being in such a community—appeared again when all inmates, regardless of religious affiliation, were asked their motivations for joining any kind of group in prison. Indeed, the authors found nonsignificant differences between Evangelical and nonEvangelical inmates' motivations for joining a group in prison.

Nonviolent inmates also seek community and support. However, Evangelical inmates reported a higher degree of gratification from belonging to a group than did non-Evangelical inmates ($\chi^2 = 4.219$, $p < 0.05$). Obviously, all Evangelical inmates in this study belong to a group ($\chi^2 = 21.559$, $p < 0.05$). Regardless of their religious belief, very few inmates report that the sanctions granted by a religious group, or the leader, are aggressive; this makes group membership relatively attractive. Indeed, only one in every ten participants said that they remain in a group to avoid punishment or retribution. More details are listed in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Motivation to belong a group in prison.

Motivation to Belong a Group in Prison	Evangelicals		NonEvangelicals		χ^2
	N	%	*N*	%	
You belong to a group	87	100.0%	68	78.2%	21.559 *
You are loyal to the group	69	79.3%	55	67.1%	3.236
The group is loyal to you	66	75.0%	55	66.3%	1.712
The group accepts you regardless of your history	83	94.3%	73	88.0%	2.770
The group gives you gratification: listens to you, takes care of you	79	89.8%	65	78.3%	4.219 *
The sanctions granted by the group are very aggressive, which makes you stay in the group and do what the group says	14	15.9%	9	10.8%	0.942
The sanctions granted by the group leader are very aggressive, which makes you stay in the group and do what the leader says	9	10.2%	8	9.6%	0.017
The group keeps your secrets	54	61.40%	44	53.00%	4.045

Note: (*) Values in the same row and sub-table that do not share the same subscript are significantly different at $p < 0.05$ in the test for two-sided equality of column proportions.

No difference was observed between the two groups when asked whether they regret their criminal behavior and the damage it caused. Both Evangelical and nonEvangelical groups tended toward socially acceptable or expected responses. These findings further suggest that inmates see religious belief as having an instrumental role.

The results are in line with other research (e.g., Schaefer et al. 2016) that suggests that the effects of faith-based interventions may not result in long-term behavioral change. In-

deed, the interviews suggested that inmates adopted Evangelism for instrumental reasons—very few showed more than a limited knowledge of the basic concepts identified by the bishop earlier in the study process. About half were able to identify the significance of bread in Evangelism, and only three subjects were able to identify the church represents the mother to the parishioners. Despite the time they spend in Bible studies and other religious activities, it does indeed seem that their adoption of Evangelism is largely instrumental.

4. Discussion

Although religiosity has been found to motivate attitudinal change and prosocial inmate conduct, these effects may not translate to life after prison. Kerley and Copes (2008) found that religion has a certain instrumental value, given the pains and confinement of prison life, by providing the qualities mentioned by inmates in the interviews above (emotional and material support, etc.). It seems as though inmates focus their efforts on establishing strong social support networks for themselves in prison, and thus Evangelical inmates in this study appear to value the positive relationships created by belonging to a community as highly as or more highly than the actual religious content of that community.

Religious activities play a significant role in helping inmates combat the dehumanizing environment of prisons and feel hopeful toward their future. Such activities provide inmates with an alternative way of serving their time in prison (O'Connor 2005) and have been found to reduce incidences of prison violence when other daily activities are not provided to inmates. Overcrowding and limited access to prison programs reduce the options that inmates have for spending their time, and such a situation can generate conflict (Barriga 2012). Limited access to such programs limits inmates' participation in activities that promote social reintegration and increases the likelihood that they will be violent or recidivist (Wooldredge and Steiner 2012). In fact, inmate participation in recreational daily activities reduces their stress levels and helps them fight off the various negative effects of imprisonment (Gallant et al. 2015; Tomar 2013). As in some other studies (e.g., Chui and Cheng 2011), the results of this study show that religious practice and community can help reduce inmates stress and provide them with a feeling of safety that they cannot get anywhere else in the prison environment.

This study indicates that Evangelical practices replace rehabilitation programs, which are limited or even absent in many Chilean prisons. Evangelical communities and their activities offer inmates the chance to fill their time, feel secure, and avoid conflict. This finding highlights the instrumentality of many inmates' religiosity; many suggested that they are cynical of the religiosity of professed believers because many merely pretend to be believers in order to reap the benefits regardless of whether they actually believe in Evangelism or not. These findings suggest that prison authorities can motivate nonviolent behavior by funding, emphasizing, and encouraging the benefits of, activities of, and membership in a religious community, and that doing so will have spillover effects in terms of the general safety and environment of a prison.

5. Conclusions

The Chilean prisons studied provide limited opportunities for inmates to develop activities that promote their social reintegration. Overcrowding and long hours of leisure are elements that are often associated with prison violence. However, this group of inmates does not show violent behavior. Instead, they look for group support to achieve safety, emotional care and have access to cleaning supplies. Evangelical inmates appear to value the positive relationships created by belonging to a community, which could help reduce their stress. In spite of the fact that Evangelical inmates did not identify the basic contents of their religion, they argued about the positive aspects that the religious community offers them in prison. Here, religion seems an element that generates cohesion between inmates, such as Durkheim (2012) arguing that religion is a bonding and cohesive force to unify people.

This research allows policymakers to distinguish between different elements that motivate inmates' nonviolent behavior and helps them to envision prison conditions that encourage inmates to be less violent. However, this study is limited in that it did not necessarily address the motivations and views of violent or extremely violent inmates. It is merely the first step in investigating why some inmates are nonviolent despite the uncertain conditions of prison, which often beget violence. Given its findings about the instrumentality of religious belief in prison, future studies might investigate the hypothesis that a person's individual agency, beliefs, and other characteristics might lead them to associate with different groups and confront the issues posed by the prison environment differently.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the main author, e-mail: claudiar@uc.cl (C.A.R.-Q.).

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