

“HE’S NOT HERE, SO HOPEFULLY *HE* IS”:  
THE FUNCTION OF RELIGION AS A COPING MECHANISM  
FOR PRISON WIVES AND GIRLFRIENDS

by

Amanda Marie Lane

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*Certificate of Approval*

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Amanda Marie Lane has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Sociology.

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(Keith Farrington)

Whitman College  
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## CHAPTER 1 — INTRODUCTION

Incarceration in the United States is often at the forefront of much political and sociological discourse (Beckett and Sasson 2000; Garland 1990; Hagan 1985; Jacobs 1977; Packer 1968). The question of how we punish those who have threatened our normative understanding of “right” and “wrong” consumes much of how we frame the morality of any society. However, these discussions often disregard the latent consequences of punishment methods. In general, the individual who committed a crime should be punished, and punished that individual is. Along with this single incidence of incarceration, however, is likely to be a web of innocent people who are also incarcerated in a sense. A single man or woman sent to prison typically means the loss of a family member, new economic hardships, social and psychological stresses, and community relabeling for those individuals who are actively related to, or otherwise supportive of, the inmate. So while the societal focus has generally been directed toward ensuring appropriate and effective punishment to those convicted of a crime, the population of people who are similarly, if not more so, affected by these acts of incarceration has been essentially ignored, creating an “invisible group of sufferers” (Brink 2003: 394). This thesis, therefore, centers on the belief that if we are going to hold ourselves accountable as a nation for the severity of and at what rate we incarcerate criminals in the United States, we must comprehensively evaluate the consequences.

There are over one million people incarcerated in federal prisons in the United States, the majority of which are men (U.S. Department of Justice 2010). This number suggests that there must be an equally or comparably staggering number of women and families who are now missing their husbands, boyfriends, fathers, sons or loved ones.

Thus, the concept of mass incarceration affects multiple populations. The inmates themselves are obviously imprisoned and hopefully justifiably so. However, there remain those on the outside, innocent according to the law, who are also imprisoned by the emotional suffering and other hardships that occur when losing a loved one to incarceration.

This thesis is not about the morality or efficacy of incarceration in the United States. Rather, it focuses on a particular population that is greatly impacted by it—women whose spouses<sup>1</sup> are in prison. I highlight how the incarceration of one’s husband or boyfriend has profound effects on those living outside of the prison walls, and how these women navigate and cope with their loss. That is to say, this thesis explores the processes of coping that are employed by such women and, more specifically, how religion functions as one of those coping mechanisms. While there are various ways in which these women cope with having a loved one incarcerated, the use of and reliance upon religion offers some a unique support system. The ways in which religion functions as a coping mechanism in this study lends insight into the social and emotional function of religion for those facing crises more generally. This study investigates the ways the function of religion might break down or be rejected as a consequence of prison wives and girlfriends rejecting religious morality or refusing to uphold their religious faith during their crisis. Overall, the study of the relationship between crisis, here exemplified by the incarceration of one’s spouse, and the coping mechanisms employed in response to such a crisis serves to contextualize religion within this larger social framework.

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<sup>1</sup> When using the term “spouse” throughout this thesis, I am referring to a woman’s husband or boyfriend.

Ultimately, this research sought to answer the following questions: How does religion function, or not, as a coping mechanism used by wives and girlfriends of incarcerated men? How do these women's attitudes towards, dependence on, or use of religion change due to their spouses' incarcerations? Why is religion used, and possibly rejected, as a coping mechanism? In order to thoroughly understand the answers to those questions, I also sought to investigate the general impacts of having a loved one incarcerated and other ways in which a woman might choose to cope with that event independent of religion.

My initial hypotheses that guided this study, and which were developed before my data-collection process, were as follows: 1) that prison wives and girlfriends will rarely reject religion and instead embrace it as a particularly accessible way to cope with the incarceration of their spouses, 2) that even women who did not consider themselves religious before the incarceration will be more likely to do so afterward, and 3) that if a woman does not employ religion as a coping mechanism at all, she will rely more heavily upon informal, less institutionalized social support systems, such as friends, family, and other prison wives and girlfriends.

The following is a brief overview of the content of this thesis. Chapter 1 is the introduction that you are currently reading. Chapter 2 lays out the theoretical framework of my thesis and reviews previous literature surrounding issues of family crises, coping processes, and the social functions of religion. Chapter 3 discusses the methods used in my research project, along with the limitations and extent to which my study can be generalized. Chapter 4 summarizes the impacts that my respondents routinely endure in relation to the incarcerations of their loved ones. Chapter 5 identifies common ways that

my respondents cope with those impacts, outside of religion. Chapter 6 prefaces my discussion of religion that follows by addressing the common reasons why many of my participants did not consider themselves religious prior to their spouses' incarcerations. Chapters 7 through 10 present my analysis of how religion specifically functions as a coping mechanism for prison wives and girlfriends. Each of these chapters addresses a different dimension of religion that arose in my data as I considered the ways in which religion is employed as a coping mechanism. Thus, Chapter 7 examines how religious social integration and participation offers tools for coping. This is followed by Chapter 8, which discusses the coping mechanism of private religious practices, such as private prayer. The following two chapters address the spiritual and psychological aspects of religion, as opposed to the more physical religious practices discussed previously. Thus, Chapter 9 focuses on how holding certain religious beliefs and values helps prison wives and girlfriends cope, and Chapter 10 focuses on the last two dimensions of religion with which I was concerned, divine interaction and possession of faith. Finally, Chapter 11 concludes my thesis by revisiting both my initial research questions and my leading hypotheses and discussing how my findings address those questions and support, or not, those hypotheses.

## CHAPTER 2 — REVIEW OF THEORY AND LITERATURE

### *Introduction*

Wives and girlfriends of incarcerated men face a unique hardship in that they are equally, if not more so, punished in law enforcement's attempt to administer justice. Those who are the target of such law enforcement have a significant second identity, which is seemingly unrecognized—that of being a spouse, partner, or oftentimes a parent. While criminal law does not explicitly threaten prisoner families, there is a network of people associated with the incarcerated individual who are greatly affected. Families of prisoners often endure challenges such as economic strains, psychological stress, and social stigmatization just by virtue of being associated with an inmate. My study focuses on the coping strategies of the wives and girlfriends of incarcerated men. More specifically, I explore the use of religion as a coping mechanism because religion may provide a framework in what is largely an anomic situation or is simply a particularly accessible way for these women to cope with this crisis. Furthermore, religion in this context becomes an especially useful coping strategy because the nature of this crisis, having a loved one in prison, often causes usual support systems to falter.

Due to the lack of direct literature on my topic, my research centralizes around a series of theories that work together as a framework for understanding the nature of the crisis of having a spouse incarcerated and how this specific crisis informs the way in which religion functions. My research is situated within three theoretical perspectives: Durkheim's theory of *anomie*, theories of family stress, specifically that of Donald A. Hansen and Reuben Hill (1949; 1964) and Hamilton McCubbin's (1976; 1979), and

functionalist theories of religion. All three perspectives, working in conjunction with one another, act to provide the theoretical framework for investigating the relationship between the incarceration of a spouse and one's attitude towards, dependence on, and use of religion.

### ***Durkheim's Theory of "Anomie"***

Émile Durkheim discusses *anomie* as a situation that lacks norms or one that lacks preconceived notions of order and meaning. It constitutes conditions of deregulation in which "the limits are unknown between the possible and the impossible, what is just and what is unjust, legitimate claims and hopes and those which are immoderate" (Durkheim 1951: 253). Anomie, therefore, occurs when social boundaries and expectations are so ambiguous as to obfuscate the appropriate trajectory of one's behavior. While his discussion of anomie in his earlier and later works, *The Division of Labor* (1933) and *Suicide* (1951), produces slightly differing ideas of what anomie is (Marks 1974), there are elements of both that are particularly relevant to my study in understanding the nuanced ways in which a spouse's incarceration is an anomic situation. The distinction between the two ways in which Durkheim conceptualizes anomie centers on how society is deficient—the earlier discussion highlights society's inherent deficiency in responding to certain populations' needs and the latter underscores how society might be incapable of properly responding to a severe change or crisis (Marks 1974).

As Stephen R. Marks argues (1974), Durkheim's concept of anomie in his earlier works, most prominently *The Division of Labor* (1933), exists as a lack of structural efficacy of society, in which the previous governing body of rules does not apply and a

“lack of harmony” inevitably ensues (Marks 1974: 330). Therefore, anomie in this sense represents a discord of the macro-social; it is spurred by a structural inability to apply norms and expectations to a certain phase or condition of society. Durkheim’s emphasis on structure applies to my research focus because it highlights the social element of what is commonly treated as a personal affliction. The spouses of incarcerated men, while oftentimes unrecognized as a victimized population, experience what Durkheim describes as anomic in the sense that societal structures of support, to be identified later, essentially break down for a woman when her husband is a prison inmate. Society’s paradigm of what is “right” and “wrong” has created a strong sense of stigmatization and negative labeling toward those who continue to love and support offenders of the law. The concept of anomie, as discussed in *The Division of Labor* (1933), lends itself to the inability of society to appropriately and effectively respond to the shared experiences of prison wives and girlfriends. While innocent in the face of the law, these women are equally punished for what their husbands have done because of society members’ ignorance toward the important distinction between criminals and those who love them.

Discussing the experiences of prison families, Judith Brink (2003) highlights the sense of isolation many feel: “Prison families and friends are an invisible group who suffer many of the same punishments as prisoners, only our suffering goes unnoticed...It is so pervasive a pain that we get used to is... This, on top of managing a household, is a challenge that many women I know have managed to navigate” (Pg. 394). Her use of the phrase “invisible group” illustrates the separation from greater society that prison wives and families often endure. They are forced to deal with the incarceration of their husbands without the help from their communities due to “the lack of meaningful contact

and interaction between the community at large” (Evanston, Farrington and Cleveland 1990: 25). This lack of interaction that Evanston et al. (1990) explore is the root of much emotional and social strain on prison wives. However, not only do communities tend to isolate those associated with the incarcerated individuals, many society members also perpetuate unfair and damaging stereotypes about those individuals, adding further stress to the situation (Evanston et al. 1990). Therefore, this situation exemplifies one of great anomie as society fails to provide structural support and, in some cases, serves to exacerbate the effects of the crisis of having a loved one incarcerated. In sum, Durkheim’s concept of anomie, born out of his *The Division of Labor* (1933), applies to how societal structures, being ill equipped to address the needs of the respective population, are damaging forces to these women’s support systems.

In *Suicide* (1951), Durkheim’s later work, the characteristics of what is “anomic” shift slightly to emphasize new qualities of this concept. In this account, anomie exists in a “crisis of transition,” or “when society is disturbed by some painful crisis or by beneficent but abrupt transitions, it is momentarily incapable of exercising this [regulating] influence” (Durkheim 1951: 252). From this perspective, anomie becomes a state in which great change catalyzes the disruption of boundaries and norms. While the earlier “anomie” is the product of inherent deficiencies of certain societies, this “anomie” is produced by the failure of a society to *react*; it is caused by an abrupt change or crisis and not by a pre-existing societal deficiency. In my study, anomie describes the profound change in lifestyle that is required of prison spouses when their husbands are incarcerated. The unique aspect of such a situation is that it not only results in potentially great psychological harm, but it often completely deconstructs the women’s previous

ways of understanding their realities and imposes great lifestyle changes. With their husbands incarcerated, the wives, commonly with children to take care of, are required to navigate two parental roles while enduring the additional emotional stress of the absence of a loved one. In addition to the inherent pressures of the previous conditions, prison wives are predominantly faced with economic strains as their husbands oftentimes occupied the working role, economically supporting the family (Travis and Waul 2003, Schneller 1976, Fishman 1990, Evanston et al. 1990).

This “crisis of transition” aspect of anomie applies not only to the consequent hardships just discussed, but also to the fundamental fact that profound change occurs with the incarceration of one’s spouse. Hargrove (1989) writes: “[The very fact of change] temporarily humanizes the established rules and patterns of interaction by showing them to be changeable products of human convention” (Pg. 36). The overwhelming change that occurs when one’s spouse is incarcerated has profound effects on the way that the individual may react to conventional norms. These can include gender norms within the family with the husband gone or norms regulating the way in which one behaves in the community because of the stigma attached to their association with an inmate. Change in this sense can destabilize what was once a foundation of behavior for these women. Once this foundation has been destroyed or threatened, it may be difficult for prisoners’ spouses to further rely on “established rules and patterns of interaction,” reinforcing the presence of anomie in the situation. Durkheim’s concept of anomie and these nuanced differences between his two presentations of the concept contextualize the conditions in which these women experience a sense of crisis.

I believe it to be important to note that while the situations of prison wives and girlfriends are clearly anomic, the anomie they experience can be relatively synonymous with that of other family crises, such as having a family member die or other overwhelmingly stressful circumstances. However, the incarceration of a loved one is much different than most other crises in relation to the anomie that ensues because of the perception of such a crisis and the negative labeling that that often inspires. How prison spouses face unique hardships, which serve to emphasize the anomic qualities of their situations, is discussed below.

### ***Family Stress Theory***

While Durkheim's theory of anomie gives insight into the state of crisis that occurs when a women's loved one is incarcerated, it fails to provide background into the specific nature of family crises and how these women navigate such anomic experiences. Donald A. Hansen and Reuben Hill (1964) identify various ways in which a family can experience a "crisis" and the different "stressors" that are involved in such crises. They draw upon the work of T.D. Eliot (1942) and Hill (1949) in discussing one of the most impactful stressors, that of dismemberment. In this case, demoralization is regarded as the inevitable consequence stemming from a disturbance of preexisting roles, such as the husband being the economic provider prior to his incarceration. With a member gone, the family must reallocate the missing member's role, which is a confusing and straining process (Hansen and Hill 1964: 794). Not only does dismemberment create internal familial stress, but community context can also exacerbate such stress. Hansen and Hill write: "Stress can arise in the family...because of tensions and strains that follow changes

in values held by the community” (1964: 795). Therefore, a crisis of dismemberment can change the way a family is perceived by the community. This can happen if the dismemberment leads to a change in how or if the family demonstrates respectable values. For example, a family that loses a member because he has been arrested could potentially demonstrate poor values for it will now be associated with crime and immorality, consequently changing the community’s perception of that family. However, the way in which a community responds to family crises is dependent on not only the crisis itself, but also the family’s reaction to the crisis. Among four possible community responses identified by Hansen and Hill (1964) are two that are particularly relevant for this study: the social welfare response and the persecutive response.

The social welfare response of a community entails somewhat artificial and contractual support. This response is not born out of sympathy or emotion; it is instead born out of a community’s responsibility to help those who appear helpless or victimized, for example in cases of middle-class delinquency and drug addiction (Hansen and Hill 1964: 798). In the case of prison spouses, a social welfare response would be one of counseling geared toward separating the women from their incarcerated husbands. If compliant, “individuals (other than the shamed one) are sometimes offered at least partial forgiveness or forgetfulness if they disassociate themselves from the shamed one” (Hansen and Hill 1964: 798), the shamed one being the inmate and the forgiven individual being the wife. However, while forgiveness is granted, the personal beliefs of the community toward the individual remain negative.

The second community response is the persecutive response that is characterized by overt community rejection of the individual. Unlike the social welfare response where

the general attitude of the community is one of possible forgiveness and acceptance while the personal response of community members is otherwise, the punitive response is completely negative. In this case, therefore, “the family...is denied all profitable intercourse with the community” (Hansen and Hill 1964: 799). Supported by data presented by Laura Fishman (1990), Judith Brink (2003), and Evanston et al. (1990), this second community response to family crisis is the experience many prison wives and girlfriends report. While these women themselves are not the ones who commit crimes, their association and love for those who did disallows them from receiving community support (Evanston et al. 1990). The women are essentially persecuted for their behavior in supporting “criminals.” These two community responses are quite possible within the context of this study; however, the fact that the most common of the two is the latter suggests that these women must employ coping mechanisms outside of overarching community support. To theoretically ground how the women might navigate the loss of community support, Hamilton McCubbin’s (1979) theory of family stress explains the ways in which families and individuals cope.

In McCubbin’s article *Integrating Coping Behavior in Family Stress Theory* (1979), he synthesizes three previous studies on family coping strategies when faced with familial separation, for example war-induced separation, to provide a spectrum of coping mechanisms dependent on the length of separation. This theory, while self-identified as pertaining to families, is also relevant to individual women as the data focuses on the specific experiences of the wives of men who leave for war. Coupled with McCubbin’s other study presented in *Coping Repertoires of Families Adapting to Prolonged War-Induced Separations* (1976), which investigates how wives of soldiers cope with being

separated from their spouses, McCubbin provides important theoretical background on both family stress and the coping mechanisms of the women in such families.

Ultimately, McCubbin presents a spectrum of coping mechanisms along a “continuum of severity of family separation experience,” (McCubbin 1979: 239). The category that pertains most to prison wives and girlfriends is what he labels as “prolonged separation,” being the most severe separation of the three categories with a mean of six years. According to McCubbin (1979), the implications of this type of separation are that the family is often required to endure “changes in family roles, processes, and boundaries in order to manage the separation” (Pg. 239). However, it is important to take note that many women whose spouses are incarcerated are forced to be without them for much longer than six years, in some cases for the rest of their lives. Under the “most severe category,” McCubbin lists several unique ways in which women and their families cope with the separation (1979: 234), some of which are especially relevant for the study of prison wives and girlfriends.

One of the coping mechanisms discussed is that of adherence to community norms and expectations in the efforts to maintain normalcy and consistency when faced with crisis. As McCubbin (1979) explains, “The family's ability to manage stress may depend on the efficacy and/or adequacy of the solutions the culture, community or the organization provides” (Pg. 242). By “solutions,” McCubbin is referring to the ways in which a community’s norms and values may be supportive of the individual. For example, a woman experiencing stress because of her husband’s war-induced absence may seek comfort in the community’s values of pride and support of war soldiers and their families. Hansen and Hill (1964) argue that the community can “offer blueprints for

behavior under stress...social institutions actually can prepare the family and its members for stress by providing roles and norms for post-impact behavior” (Pg. 796).

Communities are in a sense programmed to deal with certain crises of the family or individual and offer institutionalized ways of coping through community programs and support groups. However, unique to the case of spouses of incarcerated men is the stigmatization rooted in communities toward those who are married and related to prison inmates. As I discussed before, those who continue to love and support men who are incarcerated all endure, to some extent, unjust stereotypes and isolation because of their association with these men (Evanston et al. 1990; Fishman 1990). The fact that communities, which so often provide a powerful tool for coping with crises, essentially abandon this population of women due to the nature of their relationship oftentimes debilitates these women from coping and healing effectively.

Not only does community support positively affect the ability of a family, and specifically the mother or wife, to demonstrate successful coping processes, but the presence and strength of interpersonal relationships is also positively affective. Interpersonal relationships, as opposed to community structures that act as guidance in dealing with the situation, mean the extent to which the women have intimate friendships that act as support mechanisms of trust and understanding (McCubbin and Lester 1977). Interpersonal relationships also act to foster another coping mechanism, that of expressing feelings and seeking resolution. Through healthy and close relationships, especially with others who can relate to the crisis through shared experience, women are able to become a part of a collective and unite together to attempt to resolve whatever problem they share. These relationships based on shared experiences allow women and

families “to obtain partial control over the situation and in turn reduce the impact of the stress” (McCubbin 1979: 241). Furthermore, this coping strategy allows the women to unite in confronting whatever organization seems to represent the source of their stress. For example, in the case of prison wives and girlfriends, this would be exemplified by their discourse between one another on hating the prison and prison guards and, in some cases, the proactive action toward changing penal policies that some prison spouses demonstrate.

In addition to previous coping strategies, McCubbin et al. (1976) argue that as a family has more and more involvement in what they refer to as “Collective Support Groups,” the family is more likely to demonstrate successful regenerative processes in coping with crises. Collective Support Groups act as cohesive, unified social structures representing consistency and normalcy in the face of destructive situations. These external groups outside of the immediate family “act as a unified body on behalf of all families in a specific crisis situation” (McCubbin 1979: 243). These collective groups are different than community involvement and interpersonal relationships in the sense that they are an extension of the community specifically geared toward a specific crisis. Through involvement with these groups, families and women in crisis are more likely to have a heightened “regenerative power” (McCubbin 1979: 243). Within the context of my study, collective support groups would be groups of other prison wives and girlfriends who share the same hardships and frustrations.

While a focus on communal support, as exemplified in the previous discussion, is surely an integral aspect of successful coping for women experiencing family crises, there is also an important role for individual development in the process. Individual

development in this sense consists of internal growth or change of those experiencing the crisis as a way of responding to new hardships. For example, McCubbin (1979) suggests that there is a pattern of women who seek to establish autonomy and “develop personal strengths through proclaimed independence” when faced with separation from their spouses (Pg. 240). M. Janice Hogan, Cheryl Buehler, and Beatrice Robinson (1983) extend this discussion in their article *Single Parenting: Transitioning Alone*. Focusing on how parents navigate the hardships of transitioning to a single-headed household, they identify an increase in decision-making and subsequently “defining a new life plan” as particularly positive ways of coping with the transition (Pg. 128). Specifically, individual development as a way to cope with a crisis might consist of finding a new job, enrolling into classes, or pursuing a new interest or hobby. The possible coping strategies of women enduring family crises, therefore, range from community involvement and emphasizing external support to individual growth and establishing oneself as independent and capable.

As the population of women in my study, consisting of prison wives and girlfriends, is undeniably under-researched and the specific ways in which they cope are relatively absent in the literature, there are important analogies to be made using the mechanisms identified for women experiencing similar separations and hardships. These theoretical perspectives illuminate how prison wives and girlfriends are enduring what should be considered an anomic situation and the ways in which they might cope with such a crisis, according to McCubbin (1976; 1979) and Hill’s (1949; 1964) family stress theories.

## ***Functionalist Theories of Religion***

In studying the range of coping mechanisms a woman might employ in dealing with the incarceration of her spouse, the specific uses of religion and why many of these women turn to religion as a coping mechanism appears to be absent in the literature. First, I believe it is important to discuss what I mean by “religion” or “spirituality” in this paper. In defining what I mean by “religion” or “spirituality” within the context of this study, I draw upon literature that emphasizes the multiple meanings of these concepts and the limitations with universalizing religious experiences. Kevin S. Seybold and Peter C. Hill (2001) argue: “When considering [the role of religion], researchers must take care to properly conceptualize the multifaceted nature of religion and spirituality. The constructs cannot be defined strictly in terms of a specific set of beliefs or behaviors” (Pg. 21). In this thesis, I do not attempt to differentiate between specific religions, all of which have admittedly distinct beliefs and practices. Nor do I discuss the ways in which religion and spirituality diverge. Rather, my study explores the use of religion and spirituality more generally as a coping mechanism for women with spouses in prison. Therefore, the word “religion” as used in this study encompasses the concept of spirituality, in which a woman might not prescribe to a specific religion but still exemplifies practice of the dimensions of religion discussed below.

Ultimately, I use the following aspects to more thoroughly convey what I mean by “religion” or “spirituality”: social integration and participation, private practices, maintenance of beliefs, divine interaction or encounter with transcendence, and

existential certainty (Ellison 1991, Seybold and Hill 2001, Fetzer Institute/NIA 1999)<sup>2</sup>. I specifically chose these religious dimensions for the purpose of my analysis because they were not only highlighted by literature surrounding the function of religion, but they were also the religious dimensions that most commonly appeared in my data. Social integration and participation represents when a person attends services at a place of worship and belongs to a community of others who share her religious or spiritual beliefs. Private practices reflect how an individual experiences religion, which can manifest in private prayer or other private expressions of faith. Maintenance of beliefs and values represents the internalization of a system of beliefs and values by an individual that are dictated by her religious or spiritual identity. Divine interaction or encounter with transcendence represents a person's recognition of at least one God, or another Higher Power, and some form of communication and bond with that Higher Power. Existential certainty, or what I refer to as faith, refers to one's trust and commitment to her religious beliefs and relationship with a Higher Being (Ellison 1991)<sup>3</sup>. All of the identified dimensions, more or less working in congruence with one another, act to comprise what I mean by "religion." In this thesis, each dimension will be addressed individually to

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<sup>2</sup> Originally, I also had "commitment" as a dimension of religion to represent how central or omnipresent a person makes her religious or spiritual identity in her life and how much that faith shapes her worldview. However, I do not believe this dimension is relevant for my study because I am not focusing on how prison wives and girlfriends employ religion in any other aspect of their lives outside of coping with the incarceration of their spouses. Therefore, how committed they are to religion overall, or how much their faith "shapes their worldview," is not part of my discussion.

<sup>3</sup> In my analysis, I address the last two dimensions, divine interaction and having faith, simultaneously as that is what my respondents most often did. The ways in which having faith and engaging in divine interaction function as coping mechanisms is, according to my data, interdependent and cannot be discussed separately.

examine how each particular aspect of religion functions differently and to varying extents as coping mechanisms for prison wives and girlfriends.

When discussing my participants' levels of "religiosity," I use the same characteristics identified above. By "religiosity" I mean to conceptualize the *extent* to which an individual practices those aspects and self-reports her level of religious involvement. Her self-report of religiosity is what Robert Joseph Taylor, Linda M. Chatters, and Sean Joe (2009) define as "subjective religiosity," meaning feeling close with God, "self-reports of the importance of religion, the role of religious beliefs in daily life, and self-perceptions of being religious" (Pg. 625). For example, if a woman only demonstrates a minimal amount of religious practice, according to these dimensions, and yet classifies herself as "extremely religious," her self-report of high religiosity is significant in my analysis.

With this in mind, and within the scope of this study, I prioritized how my participant's define "religion" and "religiosity" in evaluating how these concepts function in their lives. I find that this subjectivity strengthens the research by highlighting those dimensions of religion that are commonly referred to and therefore most pervasive in the lives of prison wives and girlfriends. In applying these aspects of religion to my study, I use functionalist theories of religion from Durkheim, Meredith B. McGuire, and Barbara Hargrove to investigate why religion acts as a common and successful way of coping with the separation from one's husband for prison wives and girlfriends.

Durkheim's theory of religion seeks to explain its function within society with specific emphasis on differentiating between the "sacred" and the "profane." While the focus of this research is not on the nature of that distinction directly, it holds significance

for understanding why religion is used by prison spouses. As Durkheim suggests, religion is characterized by a dichotomy between what is considered sacred, that which is irreducible, universal, and indivisible (Pickering 1984), and the profane, or that which is essentially the opposite of the sacred in being ordinary and mundane. Why such a distinction is important to this study is because it highlights the functionality of religion for these women in that it identifies two focal components of religion and the ways in which they function for religious believers. In separating the sacred from the profane, Durkheim identifies a “transcendent reality” provided by religion, and more specifically by one’s beliefs in the sacred (Durkheim 1947). Religion as Durkheim discusses provides two functions, stemming from this fundamental dichotomy: an active and a cognitive function. The former is the framework that religion often provides in helping people live their lives; this active function is that which is associated with ritual and is characterized by the physical actions required in avoiding evil and living morally, however defined by the religion in practice (Pickering 1984: 303). The second function, or the cognitive function, is born out of the mental aspect of religion. W.S.F. Pickering (1984) elaborates on this function: “The cognitive function means that a religion renders society, social relationships—indeed the totality of existence—intelligible. In giving man the ability to think about the world, and above all an understanding of the society in which he lives, the cognitive function of religion has provided, in Durkheim’s eyes, the greatest of all services to mankind” (Pg. 303). These two functions are very much present in the way people in crises experience religion as they represent both the physical aspect, such as the feeling of belonging to a community of believers, and the mental aspect, such as having a relationship with a Higher Power, that often work together in alleviating crises.

Relating back to McCubbin's work, he identifies religion or holding religious beliefs as one of the coping mechanisms unique to situations of severe stress, or the longer periods of separation from one's spouse. In analyzing why religion emerges as an important coping mechanism, he writes: "...spiritual support contributes to maintaining the family unit, and to individual self-esteem, and also serves as a reference point for social norms and expectations" (McCubbin 1979: 241). Both functions of religion that Durkheim defines are present in the way that McCubbin understands religion to be a source of healing and coping for women and families; there is the physical component of religion, or the active function, that acts as a guide for behavior and a "reference point," and the cognitive function that serves to build self-esteem and provide support through one's relation to religion and that which is sacred.

To contextualize the use of religion from the perspective of women with incarcerated spouses, in this section I first discuss why it is that religion is a powerful tool in overcoming anomie and then I draw upon the literature to understand the power of religion in the unique case of these prison wives and girlfriends. As I emphasized previously, the incarceration of a spouse is consistent with the concept of anomie as introduced by Durkheim and requires these women to endure profound difficulties, such as detachment from a loved one, stigmatization due to one's association with an inmate, economic hardships, and loss of family and community support. Religion in such an environment plays an important role. Barbara Hargrove (1989) summarizes religion as having two functions in response to anomie—to act as a "buffer against the occurrence of anomie in the first place, and if the group does experience an anomic situation, religion can potently respond to the crisis of moral meanings" (Pg. 35). Religion can alleviate the

detrimental qualities of anomie through its ability to provide a framework that fills in the moral and social gaps of knowledge with formal answers and guidelines to navigating those gaps, thereby demonstrating the two functions that Durkheim identifies. In this regard, religion has emerged as representing the antithesis to anomie per Durkheim's presentation (Lee and Clyde 1974).

In more concrete terms, there are four ways in which religion can combat the inherent stresses of anomie. First, religion tends to perpetuate the belief that the future is predictable and rational (Lee and Clyde 1974: 45). It provides believers with a sense of control over their lives through its explanations of why certain things happen the way they do. Additionally, religion offers a "unified system of meaning" that acts as a basis for rationale of social realities (Hargrove 1989: 26). The framework of rationality offered in religion is a combative measure against the lack of meaning that characterizes anomie. Religion also has the ability to give purpose and self-worth to those who do not innately possess such qualities, or have lost either quality in the face of anomie. Susan Crawford Sullivan (2008) argues that one way religion does this is by helping to "develop a framework to interpret life that can enhance self-worth by means of a relationship with a divine being and provide hope for change" (Pg. 158). The connection with otherworldly forces, often an intrinsic element to religion, functions as a way for people to address real-world problems with spiritual or transcendental explanations. This can "enhance self-worth" because of the potential optimism and sense of control experienced in being able to answer what can otherwise be frustratingly unanswerable questions. This element of religion detracts from the sense of worthlessness and loss of purpose that subsequently arises with anomic situations. By establishing a relationship with a Divine Being, the

power of such an emotional, social, and psychological bond can elevate one's self-worth. Another way religion can build a personal sense of value and pride is by offering what Kevin S. Seybold and Peter C. Hill (2001) identify as: "locus-of-control beliefs (i.e., perception of personal control over events in one's life), acceptance from other people or God, attributions of purpose and meaning to negative life events, and optimistic explanatory style" (Pg. 23). Thirdly, religion offers a space for community involvement, social companionship, and support and validation in one's beliefs (Seybold and Hill 2001: 23). The emphasis on communal bonding in religious practices and beliefs acts as a support system for participants that can serve to eliminate feelings of isolation that often arise in anomic circumstances. Furthermore, the institutionalized community of religion can mediate against the ambiguity of norms in anomie because when immersed in a group of people, the socialization that takes place provides a set of norms that are consistently reified and demonstrated.

Literature on the coping mechanisms of prison wives rarely explicitly highlights the role of religion in such processes; however, some researchers on prisoner wives have mentioned the power of religion. Megan Comfort (2008), in her research on prisoners' families, tells the story of Erica, a prisoner's wife, and explains: "Instead of 'letting go' of her vision [to someday have her husband back from prison], Erica sticks to her belief that with dedication to Christian ideals and a firm will she can be the mistress of her destiny" (Pg. 167). Through this example it becomes clear that religion plays a significant role in the maintenance of optimism and direction when internalizing the gravity of such situations. Not only can the continued dedication to religious beliefs provide a sense of familiarity and intimacy in a situation that can be largely dominated by change and

confusion, but in some cases a woman's involvement in religion is also a reactionary move once affected by the strains of anomie. As illustrated in the case study of Lourdes Santiago (1993), a Puerto Rican prison wife, the incarceration of her husband is the catalyst for her renewed faith in the Pentecostal church because, as she puts it: "...I learned that you can get strength from God in a very special way. Going back to church after all of this happened...I realized that something was there to provide me with what I really needed to heal" (Padilla and Santiago 1993: 139). Santiago attests to the appeal of religion in providing a system of morals and values, a community, and a space to nurture relationships with a Divine Being, especially after the incarceration of her husband. Lastly, Comfort (2008) discusses a tendency in prison wives to exercise "self-conscious religiosity" that allows them to reframe the actions of their husbands "in the contexts of...the contribution to a larger good, and the enactment of loving kindness or godliness" (Pg. 138). Using religious discourse and ideals, Comfort argues that prison wives distance themselves from the negative aspects of what their husbands may have done that resulted in their incarceration and instead focus on how the men are using their experiences to appeal to religious values.

## ***Conclusion***

The theories and literature presented here provide an important foundation to the analysis of my data. Classifying the experiences of my participants as anomic as well as an individual or family crisis calls into question how their experiences require unique coping mechanisms due. These women experience anomie in the sense that the tragedy catalyzes a complete breakdown of what they previously considered "normal" life. They

are required to navigate the loss of their loved ones, along with economic hardships and negative labeling due to their new associations with inmates. In the midst of the crisis, however, prison wives and girlfriends are often unable to employ familiar support systems, such as family, friends, and their greater communities, to cope. What they used to rely on as support is no longer available and many of them are required to employ new, unfamiliar coping mechanisms in response to the distresses of the incarcerations. Religion becomes that new coping mechanism for so many prison wives and girlfriends. In studying its social function, the fact that religion is referred to as an antithesis of anomie is hardly surprising. However, as a unique crisis, the ways in which religion functions as a coping mechanism when a woman's loved one is incarcerated distinct. My thesis picks up precisely where the literature falters, where the literature fails to address religion as a coping mechanism for what these women, in particular, are experiencing.

## CHAPTER 3 — RESEARCH METHODS

### *Sampling Technique and Participants*

Due to the nature of my project as dealing with individuals who are closely tied with the prison system, I applied to the Washington Department of Corrections for approval to perform my research. In approving my project, they asked that I not be at all intrusive in collecting my sample, by handing out letters outside the Washington State Penitentiary's visitors' centers for example. Instead, I placed research posters (see Appendix A) and self-stamped, self-addressed envelopes in the two visitors' centers at the Penitentiary so that women who were interested in participating could make the initial contact with me (see Appendix B). This method of gathering my sample only elicited six responses, two of which actually resulted in an interview. Therefore, in order to supplement that method and yet stay loyal to the guidelines put forth by the Department of Corrections, I posted research descriptions on various public Facebook sites geared toward women whose loved ones are incarcerated. In my posts, I outlined the purpose of my research and asked that if any woman was interested in interviewing with me to please message me through Facebook. My second approach to gathering a sample was similarly non-intrusive in that the participants still made initial contact with me and could just as easily ignore my Facebook post. However, the new method yielded exponentially more respondents than the first. This could be due to numerous factors—the increased public usage of Facebook versus a single poster in a visiting room, the positive feedback that was posted by women who had interviewed with me urging others to do the same,

the accessibility of communication that the internet provides, and the fact that women could learn about my study from around the world, without having to physically be in the Washington State Penitentiary's visitors' center. An interesting outgrowth of publicizing my research on Facebook was the subsequent flood of interest from women who wanted to interview with me. The more women I spoke to, the more credibility I had with members of the online support groups for prison wives and girlfriends, and therefore the more women who also wanted to speak with me. With neither of these methods did I advertise my specific focus on religion's role as a coping mechanism. This way I believed I was more likely to recruit women who were both religious and non-religious for my study. Ultimately, with the combination of two methods, I interviewed a total of twenty-four women<sup>4</sup>. Two of the women in my sample contacted me through mail, as they had read about my research at the Washington State Penitentiary, and the remaining twenty-two women contacted me through E-mail or Facebook.

The population from which my subjects are drawn is adult wives and girlfriends who have spouses that are currently incarcerated or who were previously incarcerated during the intimate relationship. All participants are in heterosexual relationships. The demographics of the participants vary—the ages of the women range from eighteen to fifty-two years old and fourteen states are represented with my sample<sup>5</sup>. The race and

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<sup>4</sup> Four women that I interviewed met their spouses while they were already incarcerated. I did not specify in my research descriptions that I was particularly interested in speaking with women who were already in relationships with their spouses before their incarcerations. I do not use the data collected from those four women in my analysis to ensure consistency and internal validity.

<sup>5</sup> I was initially going to focus on women who lived in Washington state and whose spouses were incarcerated in one of the prisons located in Washington in order to specifically contextualize my study within one geographic region. However, with the

ethnicity of my participants nor their education level or occupation were explicitly asked in the interviews. I do not necessarily take into account the above factors when analyzing my data because I believe that the experience of having a spouse in prison, and more specifically how one copes with that crisis, is not significantly affected by one's age, where one is from, or one's racial identity. Eleven participants had children, from either the current or a past relationship. Lastly, a factor in collecting my sample that I believe was essential to my study was that the women were involved in the relationship before their spouse's incarceration. I wanted to note the various changes in their life from before to after the incarceration, specifically in regards to their religiosity. Although there are surely profound changes that occur for women who meet their spouses while they are incarcerated, I decided to limit my study to those who had experiences with their loved ones prior to their incarcerations. I believed this would illustrate more stark impacts on the women's lives. Of the women I interviewed, only one woman's spouse was no longer incarcerated at the time we spoke<sup>6</sup> and every other participant's spouse was currently incarcerated during the time of the interview. The lengths of incarcerations for the spouses range from three months to life sentences. The reason that I am focusing on women in particular is largely for practical reasons—there is a drastically larger population of prison wives and girlfriends than prison husbands or boyfriends due to higher rates of men in prison. In addition, upon researching the population of those who have loved ones in prison, I found that the limited academic literature that exists on the

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inclusion of my secondary sampling technique, I decided to no longer consider the locations of my respondents as a factor influencing the data.

<sup>6</sup> I found no significant differences in my data analysis between the responses of the woman whose husband is no longer incarcerated and those women whose spouses were incarcerated during the time of our interview.

topic exclusively targets women and families. Therefore, for the sake of both sample collection and relevant literature review, I chose to center my research on the experiences of women.

### ***Data Collection***

I held phone interviews (see Appendix C) with all of the participants, all but one of who gave me permission to record our conversation for my research purposes. The interviews lasted from a minimum of twenty minutes to a maximum of an hour and a half. They were semi-structured in that the interviews always began with pre-planned, open-ended questions and usually became more informal as the conversation progressed. Many of the intended interview questions were answered without me having to directly ask them. Before every interview, I read aloud to them the interview consent form (see Appendix D), which explained their rights as a participant and the intended use of the recording.

During the interviews, I asked the women to begin by telling me where they are from, how old they are, and the nature of their relationship with their spouse, for example how they met and how long they have been together. After they gave me some background information, we began to discuss the immediate impacts of losing their spouse and how they initially reacted to the incarceration. Although none of my interview questions ask why their spouse is or was incarcerated, the majority of the women told me that information early on in the interview. In addition to discussing the immediate impacts, I asked the women about specific ways in which they cope, or coped, with the incarceration and if there were any changes in the way their family, friends, or

community perceived them. The topic of religion was often brought up by the participants, but if not, during the last half of the interview I asked them to discuss the following in regards to religion: if religion plays a role in how they cope, what they believe “religious” or “spiritual” means, if their religious or spiritual views have changed since the incarceration and, if so, why that is. Furthering the discussion of religion, I also asked them if they have ever experienced frustration with their religious beliefs and, if so, why and, if they do consider themselves religious or spiritual, how do they practice those beliefs. At the end of every interview, I asked if there were any additional questions, comments, or concerns that she would like to add. All of the participants were extremely engaged in the conversation and eager to fully answer every question I posed. Not only did they seem excited to share their story with me, but also almost half of the participants asked if they could read my completed thesis and possibly share it with their friends and family, which I found to an extremely rewarding exchange.

### ***Data Analysis***

I qualitatively collected and analyzed my data. I personally transcribed every interview; half of the interviews were transcribed in their entirety and the latter half were selectively transcribed so that only the parts that were particularly relevant for my study were transcribed. The reason for the shift in my transcribing method was the need for efficiency as more interviews were conducted and less time was available for transcription. Once all of the interviews were wholly or partially transcribed, I printed them out and manually coded them to detect recurring trends and patterns in the responses. My data analysis is exclusively qualitative in nature for a few reasons. As

Berg explains: “some forms of interpretive and phenomenological research seek to discover naturally arising meanings among members of study populations” (Berg 2009: 40). My study is of the nature that Berg addresses because I am investigating how women interpret their realities once those realities have experienced drastic change. Due to the variability of trajectories in how the respondents answered my research questions my project did not lend itself to rigorous operationalizations. In performing in-depth interviews, I was able to acquire a richer understanding of the experiences of these women and incorporate the inherent emotionality of such experiences. After I coded every interview, I then categorized the women depending on whether or not they were religious, by the definition I discussed earlier, and whether their religiosity changed due to the incarceration. Using this method of data analysis, I was able to detect nuanced ways in which my participants employ, or do not employ, religion as a coping mechanism and their reasoning for doing so.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

There are several ethical considerations that I had to consider in performing my research. I gathered data on women who were undoubtedly enduring difficult circumstances, not the least of which was the incarceration and absence of their spouses, and specifically asking questions about the experiences associated with these circumstances. I was required to approach the data-collection process in a sensitive and respectful manner. During my interviews, I ensured that they felt comfortable sharing their story with me by exposing my bias to them, which is that I believe this population of women experience unjust stereotypes, stigmatization, and labeling because of their

relationship with an inmate. In sharing my support and sympathy with my participants, they were more likely to feel comfortable and at ease in our interview.

In collecting my sample, I was required to adhere to the guidelines set forth by the Washington Department of Corrections. Although I eventually employed an additional method of sample collection, I ensured that it in no way overstepped those restrictions by remaining nonintrusive in publicizing my research and allowing the women to initiate contact with me if interested.

Furthermore, when analyzing and presenting my data, I maintain utmost confidentiality. I never use the real names of my participants. This is to prevent any increase in their experiences of unjust labeling or stigmatization that could occur as a result of revealing their identities as being associated with prison inmates. I assign pseudonyms for the purpose of adding character and familiarity to the quotes used. The pseudonyms were assigned arbitrarily and in no way seek to represent the names of actual prison wives or girlfriends. In order to ensure that each participant had the opportunity, if she so desired, to express her thoughts on the interview and the subject matter of the research, a debriefing session occurred after every interview that allowed the woman to ask questions and express concerns or additional comments about what we discussed. The right to privacy of all people to whom I spoke were protected on multiple levels—first, every participant always had the right to not answer a question in the interview or to end the interview in its entirety, none of which happened in my interviews, second, I never requested information such as address, names of family members, or any other particularly identifying information besides her name, and third, I was the only one who listened to the interview recordings. If requested, the recording was immediately deleted

after its transcription. All files regarding the interviews and the participants were password-protected and I was the only one who had access to the passwords. When direct quotations are used, they never identify the participants' real identities. The subjects' rights as research participants were outlined in the consent form that the women were read aloud before engaging in the interview process. There were no physical or economic risks to the rights and welfare of the participating subjects.

### ***Generalizability and Research Limitations***

Overall, I believe that my results can be generalized to the population of heterosexual women living in the United States whose loved ones are incarcerated, or have been incarcerated, during their relationship. However, from what I was informed about the crimes their spouses committed, there was few to zero participants whose spouses engaged in white-collar crime. This lack of variation means that a population of prison wives and girlfriends whose husbands are incarcerated for white-collar crime are not represented in my research; the experiences of which may or may not be unique and differ than those of the women in my study. In addition, there was little variation in religious affiliation from the women who affiliated with any religion. From my sample, I did not find that different religions played different roles in how the women cope and so I do not believe that this is a limitation on the general applicability of my results. However, my sampling methods may have affected the potential for generalizability of my results. As my sample was self-selective, my participants may only represent a facet of the population of prison wives and girlfriends who are particularly open and willing to share their story. This process could be a coping mechanism in and of itself, which may also

mean that the women in my sample may be more likely to employ coping mechanisms than those who did not talk with me, possibly affecting my results.

Ultimately, though, my sample is varied in regards to age, location, the lengths of incarceration of their spouses, the time left until their spouses are released, how long they have been in the relationship with their spouses, whether they have children or not, and racial and ethnic background. Therefore, in acknowledging the possible limitations of my results, I firmly believe that this study is very useful. My results reveal the power of religion in dealing with this unique anomic situation and include valuable conclusions about how those who experience great hardship use religion as a coping mechanism. The results of this research also lend insight into the experiences of a greatly under-researched population and work to illustrate the effects of an individual's incarceration on an expansive web of people who are innocent in the face of the law.

## **CHAPTER 4 — IMPACTS OF HAVING A SPOUSE INCARCERATED**

Before discussing how prison wives and girlfriends cope with the crisis of having a loved one incarcerated, I believe it to be significant to review the impacts of such an event. Laura Fishman (1990) writes: “the effects of arrest and imprisonment reverberate throughout the lives of prisoners’ families” (Pg. 113). While every woman is surely impacted in unique ways, there are several effects that were commonly addressed in my interviews, and which are similarly relevant to Fishman’s (1990) sample of prison spouses. The most significant impacts that were shared by my sample were: depression, financial hardships, loss of support from family, friends, and outside community, and stigmatization.

### ***Depression***

Almost every woman I interviewed described at least a momentary, but most often an extended, period of depression caused by her loved one’s incarceration. Two of my participants attempted suicide, three were unable to eat for at least two weeks, two were hospitalized for their depression, and one had a miscarriage at five months because of the effects of her depression. In sum, the psychological state of many of my participants crashed. Heather, who was four months pregnant when her husband was incarcerated, explains the depression she is still enduring:

Two days afterward I was submitted to the hospital because I wasn’t eating. I was sick and I couldn’t keep anything down. It was very

emotional. I was dealing with sever depression and that has continued. It hasn't gotten any better. I collapsed. Completely emotionally broke down.  
(Heather, personal interview, 2/24/2012)

Many women similarly “emotionally broke down” and were, at least immediately after, debilitated from coping successfully. Another way their depression was often described was as their “world crashing,” where they were at a loss of how to respond. The depression that many of them experienced, and in several cases are still experiencing, seems to be a reaction to the onset of anomie that acts to destruct previous ways of navigating and internalizing situations. With the destruction of emotional stability, they were often unable to interpret their new realities. Holly, whose husband has been in prison for seventeen years and still has at least eight more left, recounts when he was first incarcerated: “I was sad, miserable, I couldn't get it together. When he first went in, I cried because it wasn't even real. After being with somebody everyday, it just wasn't real. It wasn't real. I would go to sleep crying, I would wake up crying” (Holly, personal interview, 2/20/2012). Just like Heather and many other participants, Holly could not effectively process that the event had truly happened; she was entirely in shock with her husband's incarceration and at a loss of how to initially cope. Depression as an impact of their spouses' incarcerations was one of the most prevalent impacts that were identified by these women, especially because their depression may have been exacerbated by the other identified impacts.

The implications of this impact range from the women being undermined to the extreme extent of disallowing them from working altogether or taking care of their children temporarily to struggling everyday with simply getting out of bed or preparing meals.

### ***Financial Hardships***

One of the additional impacts that may be correlated with the onset of depression is the stress of new or increased economic troubles. Many of the women experienced financial hardships, as their spouses were often the primary economic providers before their incarcerations, also discussed in Fishman's study (1990). The majority of my participants identified the financial aspect as being one of the most difficult consequences of the incarcerations. Many women were forced to get jobs or additional jobs as another source of income, one had to move home because she was unable to pay rent, and one was fired from her job because of her association with her husband. Ann, a mother of three whose husband was incarcerated in 2005 for thirteen months, explains how she lost her job because her husband broke the law: "In fact, I was working at Glenbriar school and I was fired... It had nothing to do with me, it didn't matter. Like he's not living in my home, he's out on the streets somewhere, but they didn't care" (Ann, personal interview, 2/10/2012). Even though she was not currently living with her husband or associating with him to a great extent, Ann was fired from her job because of his actions. Another woman whose husband was the sole economic provider for her family had to "rely on friends and family to make ends meet" (Valerie, personal interview, 1/27/2012). The financial stress of having their spouses incarcerated was clearly a prominent impact as it was addressed in almost every interview.

The financial strains on these women were often pressing enough to sometimes disallow them from emotionally coping with the crisis. Many women explained that they were immediately forced to address the new financial hardships of their situation, which

made little time for them to mentally process the incarceration. This feeling of lacking time or resources for effective psychological coping, due to their immediate economic stresses, may be further intensified by the following impact, in that many women also have little emotional support from those who were previously close to them.

### ***Loss of Family and Friend Support***

Another extremely prevalent impact of having a loved one incarcerated is a loss of support from family and friends, also an impact highlighted in Fishman's study (1990). Many women no longer felt comfortable talking about their personal problems with other family members or close friends because they were generally met with criticisms and judgment. Many women's parents seemed to be the most critical of their relationships with inmates, arguing that an inmate is not a "real man because a real man wouldn't go to jail" (Emily, personal interview, 2/24/2012) or fully denying the existence of the inmate as their daughter's husband (Meghan, personal interview, 2/23/2012). Brittany, a 36-year old mother of three whose husband is in prison for nine more months, experienced an extreme loss of support from her father, explaining:

The first person that I told was my dad because I'm super close with him. And he shut me down from day one. We haven't talked since January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010. He thought I was making a mistake and that my life could be so much better. And he said, 'Well what are you showing your children?'  
(Brittany, personal interview, 2/27/2012)

Many families of my participants reiterated Brittany's father's sentiment in classifying their relationships as immoral or a mistake. While Brittany and Lisa, whose family "disowned" her because she remained loyal to her husband (Lisa, personal interview,

2/17/2012), are the only participants who were completely disconnected from their families, almost every other participant identified loss of familial support as being a significant impact. Fishman (1990) similarly recounts the pressures on prison spouses from their families to disassociate with their incarcerated loved ones, asserting that many of her respondents felt betrayed because “they tend to view the family as a last resort or refuge” (Pg. 126).

The friends of the women I interviewed were often similarly unsupportive. While there were a few cases when the women felt very supported by their friends in enduring the separation from their spouses, many recounted losing close friends. The reasons for such loss of support were very similar to why family members sometimes abandoned these women; there was often an assumption that the woman’s spouse was undeserving of her or she was being misled by his intentions in having a relationship with her. Brittany speaks on how many of her friendships were dissolved because of her husband’s incarceration: “I lost a lot of girlfriends who didn’t understand that ‘someone like me,’ I don’t even know what that means, but how someone like me could be with someone like him. I don’t understand those words” (Brittany, personal interview, 2/27/2012). Brittany highlights the experience of many of these women, whose friends and family do not understand, nor support, their affiliations with inmates. Many women stated that it was difficult to communicate with their family and friends about the incarcerations because they either explicitly disapproved of the relationship or did so in their gestures and tones.

The implication of such loss of support is that many respondents consequently felt isolated and alone in their time of crisis. With little comfort in confiding in those who

were previously loyal and supportive, many prison spouses feel as if they must cope with the situation individually and internally.

### ***Feelings of Isolation***

Prisoners' wives and girlfriends commonly described feelings of physical and psychological isolation as a result of the abandonment of families and friends. Perhaps due to their inability to confide in friends and family about their hardships, a large majority of my participants admitted that they now feel extremely isolated because of the incarceration. On a physical level, they described the isolation that arose out of attending family events, such as birthday parties, or just going to sleep every night without their significant other. The effects of this isolation dissuade some of the women from going out at all. For example, Heather no longer goes to restaurants or crowded public spaces to avoid seeing other couples together (Heather, personal interview, 2/24/2012).

While almost all of the women addressed the physical isolation to some extent, the psychological isolation seemed to be most significant. Many women identified as being lonely no matter how supportive their friends and family were. Even if a woman claimed she had external support systems, she still emphasized the loneliness and isolation of being a prison spouse. According to Heather, the emotional isolation overwhelms most aspects of her life. She explains: "In all ways. Very isolated and alone. I say all the time that I've never felt so alone. Even though I do have my daughter and my family that I live with, just paralyzed. It's hard." (Heather, personal interview, 2/24/2012). Other women expressed feelings of isolation due to the belief that the people around them could never understand their situations; so although sometimes they may not

be physically alone, the women unceasingly feel emotionally isolated. Like Heather, Holly identifies a loneliness that prevails against any external support she may have:

Most of the time my friends and family don't realize that I'm a lonely person. They don't understand that because it's not like I walk with my head down. That when you see me you know I'm a lonely person or nothing like that. Just deep down, I'm hurting and I'm lonely.

(Holly, personal interview, 2/20/2012)

When one's husband or boyfriend is incarcerated it seems that some extent of isolation is inevitable. My participants all had varying degrees of support from others and yet almost unanimously identified this impact as being ubiquitous.

This specific impact of the incarceration highlights a unique aspect of these women's crisis—unlike women whose husbands are separated due to war, prison spouses are often placed in a position of shame with few to no available “Collective Support Groups” (McCubbin 1979) targeted toward aiding them in the coping process. While war-induced separations often elicit societal support (Hansen and Hill 1964), the forced separations of prison wives and girlfriends from their spouses elicit an opposing response. The isolation that these women experience, therefore, stems from a loss of support on a personal level, such as from their friends and family, and on a societal level, both of which contribute to the following impact.

### ***Stigmatization and Negative Labeling***

Another impact that was identified by the majority of my participants is the stigmatization and negative labeling that they now experience because of their association with an inmate. The women who do not feel as if they are stigmatized still argued that their community is in no way sympathetic toward their situations. There is a

shared view of my respondents that because they are in relationships with inmates, others associate them using the same negative connotation that inmates have (Arditti et al. 2003; Brink 2003; Evanston et al. 1990; Fishman 1990). The women do not feel as if they are evaluated by the community based on who they are; instead, they feel as if their relationship with their spouse is the determinant factor in how they are perceived.

Michelle, a 21-year old whose boyfriend is in prison for five more years, elaborates on the negative labeling:

I think that a lot of them, a lot of people think that we're just naïve and dumb. I mean, I get treated like I'm stupid when I talk about him in certain situations...I think people look at people who are incarcerated as just bad people...And because I have a loved one that's incarcerated, that I'm a horrible person too. 'If you're with this person, how could you love somebody who did this or that?' So you looked at like you're a criminal as well when you didn't even do anything.

(Michelle, personal interview, 2/11/2012)

She raises a point that was extremely common in the women's responses, which is that they are considered criminals because they love someone who is incarcerated. Also, the stereotypes of prison wives and girlfriends that Michelle brings up were consistent with many of the other women's perceptions of how the community judges them, as being "just naïve and dumb." Other words that were used to characterize how they felt stereotyped were "trashy," "having low self-esteem," and "unintelligent and undignified." My participants feel as if, upon meeting someone new, their relationships with inmates completely dictate how that person evaluates them. The opinions of my participants on this subject coincide with the results of Evanston et al.'s study (1990), which suggest that "there is a failure to see (and to appreciate) the diversity demonstrated by these women, nor is there any appreciation of the positive contributions which they make..." (Pg. 24).

Although Evanston et al.'s study was based in Walla Walla, Washington, the variation in hometowns of my participants demonstrates the pervasiveness of negative labeling toward prison wives and girlfriends across the country.

## ***Conclusion***

While every woman in my study identified different impacts that arose from the incarceration of her loved one, these five were the most commonly addressed: depression, financial hardships, feelings of isolation, loss of family and friend support, and stigmatization and negative labeling from their outside communities. All five of these impacts are in no way exclusively unique to the crisis of having a loved one incarcerated, as many other experiences generate similar consequences for individuals, such as forced separation from one's spouse due to war or the death of a family member. Therefore, while my discussion centers on one type of family crisis, the theories applied and the data collected may be generalizable to a broader spectrum of crises. These challenges that my respondents face, and others surely undergo as well, led most of them to develop coping mechanisms for attempting to successfully endure their situations. The next chapter discusses the ways in which my respondents commonly coped with having to endure the impacts of the incarceration of their loved ones. This discussion is meant to preface the analysis of how religion specifically functions as a coping mechanism.

## **CHAPTER 5 — COMMON COPING MECHANISMS OF PRISON WIVES AND GIRLFRIENDS**

### ***Introduction***

While participants vary somewhat in the ways they manage the challenges associated with spouse incarceration, many of the women interviewed employ similar coping mechanisms. Expanding upon the family stress theories of McCubbin (1976; 1979) and Hansen and Hill (1964), Pearlin and Schooler (1978) develop a working definition of a coping mechanism that is appropriate for the discussion at hand, defining a coping mechanism as: “Any response to external life-strains that serves to prevent, avoid, or control emotional distress” (Pg. 3). Pearlin and Schooler (1978) elaborate on this definition to explain that coping strategies are inseparable from the situational context of the individual employing these strategies. That is to say that the nature of the crisis of the individual determines how the coping mechanisms should be understood (Pearlin and Schooler 1978: 3). In the context of this study, therefore, the ways in which women cope with an incarcerated spouse must be understood as tactics to “prevent, avoid, or control” the consequent impacts of such a crisis. While Pearlin and Schooler’s study (1978) focuses on how people cope when faced with “ordinary—indeed, required—pursuits” (Pg. 3), or problems that individuals generally face on an everyday basis, this chapter highlights the coping mechanisms that arise out of an unusual and extreme event, being the incarceration of one’s spouse, and should be understood as such.

More specifically, the context in which the coping strategies of prison wives and girlfriends are employed is typically aligned with what McCubbin (1979) identifies as

being the most severe separation a family can endure. Not only are the separations severe in the sense that most of them will last, or have lasted, for over six years, but also prison wives and girlfriends tend to experience what Hansen and Hill (1964) refer to as the “persecutive” response from their greater communities. Contextualizing the incarceration of a loved one within these theories lends insight into the environment in which they are required to cope.

Ultimately, using this theoretical definition of coping mechanisms, I noted four that were especially prevalent amongst my respondents: distraction or “numbing” oneself, confiding in other prison wives and girlfriends, writing and sharing one’s thoughts, and comparing oneself to less fortunate women in their position.

### ***Distraction and “Numbing” Oneself***

Lindsey, whose boyfriend was incarcerated seven months ago, told me of how she is the busiest she has ever been now that he is gone. She is a full-time student double-majoring in nursing and criminal justice and working two jobs as a waitress and an aide at a nursing facility. She explained: “the busier I am the less I have time to sit down and think about it. The quicker the days go and another day done” (Lindsey, personal interview, 2/21/2012). The emphasis on distracting herself by keeping busy that Lindsey demonstrates was a significant trend among my respondents. In fact, over half of the women I interviewed identified this coping mechanism as one they also employed in avoiding the emotional stress that came with the loss of their loved ones. While some women started new jobs or enrolled into school, others distracted themselves by keeping

busy in their house by cleaning, cooking, and spending a lot of time with their children if applicable.

Four women said that music was the main way they tried to distract themselves. For Veronica, music is a tool of escape and what she considers to be her only “me time and release from this” (Veronica, personal interview, 2/23/2012), “this” meaning the incarceration of her husband. Music acts as a coping mechanism by allowing some women to escape the pressure of being numb around friends and family, stemming from the lack of support that many women experience, and to finally openly emote whatever they are feeling about the loss of their spouses. Denise explained music as follows: “Music is like my medication sometimes. And I have a playlist of songs that remind me of him and I know it’s okay to cry. So sometimes I just cry and listen to songs and read over his letters” (Denise, personal interview, 2/22/2012). For Denise, music is her way of escaping the reality of her boyfriend being gone and serves to emotionally reconnect her to him. Music is Michelle’s tool of escape in a different way—she listens to music about imprisonment and how families of inmates deal with that experience. She explained that by listening to these hip-hop and rap artists who represent her experiences in their lyrics, she is able to escape the loneliness that she often feels (Michelle, personal interview, 2/11/2012).

Other ways that my participants tried to distract themselves or escape their situation were arguably more harmful and self-damaging. A few women said that they initially tried to “numb” themselves to the situation by turning to drugs or alcohol. For example, Lisa’s drug addiction was revamped by her husband’s incarceration: “I try to stop thinking about, I don’t like to think about it. I block it out of my mind. By doing

other things...[My drug addiction] was absolutely me trying to numb myself so I didn't have to feel" (Lisa, personal interview, 2/17/2012). Other women similarly used drugs or drank alcohol more often in an attempt to escape the devastation of their loved ones' incarcerations. However, this particular way of coping, or avoiding the situation, seemed only to be an initial response to the incarceration. Every woman at the time of the interview told me that they have since abandoned these behaviors as coping mechanisms. This initial response to the crisis may be due to many women's experience with depression, which to varying extents debilitated many from positively coping. Drug and alcohol abuse may have presented an accessible way for them to initially react to the loss of their loved.

According to McCubbin et al.'s (1976) list of coping patterns, the ways that my participants tend to distract and numb themselves subscribe to the scholars' coping tactics of "reducing anxiety" and "establishing independence through self-development." While I believe that the former label, "reducing anxiety," is consistent with how some of the women used substances to cope, I find that the second label does not apply. Going to school or getting a job are used by McCubbin et al. (1976) to explain "establishing independence through self-development;" however, my participants did not justify those actions as ways of "establishing independence." Instead, the rationale for doing so was exclusively to keep busy and distract themselves from dwelling on the separation from their spouses.

## *Confiding in Other Prison Wives and Girlfriends*

Considering that one of my sampling techniques was to use support groups on the Internet to locate willing participants for my study, it is not surprising that a majority of my respondents believe that having the support of other prison wives and girlfriends is an extremely valuable coping mechanism. Women often attributed their survival to their support network of other prison wives and girlfriend. When asked how her online support group for prison spouses helps her, Denise responded:

They really help me. I found support. I have other women going ‘you should leave him alone,’ but there I have people giving me words of wisdom. Saying ‘just because someone made a mistake, you don’t have to blame him for the rest of his life. They can change’...They’re like my sisters. Talking about what is going on with our guys and family life. There I can vent. I can be myself. It’s like non-judgmental. And I love the fact that I can be myself. I don’t have to hide my emotions about how I feel about him. I can say how I’m feeling and I can comment on things. I just don’t feel alone, like I was saying, because I often do.

(Denise, personal interview, 2/22/2012)

When they feel negatively judged by their communities, families, and friends, the support groups provide encouragement and a source of strength for these women. Many women said that even if they have family and friends who support them in their relationships, those individuals could never understand the hardships that the women endure.

Therefore, the support of these groups provides something that no other resource can—understanding. Besides being beneficial in and of itself, the understanding that characterizes these support groups also serves as an outlet for women to ask questions and be mentored on how to deal with specific situations. For example, Lindsey explained: “And no matter what, you just go on [the online support group] and post or message something and they know exactly what to say or do about it because they’re there

everyday” (Lindsey, personal interview, 2/21/2012). The anomic situation of having a loved one incarcerated leaves many women feeling ill-equipped to deal with hardships initially. However, with the resource of other women who are also enduring such hardships, or have already done so, my respondents demonstrate greater confidence in handling the situation.

Belonging to a group of women with this shared experience also alleviates the isolation that is so commonly felt by prison wives and girlfriends (Brink 2003; Comfort 2008; Evanston et al. 1991; Brink 2003). Just knowing that other women are sharing the experience is a tool of coping for many of my respondents in that it gives them a stronger sense of control over the situation. Maureen, a 37-year old mother whose husband is in prison for eighteen more months, speaks on the support groups:

Yes. Quite honestly without some of these support groups that I’ve found online, I would probably be completely insane by now. It’s very an alone feeling. But then you realize you’re not the only one out there. When I’m having a bad day they will talk me off the ledge so to speak.

(Maureen, personal interview, 2/20/2012)

Maureen echoes what every woman conveyed to me when explaining how the support groups help her. Although they all continued to feel isolated regardless of their belonging to some type of support group, knowing that other women are experiencing that same isolation provides my respondents with a strength and sense of control over the situation. As Michelle claims: “it helps me to stay strong, keep my head up” (Michelle, personal interview, 2/11/2012).

### ***Writing and Expressing One's Thoughts***

A coping mechanism used by my participants that coincides with confiding in other prison spouses is expressing their thoughts through either writing or poetry. Many women who identified using a support group as a way to cope also commonly identified writing letters or poetry as a way for them to control their emotions and thoughts. As discussed previously, talking to others about the crisis of having their loved ones incarcerated is not often an accessible resource for these women because of the lack of support and negative judgments received by those around them. Therefore, many of them turn to writing down their thoughts as an outlet for expression when otherwise unavailable. Three of my respondents write letters to their spouse, two have started writing poetry, and three use online blogs or Facebook as an outlet to write down and share their thoughts. Although the different mediums through which they write vary, the underlying sentiment for how it helps remains consistent. Michelle concisely explains: “Every time I’m feeling anything I’ll go on there and post in on my Facebook wall. It helps me just to get it out of my head and not have it in the back of head all the time” (Michelle, personal interview, 2/11/2012). All of the women who employ some form of writing mirrored Michelle’s description of what it does for her; they all claimed that writing was their way of clearing their mind and venting about the everyday struggles they endure.

The response that I often received once the interviews were completed substantiates this as being a powerful coping mechanism. Over half of the women thanked me for listening to their stories because as Holly put it: “this is the first time I ever spoke with anybody about it” (Holly, personal interview, 2/20/2012). A staggering

amount of the women I talked with had never told their story to anyone else, meaning that they are extremely limited in the ways they are expressing what they are going through. In light of those reactions, writing as a coping mechanism is highlighted as being especially powerful due to its personal and individualized nature. When many of the women were either unable or unwilling to voice their stories to others, writing may have become a particularly accessible way to alternatively do so.

### ***Comparison to Other Prison Spouses***

A seemingly simple way of coping with the incarceration of their loved ones that my respondents often referred to was through downward comparison, for example through contrasting their situation with other women whose husbands have a longer sentence. Imagining how the situation could be any worse, and is for many other prison wives and girlfriends, relieves some women when evaluating their own situations. Diane identified this as her main coping mechanism:

And so the way I cope with it is knowing that my husband is coming home and he is not coming home in a time box. Most people that go there are serving 56 years. I will take my 20 years and walk away quite happily. Whereas 90% of his friends will not have that, they'll live and die in prison.

(Diane, personal interview, 1/23/2012)

Diane demonstrates how downward comparison can serve to boost her self-esteem and frame her situation in a more positive light. Other women knew of wives whose husbands were sentenced for much longer than theirs and admitted that there was a sense of comfort in that acknowledgment. Gibbons and Gerrard (1991) investigate the role of downward comparison as a coping mechanism and similarly conclude that it may serve to boost one's subjective well-being and optimism and decrease anxiety. Furthermore, the

way in which my participants contrast their situations with more prolonged separations that other prison spouses experience indicates that they engage in positive comparison, as articulated by Pearlin and Schooler (1978), which is regarded as an effective way to reduce stress.

### ***Absence of Any Identifiable Coping Mechanisms***

Although most women were able to identify ways in which they cope with the absence of their spouse, there were a few who denied employing any coping mechanisms at all. These women often argued that they “just want to deal with it alone” (Valerie, personal interview, 1/27/2012). They all equated not reaching out to others, such as a support group or family and friends, as not coping with the situation at all. When asked if there are ways that she copes with the incarceration of her husband, Lisa responded: “Not really, I guess. I just have my mind made up that I’m going to make it and do it no matter what. I just keep going with that mindset. I just keep on keeping on” (Lisa, personal interview, 2/17/2012). However, despite their perceptions of not employing any coping mechanism, I found that their responses were consistent with Pearlin and Schooler’s (1978) dimension of “controlling emotional distress” as a coping mechanism. Instead of not employing any coping mechanism, these women often demonstrated heightened independence because of their loved ones’ incarcerations. For example, Lisa’s self-assurance that she’s “made [her] mind up and that [she’s] going to make it” underscores her emphasis on coping with the situation alone, as an independent individual. Consistent with McCubbin et. al’s (1976) finding that women who are separated from their husbands

due to war sometimes cope by “establishing autonomy,” not acknowledging external coping strategies for some of my respondents can itself be a coping strategy.

Of my entire sample, only two women reject using any other coping mechanism. These same two women are only respondents who do not consider themselves religious and do not employ any of the dimensions of religion as a coping mechanism. While I was unable to find literature pertaining to this specific trend, this may suggest that using religion to some extent as a way to cope increases the likelihood that one will use other coping mechanisms as well.

### ***Conclusion***

Except for the coping mechanism of distracting and numbing oneself through substance abuse, all of the most common coping strategies serve to control the distresses of being separated from their loved ones. Hence, my respondents tend to employ mechanisms that demonstrate the control dimension identified by Pearlin and School (1978). Although substance abuse and distraction are geared toward avoiding and preventing the distresses of their situations, the focal trend in how the women I spoke with cope is by seeking control over the social and emotional distresses.

In the proceeding chapters, I will specifically analyze how religion functions as a coping mechanism for my respondents. In doing so, I will use the dimensions of religion that I previously identified—social integration and participation, private practices, maintenance of religious beliefs, divine interaction or encounter with transcendence, and faith—to investigate how each functions in a different way and to a varying extent. The following chapter, which precedes my discussion of religion as a coping mechanism,

discusses the possible reasons my respondents were *not* religious, or were less religious, before the incarceration of their spouses.

## **CHAPTER 6 — THE RELIGIOSITY OF PRISON WIVES AND GIRLFRIENDS BEFORE THE INCARCERATION OF THEIR SPOUSES**

A majority of the women in my study became religious, or more religious, after the incarcerations of their loved ones. This suggests that a majority of the women in my study were not previously religious, or not to the extent that they were at the time of the interview. Although there are myriad reasons that individuals do not consider themselves religious, the reasons why these women did not do so before their spouses' incarcerations are fairly consistent with one another. All of the women who discussed their reasoning for not being previously religious brought up the fact that they were younger, more immature, "living a care-free lifestyle" (Diane, personal interview, 1/23/2012), and "just hanging out in the streets" (Holly, personal interview, 2/20/2012). For example, when asked why she become religious, Denise explained:

Me being older. I used to like to go out all the time and drink sometimes. I didn't really stray away from God but I was just doing my own thing. Like I just didn't care, you could say. I didn't realize that tomorrow, like what if I don't make it tomorrow.

(Denise, personal interview, 2/22/2012)

Denise describes the time before her husband's incarceration as being devoid of consideration of the future and without a need to communicate with her God. As most of the other women also relayed, her lifestyle was not conducive to dedicating herself to the values of her religion. She explained that she was a college student preoccupied with partying and drinking and did not experience a pull toward being religious (Denise, personal interview, 2/22/2012). Similarly, Kelly, a 38-year old mother whose husband is in prison now for a 40-year sentence, told me of her drug addiction that essentially

consumed her life before his incarceration. Kelly and her husband were drug abusers and did not practice religion in any way. She recounts: “I have a very firm belief that there is a God and God is the reason why I am here. But I had ran from that. I found myself lost...I just didn’t care” (Kelly, personal interview, 2/22/2012). Both Kelly and Denise attribute their lack of religiosity before the incarceration to the different lifestyles they were leading, characterized by youth, substance abuse, and not feeling a need to connect with their God.

Research on why individuals are not religious when occupying lifestyles similar to many of my participants suggests that deviance often decreases one’s likelihood in practicing religion (Uecker, Regnerus and Vaa 2007). The women who did not consider themselves as religious before the incarceration frequently recounted habits of using drugs and drinking alcohol or of leading a generally more relaxed lifestyle in the sense that they had less financial, social, and emotional worries, possibly as a product of being younger or of not having the label of prison spouse yet. Coupled with this particular lifestyle that many remember living is the shared assertion that they still believed in God, but had temporarily “ran from that,” as Kelly said (personal interview, 2/22/2012). The discord between their behaviors and their religious beliefs and values might have created a “cognitive dissonance – the gap between what they are doing and what they think they ought to be doing” (Uecker et al. 2007: 18). This dissonance that might have occurred for some of the women can have a distancing or disassociating effect on an individual and organized religion (Uecker et al. 2007: 18). Therefore, it may be that those women who were previously less religious were so because of the incompatibility between their behaviors and religion.

Nonetheless, once their spouses were incarcerated most of the women with whom I spoke with had either rededicated themselves to their religion or became more religious as a product of their loved ones' incarcerations. Therefore, in the following four chapters I analyze how each dimension of religion functions as a coping mechanism for these women while facing the crisis of the forced separations from their spouses.

**CHAPTER 7 —**  
***“I’m Trying To Give My Life Back To God,  
Find Me A Good Church”:***  
**RELIGIOUS SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND  
PARTICIPATION AS A COPING MECHANISM**

***Introduction***

When discussing whether or not my participants consider themselves religious and how that sentiment was manifested in coping with the incarcerations of their spouses, the subject of church or another place of worship led to various conclusions. My participants only referred to a church, rather than other places of worship, so my analysis and discussion is therefore confined within the context of a church. I use our discussions of church to highlight the ways in which “social integration and participation” with regard to one’s religion might function as a coping mechanism.

Much of the literature on the function of religion argues that it is a powerful tool in helping its community of believers cope with crises (McGuire 2002; Seybold and Hill 2001). Specifically, Durkheim’s discussion on religion centers on the belief that religion is definitively a communal experience and is largely based on collective representations, or ways in which the religious community portrays that which is important or sacred. Collective representations do not only serve as a form of expression of sacredness, but are also venues through which religious communities collectively experience their religion and build unity among members (McGuire 2002: 37). Additionally, Durkheim argues that not only is religion inherently social, but that it cannot be otherwise; the nature of religion disallows any believer to experience it devoid of its social context and meaning. Pickering (1984) follows: “...it is generally agreed that the influence of

society, of the external social and religious environment, in some way mediates even the most personal of religious experiences. ‘Purely’ individual, innate religious awareness does not exist as Durkheim indicated” (Pg. 199). Religion, then, can only ever be social, according to Durkheim. Simmel (1905) also elaborates on this argument: “The faith which has come to be regarded as the essential, the substance, of religion, is first a relation between individuals” (366). Therefore, experiencing religion is wholly based on the communal where shared interactions provide and shape the overall religious experience. As starkly illustrated with the works of Durkheim and Simmel, the concept of religion is undeniably interwoven with ideas of community and shared experiences, the physical extension of which is the presence of a church or other place of worship in one’s practice of religion.

This particular aspect of religion is often highlighted as one of the ways in which religion offers tools of coping when an individual is experiencing anomie, such as the women in my study. However, when interviewing my participants, the subject of church involvement in relation to how they cope with the incarcerations of their loved ones was met with dichotomous responses. While, it should be noted, all of the women’s conceptions of what it means to be “religious” never identified attending church as an essential component, responses consisted of both support and rejection of the argument that a religious community, found in a church, is an important aspect of religion in coping with the incarceration of a spouse. This tension provides interesting insight into how these women employ religion as prison wives and girlfriends.

## ***Church Attendance as an Important Coping Mechanism***

Of the women that agree that attending church has played an important role in how they cope with the crisis of incarceration, there are two subgroups of responses. Some of the women explained that not only attending church is helpful, but also being able to open up with their church communities about their situation has been an important coping process. However, other women who also believe that attending church is helpful argue that they do not feel comfortable opening up to their church communities about the incarcerations of their loved ones.

For the women in the first group, who maintain that their church communities offer an environment where they feel comfortable opening up about their spouses' incarcerations, church represents a space detached from their largely unsupportive outside communities. Veronica, a 21-year old whose husband is currently incarcerated for a three-year sentence, attends church as a way to seek refuge from the harsh judgment of her greater community. Speaking on her church community, Veronica explains:

They knew Ryan [her husband] and they know that he's a good guy. They know that he messed up but everybody messes up. And they know that whatever happened that we do love each other. I have forgiven him, God forgave him and that's all that matters. In this world it doesn't matter if God has forgiven you or not. If you did the crime you have to do the time.

(Veronica, personal interview 2/23/2012)

Church, in this case, represents a supportive and healing environment in three ways. As Veronica explains, her church was familiar with her husband, Ryan, before he was incarcerated because he too attended that church. This intimacy with him prior to his incarceration acts as a powerful tool in thwarting the stigmatizing effects of negative labeling experienced by almost all of the interviewees. This labeling is often solely based

on one's association with a man in prison (Evanston et. al 1990). However, if the church community is already familiar with one's identity before he is labeled as an "inmate," then community members may be less likely to use "inmate" as his dominant identity. For example, as is the case for Veronica's husband, the church maintains a positive view of the individual born out of the context of him being a member of their church community and therefore a "good guy." In addition, the fact that Veronica has been going to the same church since before her husband's incarceration provides her with a sense of consistency in a time of great change. Veronica's life was hugely altered by Ryan's incarceration because most of her family and friends now refuse to support her emotionally or financially and she is forced to take care of four children by herself. In a time of both acquiring new family roles and losing previous support systems, the church represents an environment of reliability and consistency.

The church also creates a space for comfort in another way—the guidelines by which one is judged differ than those in the outside community. While society may not be forgiving when one commits a crime, Veronica maintains that God has forgiven him and "that's all that matters" (personal interview, 2/23/2012). With this perspective, she is able to seek comfort in knowing that although he is still being punished by society, he is truly forgiven in the eyes of those who seek God's judgment.

Echoing the idea that the church offers a supportive environment in its alternative ways of evaluating an individual, Diane, a 27-year old mother of one daughter, whose husband is sentenced to twenty-three more years in prison, finds comfort in the values put forth by her church community:

Divorce is not something we believe in and so [my pastor] definitely supports me in supporting my husband. And always prays for me constantly to have the strength to continue through it because it's not an easy lifestyle. So for the most part my church is definitely supportive.

(Diane, personal interview 1/23/2012)

While the rest of Diane's community, family, and friends are urging her to separate herself from her husband, the values of her church inspire strength within her to continue supporting him. Diane's experience is analogous to the low-income mothers of Sullivan's study (2008) who state that attending church acts as a resource to reinforce positive values for them and their children. Similar to Veronica's case, Diane also emphasizes how the different values and standards of her church create a space that is more welcoming of her as the wife of a prisoner than the outside community.

What Veronica and Diane express in how they experience increased support and comfort in church when coping with the incarcerations of their husbands resonates with literature on the correlation between social support and religious coping (Neal Krause et al. 2001; Pargament et al. 2000). Studies on the different dimensions of church-based social support reify these ideas in arguing that church provides positive religious support and spiritual support for its members. In this way, religion functions as a coping mechanism for these women by allowing them to gain support and intimacy with others, being their Clergy or fellow members (Pargament et al. 2000). The ideas expressed by these women also serve to reify the findings of Mary Ann Farkas and Gale Miller (2007) who researched the hardships that families of convicted sex offenders face. In their discussion of family coping mechanisms that were often employed, they note that several families become more religious because of they found the church community to be "more forgiving and less judgmental" (Pg. 91).

While several of the participants reinforced the sentiment that church was a place where they could, and did, share their experience of the incarcerations of their loved ones, other participants did not do likewise. Of the women who attended church, there was also a subgroup who found their church communities to be supportive but who, at the time of our interview, continued to conceal the fact that they had a spouse in prison. Of the women who are part of this group, they all share the belief that if they were to tell people about the incarcerations, their fellow church members would be the ones they would feel most comfortable telling. Heather, a 24-year old mother of one daughter whose boyfriend is in prison for eight more years, has yet to share the fact that her boyfriend, who is her daughter's father, is incarcerated with anyone outside of her immediate family and one friend. She started to go to church with the occurrence of the incarceration of her boyfriend and birth of her daughter, which happened soon after. Although she feels generally supported by her church, she leaves her boyfriend's identity unknown to all other churchgoers. Heather expresses what all of the other women in this category similarly felt: "I haven't opened up at my church community. I had the chance at my daughter's baptism but I didn't even bring it up at that point...But eventually I feel that if I was, I think they would be a little more supportive and maybe non-judgmental" (Heather, personal interview, 1/24/2012). Although she hides the fact that her boyfriend is an inmate, Heather, along with several other participants, believes that her church provides a place where she would feel more comfortable sharing that information.

Another significant difference between these women and the women who are open about that their relationships with incarcerated individuals is the length of time they have been attending their churches. While the women who find comfort in telling their

church about the incarcerations of their spouses have been attending church since before the incarcerations occurred, the majority of the women in the latter subgroup did not begin attending church until after that happened. Therefore, the familiarity and consistency that characterizes church for women like Diane and Veronica is not necessarily relevant for women such as Heather. Instead, many of the women in the second subgroup started to attend church once they rededicated themselves to their religion due to their spouses' incarcerations. The relationship between religiously rededicating oneself and beginning to attend church might suggest that church, in this case, provides a particularly accessible way to reconnect, or connect for the first time, with one's religion. While the community of a church may surely work to help women such as Heather cope, it might be that that is simply not the focal reason why they joined. Instead, they may seek the guidance that a church provides, on an individual level, in practicing and involving oneself in her religion, especially when she has not done so previously or for a long time. For example, Denise, a 24-year old, met her husband in church when she was fifteen. Soon after they started dating she stopped going to church until her husband's incarceration, when she decided to rededicate herself to her religion.

I told him about mid-November that I went to church and I rededicated myself. Because I'm not a horrible person but I can curse when I want to, I've been trying to work on that. I told him I'm trying to give my life back to God. Find me a good church. Get my faith together because I know I believe in God but at the same time I want my faith to get better because sometimes we have challenges that make us wonder 'Why?'

(Denise, personal interview, 2/22/2012)

Denise uses the church to rededicate herself and strengthen her ability to remain focused on God and her faith amidst her hardships. Her intentions for attending church differ than those in the first group because she did not use the church for

its space of community and shared support, but instead for a personal pursuit of rededication.

Therefore, the personal histories of these women play a role in how they employ church attendance to cope. The dichotomy that is revealed among the responses of women who do attend church lends insight into how attending a church might function as a coping mechanism. The church in this case is socially constructed to represent different tools for coping to different women. It may act as a space for community that can be utilized for its familiarity, consistency, and greater support or it can provide an environment for one to individually rededicate herself when she has lost touch with her religion. In other words, for prison wives and girlfriends a church can be a space of both the familiar and the new.

### ***Church Attendance as Being Absent as a Coping Mechanism***

Of the women who considered themselves religious, there were many who did not attend church at all as part of their religious practice. These women generally fell into two categories—those who do not go to church and wish that they did and those who do not go to church and do not want to go to church.

The women in the first category expressed that while they do not currently go to church, there are desirable outcomes in attending one and are unsure as to why they do not. Valerie, a 49-year old mother of two children whose husband is in prison for a life sentence, explains why she feels attending church would help her and her family:

I have [considered becoming more religious] but I never get in there. But I think it would really help if we attended church more often...for the

spiritual healing...and for the kids. I think it would help them see that there are other people that attend church, their way of living. It just seems they're [churchgoers] are a lot more different [than the outside community].

(Valerie, personal interview, 1/27/2012)

Valerie's words highlight the ideas put forth by the women who do attend church, which were previously discussed; she perceives church as being an effective source of coping and as providing a community that may be more supportive than the outside community, and also refers to attending church as being a product of strengthening one's religious ties. She notes that those who go to church are "a lot more different" and might therefore be less stigmatizing and judgmental than the people she has confronted in her community. Also, resonating with the experiences of Denise and Heather, who go to church but do not open up there, she believes that attending church would be a product of her becoming more religious or rededicating herself in search of "spiritual healing."

Another sentiment expressed by some of the participants was that they believe church provides physical support in addition to the spiritual support often emphasized. Lisa, a 39-year old mother of two whose husband is in prison for twelve more years, considers herself "absolutely religious" and does not attend church; yet, she believes that it would be an especially supportive community group for her to join. The reasons she identifies for holding this belief is because she knows of other prison spouses who joined churches and have received physical support such as car rides to the prison for visits and presents for their children during the holiday time (Lisa, personal interview, 2/17/2012). While she also acknowledged the moral support that may arise out of a church community,

Lisa's emphasis was on what churchgoers might physically provide that would alleviate stresses, financial and otherwise, of her situation.

Of the women who do not attend church, but simultaneously recognize its potential in being helpful for prison spouses, when asked why they do not attend a church all of them mimicked exactly how Lisa responded: "I just haven't done that, I don't why" (Lisa, personal interview, 2/17/2012). None of the women who wished that they did go to church could, or did, explicitly identify the reason why they did not. On the other hand, they were quick to offer reasons a woman in this situation would be benefited by going to church. My data does not offer much in the way of explaining this pattern, but their desire to attend church might be indicative of their desire to belong to a supportive community; yet, at the same time, they may be hesitant of community institutions, such as a church, because of the stigmatization many of them experience from society in general. Therefore, although none of them specifically justified not going to church despite their positive assumptions, it may be that they are generally wary of societal institutions.

The other set of women who do not go to church were, unlike Lisa and Valerie, able to identify why they do not attend church and do not want to. There were many participants who considered themselves religious and yet do not attend church simply because that is not how they preferred to practice their religion. However, there were several who at one point attended a church and decided to stop attending. These women argued that the church community to which they belonged acted as an extension of their greater community in judging and

stigmatizing them for their association with an inmate. As opposed to other participants who either experienced church as being a community detached from those external to it or assumed it to be so, the women in this particular subgroup did not differentiate between the two. Ann, a 42-year old mother whose husband has been out of prison since 2003, remembers when she first moved to a new city and her husband was soon after incarcerated:

I am a Christian. I do believe in God and do pray even though I'm not perfect. I don't attend church. That's just my own personal thing. It's very...here I haven't found a church I like and I've tried a few when I first got here. It was part of the community so you're judged. Whether you were a part of [the church] or not...I mean as an example you tried to go attend a school community function and those type of people that are in church or school, those types of people, um, they still know the stories.

(Ann, personal interview, 2/10/2012)

According to Ann, although there may be different types of people who attend church, they still continue to negatively label prison wives and girlfriends. Church is seen as an extension of society; for these women it represents an institution that has very much internalized the values of the outside community. Furthermore, Ann asserts that it is irrelevant whether one is actually a member of the church when negatively judged by churchgoers for having a loved one in prison. She generalizes all people who are part of her greater community as holding the same negative connotations of her as a prison wife.

Denise also shares this belief:

At the church I was going through honestly I didn't find it there and I stopped going to that church. I still try to read my devotionals. Right now I'm not going to church honestly. I don't think they would have been supportive. It was something about them. They probably wouldn't be supportive of anything I would do. To me, other than close friends and his family, nobody else would be supportive. Like just because he's incarcerated he's an animal.

(Denise, personal interview, 2/22/2012)

Slightly different than Ann's approach to church is Denise's inference that church members might be *more* judgmental than other community members upon hearing about her situation. Just like women, such as Diane and Veronica, regard churchgoers as holding other standards for the way they judge an individual, so does Denise; however, the new standards adopt a hyper-judgmental tone with Denise. Both Denise and Ann reinforce the feeling that those in the church have "something about them" that makes it an undesirable environment for seeking support.

### ***Conclusion***

As McCubbin (1979) explains, family crises are most effectively dealt with when the individuals experiencing crisis, or anomie, are able to rely on the support put forth by their communities. Community integration and adherence to community values, as Hansen and Hill (1964) discuss, offers a sense that there is an appropriate trajectory of behavior in dealing with the crisis. Although prison spouses are not, in most cases, able to employ their greater communities as support systems, church attendance is one way in which they might alternatively achieve such support; the church for some of my respondents acts as their focal community.

In conclusion, this particular aspect of religion was a significant actor in some of the women's coping processes when enduring the incarcerations of their loved ones. Many participants use their church as a source of community support when such support is otherwise absent. Church provides emotional support to some of the women on various levels—it offers them a sense of consistency when they are experiencing profound change, it provides a set of values that might be especially comforting for prison wives

and girlfriends, such as remaining loyal to one's husband, and, on an individual level, it is an accessible way for one to rededicate herself to her religion. On the other hand, some women in my study represented church identically to how they often represented the rest of society in their assumption that it would be equally judgmental and stigmatizing toward them. In these cases, social integration and participation in the form of church involvement was deemphasized as a coping mechanism. Therefore, the topic of church, and the religious social integration that is derived from it, elicited dichotomous reactions from my sample; this illustrates the tensions in how prison wives and girlfriends react to employing any community support as a coping mechanism. While women who attend church and do not attend church all expressed feeling unsupported by their greater communities, some participants regarded church as being part of that unsupportive network while others differentiated the two.

In the next chapter, I discuss ways in which prison wives and girlfriends privately practice religion as a coping mechanism, as opposed to engaging in the social aspect of it to cope highlighted in this chapter.

**CHAPTER 8 —**  
***“We Tell Each Other ‘We Can Do This, God Has Us’”:***  
**PRIVATE RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AS A COPING**  
**MECHANISM**

***Introduction***

The hesitancies of belonging to a religious community that some of my respondents demonstrate calls into question, “if they consider themselves religious, how *do* they practice their religion?” The answers revealed that these women almost unanimously, churchgoers and not, emphasize the importance of private prayer and what many called an “individualized” approach to religion.

According to (NIA)/Fetzer Working Group (2003) private practices are distinct from the previous dimension of religious social integration, exemplified here by attending church, in that “the behaviors take place in the home, or generally in daily life, alone or with family” (Idler et al. 2003: 341). Specifically, these “behaviors” that the (NIA)/Fetzer Working Group (2003) refer to often include “reading religious books or other religious materials, watching religious television programs, listening to religious radio programs, praying, and asking someone to pray for you” (Taylor et al. 2009: 628). This form of religious expression holds unique significance for prison wives and girlfriends because of the ways in which they often feel stigmatized by their communities. As illustrated with the women who do not feel comfortable either sharing their stories at their churches or attending a church at all, prison wives and girlfriends are sometimes dissuaded from involving themselves in the community due to fear of judgment and negative labeling.

Therefore, a majority of my sample turned to private expressions of religion once their spouses were incarcerated. Not only did many demonstrate religious behavior in this way for the first time, those who regularly prayed or read the Bible before, more frequently engaged in such practices after they were separated from their spouses. The ways in which my respondents privately practice religion falls into three categories: private prayer, reading the Bible and private Bible study, and exchanging prayer and Bible verses and psalms with their incarcerated spouses.

### ***Private Prayer as a Coping Mechanism***

Almost *every* woman that I spoke with said that she prayed or conversed with Higher Power to some extent. The presence of prayer as a way to cope with the incarcerations of their spouses is independent of whether my respondents attend church or even consider themselves “religious” or “spiritual;” it emerged as an overarching response to the crisis these women face. However, the reason for why they pray and how prayer functions as a coping mechanism differs among respondents. For some, prayer and conversation with a Higher Power offers a sense of comfort and strength in enduring the crisis when they feel especially alone and isolated. Others approached prayer in a more practical sense as a way to receive answers or explanations for the situation they have been put in when otherwise incomprehensible. It must be noted that while this distinction was made relevant by the responses I received, many women pray for both reasons.

These two types of prayer demonstrated by a significant amount of my sample mirror how prayer was used by Ai et al.’s (2002) sample in their study on how private prayer correlates with optimism of older patients with heart diseases. Although Ai et al.’s

sample is admittedly very different than my sample, both are faced with a crisis that requires coping and responding to the difficulties and stresses of the extreme situation. The results of their study reveal “conversation with God” and “accomplishing spiritual or material needs” as being the two most popular forms of praying (Ai et al. 2003: 76), which exactly mirrors the trend in how and why my participants pray.

The first form of prayer, being a conversation with a Higher Being, serves to provide comfort and strength amidst the separations from their spouses. When asked how she practices her religion, Maureen said: “it’s more a personal matter. I find myself thinking more along those lines but I don’t really voice it. I just find myself asking for the strength to get through another day...it consists of prayer and faith” (Maureen, personal interview, 2/20/2012). Illustrated by Maureen’s response, many women use prayer when they are feeling especially weak or defeated. Maureen’s ambiguity as to who she is “asking for the strength to get through another day” was common for my respondents; it was apparent that the act of conversing with something or someone other-worldly was what provides these women with a sense of strength even without identifying who the other conversant is, whether it be God or another Higher Power. This trend in how prison spouses pray is not affected by whether they attend church or not, or even whether they consider themselves “religious.” For example, although Maureen does not attend church nor consider herself “religious,” Tonya attends church on a regular basis and considers herself “very much so religious.” Although Tonya practices religion in an institutionalized manner, by attending church, and has a high level of self-reported religiosity, she prays for the same reasons that Maureen does. Tonya explained that she prays when she is feeling alone or discouraged because of her boyfriend’s absence and

that this “makes [her] feel like someone’s there that [she] can talk to” (Tonya, personal interview, 2/22/2012). Therefore, although Tonya attends church and may have social and emotional support there, while Maureen does not, they maintain the same reasons for praying.

Another reason for praying my respondents frequently identified is to gain understanding, answers, or guidance in a time of confusion. As I addressed in my review of literature, religion offers a system of meaning when anomie debilitates one’s previous way of understanding her reality (Hargrove 1989; Lee and Clyde 1974). “Religion fosters the internalization of norms, advocates particular guidelines for behavior, gives its adherents a firm notion that there are right and wrong ways of thinking and acting, and indicates specifically what these ways are” (Lee and Clyde 1974: 37). The ways that Lee and Clyde (1974) describe what religion does for its adherents is applicable to the second way in which my respondents use prayer. The emphasis on “guidelines” and indicating “right” and “wrong” ways of acting are exactly what many prison wives and girlfriends seek in prayer. Holly explains how she demonstrates her religion in this way:

I just believe. I don’t go to church, I don’t...I just believe in God. I just believe. It’s individual... I don’t necessarily pray to Him. But I do talk to Him, I guess you could say that’s praying. But I talk to Him. Like when I can’t take it anymore and ask Him to help me to make the right decisions and the right choices. I don’t know if you call that praying but I have a conversation with Him and that helps me. Because once I let it out, I let it go and everything turns out right.

(Holly, personal interview, 2/20/2012)

Holly’s words reflect Lee and Clyde’s (1974) conceptualization of what religion does in that her prayer guides her to “make the right decisions and the right choices.” Other women responded likewise saying that “I was drawn to talking to God because He has the final answers to everything” (Emily, personal interview, 2/24/2012) or, more

specifically, that prayer provides them with answers on how to act Christ-like so that everything happens as they want it to happen (Hope, personal interview, 2/7/2012).

Overall, the private practice of conversing with a Higher Power in some form functions in powerful ways as a coping mechanism. Prayer offers a greater sense of internal strength in approaching the distresses of the incarceration of a loved one and provides women with an understanding as to how and why this crisis occurred. Every woman, but one, who identified prayer as a way that they cope also said that they pray more often now than they did before the incarcerations. Considering the crisis in which they are responding to, this is not surprising that these women commonly seek an accessible and individualized way to find answers and strength. As Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest (2003) explain: “the loss connected to incarceration can be defined as ambiguous, because it remains unclear, indeterminate, and unvalidated by the community” (Pg. 196). The ambiguous nature of having a loved one incarcerated was often expressed by my respondents due to either not knowing when their spouses would be released or simply being fearful of the everyday threats their spouses were facing in prison. As Pearlin and Schooler (1978) suggest, then, the coping mechanism of prayer must function within the context of ambiguity that an incarceration of a loved one exemplifies in providing strength and answers to my respondents.

### ***Reading the Bible as a Coping Mechanism***

Another way in which private practice of religion is demonstrated by prison wives and girlfriends is through reading the Bible and engaging in Bible study. My participants referred to no other religious texts except for the Bible, so this discussion does likewise.

While less respondents claimed to read the Bible than did those who pray, a significant amount of women do so as a coping strategy. An important distinction between this form of private religious practice and prayer is that only women who self-reported as being “religious” read the Bible. Church attendance remains irrelevant for whether a woman reads the Bible or not, which is consistent with Koenig’s study (1998) on the religious practices of medically-ill older adults. Half of the women who said they now read the Bible started doing so after the incarcerations of their spouses, which implies that there is something attractive to this behavior for women enduring this crisis. Many of the ways in which reading the Bible functions as a coping mechanism for prison wives and girlfriends are consistent with what prayer does for them. For example, the Bible offers many women encouragement and strength when facing their crisis, as it does for Michelle:

And I’ve found lately, especially lately, if I’m feeling really really low and upset, which is usually at night when I get the saddest, I’ll pick up the Bible and just open it and read a psalm or a proverb or something. And sometimes it helps and sometimes it doesn’t...I plan to keep doing that for sure. I think it makes me feel stronger.

(Michelle, personal interview, 2/11/2012)

Just as prayer provides women a sense of strength in their communication with a Higher Power, the Bible does the same, as it is essentially another way to connect with a Higher Power. Helm et al. (2000), in their study on whether religious activity prolongs survival, notes that participating in Bible study is one way for people to acknowledge having a Higher Being and may in turn reduce stress and engender optimism (Pg. 403). In this sense, reading and studying the Bible may function as a coping mechanism in much the same way that prayer does.

However, one difference between how prayer and reading the Bible provide coping tools for some my respondents is that the Bible addresses the experiences of

prisoners and suggests how one should treat them. A few of the women I spoke with said that reading biblical stories that speak of the incarcerated, such as that of Paul the prisoner, gives them a sense of justification in supporting their spouse when so many others are urging them to do otherwise. In addition, these stories validate that religious faith conquers all and inspires prison wives and girlfriends to maintain their faith through every hardship. When asked how religion helps her cope, Diane responded: “I guess I always go back to the scripture and Bible, when they were in prison and prayed and God let them out. I always go with that” (Diane, personal interview, 1/23/2012). Through addressing the very crisis that these women are experiencing, the Bible helps Diane and two other participants cope simply by addressing the situation as conquerable and one that esteemed Biblical figures have also endured.

### ***Exchanging Prayer and Bible Verses with Spouses as a Coping Mechanism***

The third way that my respondents privately practice religion is geared toward the maintenance of their relationships with their incarcerated spouses. Five women reported exchanging prayers, bible verses, and psalms with their husbands or boyfriends as a way to strengthen communication with them. One of those women, Veronica, participated in a joint Bible study with her incarcerated husband when their relationship was particularly threatened by the separation. She explained:

There’s a book, it’s called the Love Dare. It’s a Christian Bible Study. And it was helping there for a while and then he quit going it. And when he quit doing it that’s when all of our problems started...it says that you can’t take anything seriously if you’re not investing in it. And so how can you have a successful marriage if you’re not investing in it?

(Veronica, personal interview, 2/23/2012)

All of the women who use the Bible as a form of communication and bonding with their spouses reiterated what Veronica said—that engaging in prayer and studying the Bible together is a way to ensure that both individuals remain invested in the relationship despite the physical separation. Prayer and Bible study is a way for some of the women to emotionally connect with their spouses when physically doing so is no longer available. Demonstrating an alternative to engaging in the Bible with her spouse like Veronica and other women do, Denise prays for, and with, her boyfriend to attain that same sense of strength and eternal investment in the relationship:

He's been strengthening his faith in me and he's also trying to surrender to God, trying to get himself together also...And I've impacted him, with my prayers and everything. We also give each other pep talks like 'I prayed today and I read my daily devotionals.' He'll ask me about it and I'll say 'no I didn't do it unfortunately' and he'll tell me he prayed today. We gotta pray. We push each other on the religious thing. If one of us is not praying or we're losing faith we tell each other 'we can do this. God has us.'

(Denise, personal interview, 2/22/2012)

In her case, prayer and shared expressions of faith serve to reinforce communication with her boyfriend and to empower both of them in overcoming the distresses of the separation.

Literature on the effects of joint religious participation in marriages reinforces the sentiments of my participants. Lambert et al. (2012) found that joining together in prayer and other religious practices promotes unity and trust in relationships. In Mahoney et al.'s study (2003), they too found that religious involvement has positive effects on a relationship by providing a "higher spiritual status" to the relationship. With this new status, they argue, individuals may be more willing to sacrifice and protect their relationships (Mahoney et al. 2003). Therefore, within the context of my study, prison

wives and girlfriends may employ this specific coping technique to ensure the success of their relationships despite the crisis, providing them a heightened sense of unity, strength, and trust with their spouses.

## ***Conclusion***

Evident in my data is the importance of private religious practice for prison wives and girlfriends, possibly stemming from their negative connotations of society and institutions. Prayer, reading the Bible, and using the Bible to communicate with their incarcerated spouses act as mediums through which they cope in unique ways. Such private expressions of religion provide my respondents with a greater sense of strength and confidence when facing the hardships of the separations. Interestingly, the frequency of private religious practice in my sample was much greater than that of public religious practice, such as church attendance. While less than half of my respondents attend church, or expressed desire to attend church, a majority of women demonstrate private religious practice in some way. Moreover, discussions on private religious practices were not at all polarizing in the way that discussions on going to church were. These distinctions possibly reveal that this dimension of religion is more accessible or attractive to prison wives and girlfriends.

Drawing upon my initial functionalist theories of religion, it appears that the ways in which private expressions of religion are manifested as coping tools for this sample of women would contradict Durkheim's argument that the social is absolutely intrinsic to any believer's experience of religion. However, upon further investigation, I do not believe this to be the case. Instead, I maintain that private religious practices discussed in

this chapter are very much in union with Durkheim's conceptualization of the function of religion. Prison wives and girlfriends seem to gravitate toward private religious expressions simply because they feel uncomfortable in engaging in societal institutions as a product of their crisis. However, just because they often emphasize the power of individually practicing their religion does not mean that religion is individually *experienced*. Private prayer, reading the Bible, and engaging in religious practices with their incarcerated spouses all center, to some extent, on the idea of shared religious experience, what Durkheim argues is the core of any religion. For example, prayer is communication with another being, albeit otherworldly, reading the Bible is engaging oneself in the sociohistorical context of one's religion and thus participating in its social context, and, finally, practicing religion with one's spouse is overtly social in that it consists of experiencing religion through the alliance with another social individual.

In the next chapter I shift from physical practices of religion, such as church attendance and prayer, to the mental and spiritual aspect of practicing religion, addressing how holding certain religious beliefs functions as a coping mechanism for women in my study.

**CHAPTER 9 —**  
***“He Brought Me To This For A Reason”:***  
**MAINTAINING RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AS A COPING**  
**MECHANISM**

***Introduction***

As prison wives and girlfriends find new ways to practice religion, privately and communally, in order to cope with the incarcerations of their spouses, they also internalize new religious beliefs and values. Idler et al. (2003), in their study on how religion helps individuals cope with negative health impacts, assert that “religious beliefs offer individuals cognitive resources...they create webs of meaning and comprehensibility that may comfort and sustain believers even in the midst of acute tragedy or long-term suffering” (Pg. 344). The religious beliefs that my respondents often identified as providing them comfort are consistent with literature on how such beliefs have the potential to increase a believer’s optimism, sense of control, and positive justification for life events (Pargament 1997; Seybold and Hill 2001). Compared to prayer and church attendance, maintaining religious beliefs does not represent tangible ways in which my respondents cope with the incarcerations of their spouses. Rather, holding such beliefs acts as a coping mechanism in that it “functions to control the meaning of the problem,” which Pearlin and Schooler (1978) argue can greatly decrease the perceived threat of the crisis (Pg. 6). For prison wives and girlfriends, certain religious beliefs alleviate feelings of disempowerment in several ways. The two most prominent religious beliefs that my respondents highlighted are the belief that everything happens for a reason and that God, or their Higher Power, would never give them

something that they were not strong enough to handle. Each belief functions as a coping mechanism differently for these women, although often in congruence with one another. The former gives the crisis a sense of purpose and frames it so that the end must provide an ultimate good, while the second belief provides inner strength for the women and similarly proposes that there must be a more meaningful outcome to the incarcerations of their spouses.

### ***“Everything Happens For a Reason”***

One of the most consistent phrases used by my participants in trying to make sense of their situation was “everything happens for a reason.” Although both religious and non-religious women said this phrase, it was most often contextualized within religion. Many women rationalized the incarcerations of their spouses by asserting that it was “God’s will” or that He has reasons, both known and unknown to them, for putting them through these hardships. This belief appears to function as a coping mechanism for my respondents in three ways—it inspires them to evaluate the crisis positively in identifying lessons that can be learned and individual growth that can be attained, it encourages them to be thankful that the incarcerations happened for they may have saved their spouses’ lives, and it reinforces their conviction that they are meant to stay loyal to their spouses.

The first way in which this belief comforted my respondents was by offering a sense that there was something to be learned and some way to grow from the situation. Heather told me:

I believe that everything happens for a reason...I believe that something good will come out of this in the end and that He brought me to this for a reason to grow or whatever it might be. I may not know it right now, but with His guidance eventually it will be clear to me.

(Heather, personal interview, 2/24/2012)

Heather and many other women that I spoke with are comforted by the belief that while it may be difficult to endure this hardship for the moment, there must ultimately be a positive outcome. Although Heather is unable to identify exactly what the reasons are that her Higher Power put her through this phase of crisis, she maintains that with “His guidance” those reasons will eventually be revealed. Similarly, Lindsey explained: “everybody always says, ‘why did He have to do this? Why did God have to do this to him? Why do we have to do this?’ But I don’t know, you just have to believe that He has a plan and somehow this plan is working out in our favor” (Lindsey, personal interview, 2/21/2012). Acknowledging that the incarceration is part of a greater plan that culminates in some good gives Lindsey, and many of my other participants, relief as they confront what is an anomic situation. Believing that the incarcerations were *supposed* to happen, that some Higher Power intended for each woman to endure the event, creates a lens of optimism through which my respondents can reflect on the crisis.

Positive reflection on the incarcerations is also exemplified by the way in which a few women classified the event as being life-saving. By believing that everything happens for a reason, many women were inspired to search for the positive in their situations. In doing so, three conveyed that their spouses would otherwise be dead if the incarcerations had never occurred and were ultimately thankful that they did.

Accordingly, Holly suggested that the imprisonment of her husband saved his life: “They say that God does things for a reason and honest to God He saved his life by putting him

where he's at. Because he probably would have been dead somewhere. Because of the lifestyle we were living.” (Holly, personal interview, 2/20/2012). Two other women offered the same reason for why God must have made the incarcerations of their spouses happen. Consequently, they are thankful to God that their loved ones are in prison and not the alternative. Contrasting their current situations with how much worse it could be helps them cope by improving their subjective well-being (Gibbons and Gerrard 1991), alleviating the anger and depression that many prison wives and girlfriends initially experience.

Lastly, in assuming the belief that everything happens for a reason, some prison wives and girlfriends are able to be more confident in their relationships despite constant pressure to abandon their spouses. Using the notions of “God’s will” or “God’s plan” serves to validate their relationships in instilling in them the belief that some Higher Power meant for the women to be with their spouses no matter the circumstances. As Diane explained: “...[others] were like ‘this is not for you’ but I knew that God told me that my husband was supposed to be my husband, that we worked to be together” (Diane, personal interview, 1/23/2012). Diane insists that it is God’s will that she be with her husband. Considering that both her family and friends are unsupportive of her relationship with him now that he is incarcerated, this belief is especially comforting for her. Just as Diane knows that her husband is supposed to be her husband, according to God’s will, Brittany argues that she must remain with her boyfriend because that is the path that God has chosen for her: “If God gives you a path and you’re following a path and in your heart you know that it’s right, keep following. But once you have that it’s wrong, then you’re not listening to what God’s telling you. Everything happens for a

reason” (Brittany, personal interview, 2/27/2012). The way in which the belief that “everything happens for a reason” manifests as a coping mechanism here is that it justifies the women’s loyalty and their relationships in general. The maintenance of this religious belief serves to convince my respondents that, while so many others are criticizing their associations with inmates, they can and should remain confident in knowing that they have God’s support.

### ***“He Would Never Give Me Anything That I Couldn’t Handle”***

An equally popular belief that a majority of my participants addressed is the belief that their Higher Power would never put them through a situation that He knew they could not handle. Of the women who expressed this belief, there is a dichotomy in how this helps them cope. Half of the women feel that the incarcerations of their loved ones is a test of their inner strength and is meant to challenge them and push them toward growth. The other half of women modify the belief to be, “He would never give me anything that *we* couldn’t handle.” This indicates that the incarcerations serve to bond the women with their Higher Power in order to survive the crisis and strengthen them as individuals. Both variations of the belief, however, function as coping mechanisms in similar ways—to test, develop, and make them acknowledge their personal strength and faith when all are being challenged in the face of this crisis.

Most of the women I spoke with claimed that God would only ever make them endure that which they, as individuals, are strong enough to endure. This belief provides

my respondents with a sense that, although the situation appears unconquerable, God believes that they will survive the separations from their spouses and that such survival will ultimately produce positive results. Using the metaphor of crackerjacks to illustrate the good that will eventually arise from the devastating incarceration of her husband, Holly explained:

I believe in a Higher Power...and once I understood that it was Him giving me different tests throughout my life, I then believed that he's never going to give something that I can't handle. I believe that after this path there's a wonderful prize for me in my crackerjacks, I just have to keep waiting. That's how I cope. That's what brings me to the next day.

(Holly, personal interview, 2/20/2012)

Reiterated by many other women was Holly's conviction that this was one of many tests that are part of her "path," set forth by her Higher Power. When framed in such a way, the incarceration of one's spouse takes on a new connotation, affirming that this is an inevitable occurrence in their lives that was supposed to happen. This belief also suggests that without enduring the crisis of their loved ones' incarcerations, these women would somehow be weaker. As Meghan declares: "It's a lesson. There is stuff to be learned. Obviously I'm a strong enough person for whoever decided for me to live this life to live it. So I just take it...Because they have something to teach me" (Meghan, personal interview, 2/23/2012). Referring to the incarceration as a "lesson" allows women to assimilate the loss in new ways. While the impacts are surely pervasive, with this belief in mind the women navigate the loss using a positive mindset and acknowledge that they are gaining new strengths.

A slight variation in this belief is one that a few women expressed, which emphasizes the partnership between them and their Higher Power in enduring the crisis. Therefore, instead of it being a personal pursuit set forth by a Higher Power, it becomes

an experience that must be survived with God and not alone. Denise shared this belief and explained that if she is to conquer the distresses of the incarceration of her boyfriend, she needs to stay united with God because: "...if God is for you, who can be against you? Nobody. This one God is better than the whole world against you" (Denise, personal interview, 2/22/2012). Unlike the women who stress the individual development that may come from this situation, Denise underscores the strength that comes from working with God in conquering the situation. The attachment to God that Denise and other women demonstrate when facing hardships may function as a coping mechanism in decreasing grief and increasing their sense of individual strength and growth (Kelley and Chan 2012).

### ***Conclusion***

Although there is little physical manifestation of these beliefs in how the women cope with their crises, the spiritual and mental growth and positivity that arise from them act as important tools for coping. That a majority of the women I talked to mentioned at least of the religious beliefs identified in this chapter suggests that this dimension of religion is especially powerful in the coping processes of prison wives and girlfriends. The popularity of employing this specific dimension of religion may be similar to why private religious practices are also extremely common; individualized ways to cope for these women holds unique appeal due to their hesitations toward reaching out to societal groups or even friends and family who the women often assume will negatively label them. Therefore, the ways in which these religious beliefs instill both internal strength

and the sense that they have divine protection allow them to cope independent of anyone else.

The next chapter furthers the discussion of the mental aspect of religion, focusing on how the last dimensions of religion that I previously identified—having faith and interacting with a Divine Being—serve as coping mechanisms for prison wives and girlfriends.

**CHAPTER 10 —**  
***“There’s No Way I’d Be Able To Survive This Life Without  
God”:***  
**DIVINE INTERACTION AND HAVING FAITH AS A  
COPING MECHANISM**

***Introduction***

A dimension of religion that underlies much of the previously discussed dimensions, yet deserves its own discussion as a coping mechanism, is divine interaction and maintaining faith in some sort of Higher Power and one’s relationship with it. While there were slight differences in how my respondents conceptualized “faith,” all referred to it as consisting of a relationship with a Divine Being and putting trust into that relationship. Even those who, when asked, did not consider themselves religious, often used “faith” to explain their connection to some sort of transcendence. Therefore, the concept of faith and divine interaction appears to be intertwined and somewhat inseparable according to the prison wives and girlfriends of my study. While I was unable to find literature that specifically addressed the notion of having faith as a coping mechanism, studies have found that having a relationship with God or another Higher Being can have positive effects on one’s coping processes (Kelley and Chan 2012; Pargament and Hahn 1986). Feeling connected to God allows individuals to escape the realities of their crises and seek meaning in transcendence, which can be a comforting process especially when faced with the anomic situation of having a spouse incarcerated. As the results of Kelley and Chan’s (2012) study show, having a secure attachment to God is inversely associated with negative emotions, such as depression and grief, and

positively correlated with one's sense of understanding the situation, which are consistent with my findings.

In discussing how these interrelated dimensions of religion—having faith and a relationship with a Higher Power—function as a coping mechanism for my respondents, they emphasized three ways. First, and most commonly identified, is the strength that their faith and connection to a Higher Being provides them in facing the incarcerations of their spouses. This connection also instills a more positive mindset when evaluating their situations and promotes thankfulness among the women. Lastly, several women commented on how faith and a strong relationship with a Higher Power are intrinsic to successful marriages. Therefore, in order for their relationships with their spouses to survive the separations, they feel that faith is essential.

### ***Faith and Divine Interaction as Providing Strength***

The most consistent way in which having faith and a relationship with a Higher Being aid my respondents in their coping processes is to provide a sense of strength when facing the impacts of their spouses' incarcerations. I sensed that the way in which their faith provides strength as opposed to the religious beliefs that they consistently draw upon, such as "He would never give me anything that I couldn't handle," is that faith promotes the idea of a guardian or a divine protector. While my discussion on their religious beliefs emphasized how they develop inner strength by supporting those beliefs, their maintenance of faith and a relationship with a Higher Being acts as an external source of strength and protection that is available to them. For example, while Diane in our interview articulated that believing He would never put her in a situation that she

could not handle makes her feel like a “stronger person,” she also claimed that interacting with God gives her additional, external protection in times of weakness:

If I didn't have God I would have probably lost my mind... I definitely, like I told you earlier, I wouldn't be able to withstand this life...I know that my God helps me through a lot of it. Without Him, I would absolutely lose my mind. The times when I'm really hurting or don't understand, when the bills are due it's not like I can call on my husband and say, 'Resort to what you know. Go out there and sell some drugs,' and it's sad to say. I can't do that. I have to rely enough on God and trust on Him that he's gonna make sure the bills get paid. There's no way that I would be able to survive this life without God. Absolutely not.

(Diane, personal interview, 1/23/2012)

Many other women reinforced the idea that they have to “rely enough on God and trust on Him,” or in other words have faith in Him, if they are to survive the especially difficult times of dealing with the incarcerations. In this way, having faith acts as a supplemental source of strength when the women feel individually weak or incapable of conquering the hardships.

An interesting commonality in responses regarding divine interaction as a source of strength was the women's conviction that this is *required* if they are to successfully endure the separations from their spouses. Just as Diane argued that she wouldn't “be able to survive this life without God,” Hope told me that: “I've been to my lowest lows and somehow or other I come out of it. So I know there's somebody or something out there. And I have to have faith in that...you just have to” (Hope, personal interview, 2/7/2012). The emphasis on *having* to keep one's faith in order to physically survive the suffering was shared with many others of my respondents. Faith and divine interaction, then, function as a coping mechanism for prison wives and girlfriends in bestowing upon

them a greater sense of confidence that some Higher Being will support them when they need it most and ensure their survival of the distresses of their spouses' incarcerations.

### ***Faith and Divine Interaction as a Tool for Positivity and Gratitude***

The strength that faith and divine interaction often provides prison wives and girlfriends is coupled with an increased acknowledgement of the positive in what appears to be a negative situation and the consequent thankfulness that arises from that acknowledgement. Just as the belief that everything happens for a reason serves to frame the incarcerations of their spouses in a more positive manner, a majority of my participants asserted that their faith inspires them to seek the good in what they initially interpret as completely devastating. When asked if her newfound faith helped her cope with her boyfriend's incarceration, Michelle replied:

Yeah, definitely. Because I feel like when people are in really hard situations and feel like you're alone and that's a lot of the times when people will look to a Higher Power...it's usually when things are going really bad when people look for that relief and that support and the comfort that it brings...And it definitely reminds me to keep looking at the positive and not search for the negative but just focus on the positive as much as I can even when its really hard to do that sometimes.

(Michelle, personal interview, 2/11/2012)

Michelle illustrates the ways in which her relationship with a Higher Power brings her comfort, in that through that connection she is reminded that there must be positive aspects of her situation. Heather reiterates Michelle's comment by succinctly defining faith as: "...being thankful for what you have and hoping" (Heather, personal interview, 2/24/2012). She was, like Michelle, inspired to renew her faith once her husband was incarcerated in order to gain a perspective of positivity and thankfulness through her times of strife. For both of these women and many others that I spoke with, their faith

allows them to be more receptive to how the separations from their spouses can have positive consequences.

Another way in which faith and divine interaction enhances the women's positive outlooks is by encouraging them to remember that even if it seems impossible to find good in their current situation, there must be ultimate good to come out of it. Diane commented on this aspect of her faith: "...God has to help me believe 'hey, you said 'for better or for worse' you know, this is the worse part. You gotta stick it out. And be that woman. Just think of the good times, they're coming.' Good times are coming, it reminds me" (Diane, personal interview, 1/23/2012). For Diane, her relationship with God pushes her to remember that the hardships are not eternal and thus be more positive about her situation. Therefore, trusting a Divine Being inspires prison wives and girlfriends to both seek the positive in what currently appears negative and to remember that there must be good outcomes of the incarcerations to come in the future.

### ***Faith and Divine Interaction as Essential for Relationship Success***

A few women mentioned another way in which faith acts as coping mechanism for them—it makes them more confident in their relationships despite the separations. Faith and interaction with a Higher Being were presented as intrinsic components to a successful relationship by some of my respondents. When asked how she copes with the realization that her husband is going to be in prison for another three years, Meghan answered: "God. That's the only thing...Marriages can't work without God in them. I don't care what anybody says, but you have to have Him in your marriage for it work..." (Meghan, personal interview, 2/23/2012). After rededicating herself to religion once her

husband was incarcerated, Meghan's relationship with God was "intensified" and she "become a lot closer to Him." Her rejuvenated faith and connection with God is what, she argues, made her relationship stronger and helps her to cope with the fear that many prison wives and girlfriends have that their relationship will dissolve with the separations. Denise, who also rededicated herself because of the incarceration of her husband, parallels Meghan's belief in the importance of God and having faith to sustain her marriage. She now prioritizes her relationship with God over her relationship with her husband because she says: "Without having our relationship be right with Him first, we're not going to be right. If we don't have faith in our relationship with God then we'll never be right" (Denise, personal interview, 2/22/2012). From some of my respondents' perspectives, divine interaction and faith are powerful, and necessary, tools in building and ensuring a stable relationship with their incarcerated spouse.

My participants' beliefs in this regard are not far off from the results of studies that support the positive effects of religious faith on the success of relationships (Hunt and King 1978; Mahoney et al. 2003). They may feel more confident and secure about the future of their relationships in emphasizing the presence of God and His central role in them. Although Mahoney et al. (2003) argue that sanctified marriages, or marriages that emphasize the role of God in them, are more likely to experience guilt or depression when that relationship is greatly disturbed in some way, as the incarceration of one's spouse exemplifies, I argue that this does not apply to my sample. That the majority of my respondents became religious, or more so, after the incarcerations means that they had little religious beliefs to disturb at the time of the crisis. That is to say, their relationships were not yet "sanctified" and for the most part became so afterward.

### ***Abandoning Faith or Being Angry at God***

In discussing how faith and divine interaction function as a coping mechanism for a majority of my participants, I believe it to be significant to address those few women who expressed doubting their faith because of their loved ones' incarcerations. Five women that I talked with mentioned being frustrated with or questioning God for making them endure the separations from their spouses. For example, Hope, who at the time of the interview had recently received the news that there would be no change to her husband's 2095 release date, said: "going through what we're going through with these terrible downs somehow I start to lose faith. And I have to pick myself up again. You start to wonder what kind of a God or a Creator would let such horrible things happen and go unnoticed and unpunished" (Holly, personal interview, 2/20/2012). When the women receive bad news or the impacts of the incarcerations become seemingly unbearable or unjust is when they are most likely to question their Higher Being, as Holly did. Lisa also expressed anger at God: "I'm kind of angry at God. Because I guess it goes back a long ways. My dad, brother and sister were all killed. And then [my husband] being incarcerated, which I know is his own fault, but I feel like God has given me way more to handle than I wanted to handle. I've lost too many people" (Lisa, personal interview, 2/17/2012). The accumulation of negative events in Lisa's life has instilled a sense of anger in her towards God. However, she later told me that she has not lost her faith in God because she owes her survival of three drug overdoses to Him. Just like the other women who are sometimes frustrated with God, Lisa's frustration is not wholly destructive toward her faith.

Some researchers assert that when an unfavorable event happens in one's life, the individual may demonstrate negative religious coping and feel abandoned by God or blame an angry God for the occurrence of that event (Hebert et al. 2009; Pargament and Hahn 1986). However, although some of my participants spoke about times they were frustrated with God, none of them negatively blamed Him for the incarcerations of their spouses; in fact, most of the women were accepting of the fact that their spouses were guilty for committing some crime and deserved to be in prison for some amount of time. Moreover, none of my participants permanently rejected God, or religion more generally, because of the crisis. The overwhelming percentage of women who demonstrate positive religious coping, illustrated by my analysis thus far, parallels other studies in which the sample is similarly skewed toward positive rather than negative religious coping techniques (Hebert et al. 2009; Pargament et al. 1998).

### ***Conclusion***

Faith as it was conceived in my interviews consisted of both divine interaction and trust in that Divine Being. The pervasiveness of this concept, which was integrated in the responses of both religious and non-religious women, reveals its potency as a coping mechanism. Further reifying the importance of private religious expression for prison wives and girlfriends, my data suggests that simply believing in something otherworldly provides positive tools for coping for prison wives and girlfriends. Strength, positivity, and confidence in their relationships despite the separations are invaluable characteristics to have when faced with the impacts that my respondents endure.

The significance of the particular religious dimension of faith and divine interaction may be analogous to the power of having strong interpersonal relationships for individuals experiencing crisis in McCubbin and Lester's study (1977). Although having a relationship with a Higher Being may function differently than having a relationship with another individual, my data suggests that the result is similar. McCubbin (1979) asserts that engaging in interpersonal relationships can serve as a coping tactic by providing an outlet for expressing one's feelings and seeking resolution. Likewise, developing and trusting a relationship with God offers prison wives and girlfriends a space for expression and a sense that they can achieve certain means, either physically or spiritually.

An important aspect of this discussion is the complete absence of women who reject their faith or religion because of their spouses' incarcerations. While there were five respondents who mention having some frustrations with their Higher Being, none of those women entirely abandoned their faith. On the contrary, most of those women still heavily rely on religion as a coping mechanism.

## CHAPTER 11 — CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I want to again emphasize the initial purpose of why I chose this topic—to reveal the experiences an “invisible group of sufferers” (Brink 2003: 394) who are prison wives and girlfriends. Women who are viewed by society as criminal because of who they love are required to navigate their forced separations from their husbands or boyfriends in unique and often idiosyncratic ways. As almost every one of my participants articulated, prison wives and girlfriends are viewed by society in much the same manner as their incarcerated spouses—i.e., they are “looked at like [they’re] criminal” (Michelle, personal interview, 2/11/2012) and perceived by others to be “bad people and [who] have done wrong” (Heather, personal interview, 2/24/2012), simply because of who they love. I wrote this thesis to investigate how one can possibly cope with such pervasive stigmatization and distress and the degree to which religion emerges as a powerful way of coping for these women.

### *Findings*

My focal research questions were the following. What are the impacts of the incarceration of one’s husband or boyfriend? How do prison wives and girlfriends cope with those impacts? How does religion function, or not, as a coping mechanism used by wives and girlfriends of incarcerated men? How do these women’s attitudes towards, dependence upon, and/or use of religion change due to their spouses’ incarcerations? Why is religion used, or rejected, as a coping mechanism?

In response to the first two questions, I found that the impacts of a spouse’s incarceration for women were overwhelming, catalyzing an environment analogous to

Durkheim's concept of anomie. Not only do these women experience psychological harm, such as depression and feelings of isolation, but many of the ways in which these people typically cope with crises are unavailable due to what Hansen and Hill (1964) refer to as the persecutive response of a community toward an individual in crisis, thus exacerbating the effects of the impacts. Consequently, my respondents often relied on either individual ways to cope, such as writing in diaries and personal letters or keeping themselves busy with maintaining their house or working overtime, or reached out to women to whom they could relate to through the shared experience of being a prison spouse. Although the ways in which my respondents cope have for the most part served to positively alleviate the distresses they face, the most powerful and prevalent coping mechanism for many of them did in fact appear to be the use of religion.

My findings regarding the impacts of incarceration on my respondents, and the limited ways in which they feel comfortable coping with such impacts, suggest that there are practical steps to be taken in addressing the experiences of families who have a loved one in prison, especially for "prison towns" such as Walla Walla. The pervasive lack of institutional support that my respondents illustrate heightens the extremity of the crisis and is largely based on unjust stereotypes (Evanston et al. 1990). As Evanston et al. (1990) conclude in their study: "...a major reason for whatever tensions and conflicts do exist between the two stems at least partially from the lack of meaningful contact and interaction between the community at large, and this particular segment of that community" (Pg. 25). Therefore, I believe it to be necessary for cities in which a prison is located to consider appropriate and effective measures to avoid such "lack of meaningful contact." While I acknowledge that overcoming widely distributed perceptions and

stereotypes surrounding families associated with the prison is no easy feat, I propose one way in which this might be accomplished. Host communities of prisons may thwart the separation between families of inmates and the greater community by hosting public forums geared toward allowing family members with incarcerated loved ones to speak out on the difficulties of their situations. This has the potential to provide two positive functions—it would serve as an outlet for families to publicly share their hardships when that option is often unavailable due to lack of support from others, and it would provide members of the greater community with insight into the experiences of prison families. This insight may manifest into greater understanding and, hopefully, with greater understanding comes empathy for individuals enduring forced separations from their loved ones because of incarceration.

Although I use several dimensions of religion in the attempt to answer to my second question of how religion specifically functions as a coping strategy for my respondents, there were underlying themes in terms of how the dimension of religion all function as coping mechanisms. Indeed, it seems that religion provides the prison wives and girlfriends with whom I spoke to with five central coping instruments: 1) inner strength, 2) community of support, 3) a sense of divine protection, 4) encouragement to remain confident in their relationships, and 5) tools for positively framing their situations. Although religion is widely regarded by scholars as being an effective means of coping (Acklin et al. 1983; Idler et al. 2003; Krause et al. 2001; Koenig 1998; Pargament et al. 2000; Seybold and Hill 2001), religion holds particular significance for this population of women. As has been discussed earlier, these women have developed personalized ways in which to cope due to the negative connotations that their labels of “prison spouses” or

“pen wives” generate. Religion offers these women a multifaceted way with which to individually cope with the separation from their loved ones, in the sense that it can be employed in many ways. That is to say, any woman can engage in religion in the specific way that she wants to, through individual prayer, church attendance, or simply adopting and adhering to religious beliefs. This multidimensionality and individuality of religion is attractive to those who are otherwise hesitant to rely on formal and institutionalized coping mechanisms, such as prison spouses.

The consistent use of religion among a majority of the women in my sample supports my first two hypotheses, which were: 1) that prison wives and girlfriends will rarely reject religion and instead embrace it as a particularly accessible way to cope with the incarceration of their spouses and 2) that women who did not consider themselves religious before the incarcerations of their loved ones will be more likely to do so afterward. No woman in my study fully rejected religion because of the incarceration of her spouse, and no woman claimed to be less religious now than before the incarceration took place. Although some expressed being frustrated with God because of the hardships that they believed were undeserved, none have abandoned religion completely. To the contrary, women who were previously religious before the incarcerations of their loved ones became more so afterward, and women who claimed not be religious at all before the incarcerations took place, claimed that were now religious or, as Maureen expressed, now think more along those lines (Maureen, personal interview, 2/20/2012). These hypotheses were powerfully—in fact unanimously—supported by my data.

My last hypothesis was the following: if a woman does not employ religion as a coping mechanism at all, she will tend to rely more heavily on informal, less

institutionalized social support systems, such as friends, family, and other prison wives and girlfriends. Although I had only two respondents who do not employ any dimension of religion in their process of coping, I believe my data rejects this hypothesis. These two women did not rely on their friends or family any more so than my other respondents. To the contrary, they seem to rely less on such support systems. They failed to identify any specific ways in which they cope, although they inferred that their coping was founded on establishing their independence. For example, instead of confiding in other prison wives and girlfriends who share their experience, these two women asserted that they choose to entirely keep to themselves.

The results I just discussed may suggest one of two conclusions—that religion is a medium through which one becomes more welcoming of other coping mechanisms or that individuals who employ religion to cope are more disposed toward employing additional coping mechanisms as well. However, my data does not definitively substantiate either conclusion and thus calls for future research on the relationship between one’s religious involvement as a coping strategy and the likelihood she will employ other forms of coping.

The fact that religion so powerfully emerges as an important tool for coping for nearly all of my respondents implies that practical implications can, and should, be implemented in response to this research. Employing religion in response to the incarceration of one’s spouse exemplifies an extremely positive coping strategy and yet there are few collective support groups for prison families geared toward capitalizing on religion’s potential as a coping resource. Through researching the available support groups publicized by the Washington State Penitentiary’s website, I found only five

support groups targeted toward families of prison inmates in Washington, and only one which had an explicit emphasis on religion. Not only is there a staggering lack of support groups more generally, but there is also an absence of religious institutions that have provided environments of support for families experiencing this type of crisis, despite the potential for substantial benefit for the families in doing so, as my data implies.

Therefore, I propose that, with this data as inspiration, religious institutions begin to recognize the power of religion for prison families and utilize that capacity in an effective manner. While simply holding church services does indeed serve as a coping tool for some prison wives and girlfriends, there are many women who, while they consider themselves religious, either do not feel comfortable attending services as a product of them rejecting social groups more generally or are interested in employing religion in ways that church attendance does not fulfill. For example, some of my respondents pursue religion in a very individualized manner and feel that going to church is unnecessary for their personal expression of religion. Accordingly, if religious institutions provide private support groups, or even individual support sessions, for prison spouses, women of inmates might be able to more comfortably and effectively employ certain religious dimensions as coping tools, such as religious social integration and also private religious practices. Offering a service that creates an environment devoid of the negative labeling rooted in the greater community, promotes coping through making connections based on shared experiences, and provides the tools for positive religious coping would be an immensely powerful program for prison wives and girlfriends. Such a religious support group would alleviate the stresses of anomie in their situations by directing them toward definitive ways in which to respond to the incarcerations of their

spouses and represent a space of community with supportive values and goals, unlike society more generally.

In conclusion, the results of this thesis further illustrate the social function of religion in dealing with crisis. I firmly believe that the work presented here holds important sociological value. This study reaffirms the power of religion in dealing with difficult or life-changing situations. It also targets an under-researched population and adds to what little literature exists on the spouses of inmates and their unique coping mechanisms. Most importantly, it unveils the suffering that many individuals endure as they are “imprisoned” along with their loved ones. While the imprisonment of “pen wives and girlfriends” may not be characterized by the inescapable confines of prison cells, the consequences are equally consuming and perhaps even more psychologically damaging.

## APPENDIX A— Example of Research Poster

### *RESEARCH STUDY*

#### ***WIVES AND GIRLFRIENDS OF PRISON INMATES: PLEASE READ***

Dear Washington State Penitentiary visitor,

I am a senior sociology major at Whitman College and am interested in learning about the experiences of wives and girlfriends of prison inmates. I believe that these experiences can be extremely difficult and that there are unjust stereotypes attached to families of men in the prison. Therefore, I am investigating how the wives and girlfriends of inmates endure what can be a difficult experience.

If you are currently married to a prison inmate or involved in an intimate relationship with an inmate, then, with your permission, I would like to interview you about how you deal with your husband being in prison and what support systems help you in your daily life. It will be possible to gather this information in one interview session (the length of which will most likely vary from 30 minutes to an hour, depending on how much you want to or are willing to talk about your situation). In the interview, I will be interested in asking questions like:

What difficulties do you experience because your loved one is in prison?

Are you religious? Does religion help you in coping with your loved one being in prison?

Do you feel that you are looked down upon because your loved one is in prison?

If you volunteer to participate, please keep in mind that you will *always* have the right to not answer a question or to stop talking about a topic if you feel uncomfortable in doing so. Also, you can withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason without any further questions asked.

Please be assured that all information is *purely confidential*. Absolutely no one will know that you have spoken with me. However, if you do choose to volunteer to participate in my study, you will have the opportunity to help me counter the unfair stereotypes given to the loved ones of inmates. By sharing your story, I can better understand how you cope with the difficulties of having a loved one in prison, using religion or not, and explain to others how much the imprisonment of a loved one affects a web of people outside the prison.

If you are willing to speak with me, or simply want to know more about the study, please fill out the attached form and send it to me in the pre-stamped and self-addressed envelope. If need be, please take your time to think about this. If I receive an envelope from you, I will contact you shortly to either answer questions or set up a time and place for us to meet. Your time and willingness to participate are greatly appreciated! Thank you.

**APPENDIX B— Example of Letter Attached to Poster**

**(Which was sent to me if a particular Penitentiary visitor was interested in participating or knowing more about my study)**

I am interested in knowing more about your study: YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_

I am interested in talking with you: YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_

Please contact me at:

EMAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE: \_\_\_\_\_

I prefer to be contacted by: EMAIL \_\_\_\_\_ PHONE \_\_\_\_\_ NO  
PREFERENCE \_\_\_\_\_

The best time to reach me at this phone number is: \_\_\_\_\_

At this time I wish to remain anonymous \_\_\_\_\_

OR

My name is \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C— Example of Interview Questions

1. How old are you? Where are you from?
2. Are you currently married to an inmate or involved in an intimate relationship with an inmate?
  - a. If so, what is the nature of this relationship?
  - b. Is your significant other currently incarcerated or was he previously incarcerated during this relationship?
  - c. How long have you been married to your husband or been involved with your significant other?
  - d. What three words would you use to describe the situation of being married to or in an intimate relationship with a prison inmate?
3. Has your significant other only been incarcerated this one time? Or has he been incarcerated in the past as well?
4. Do you have children? Ages?
  - a. Are they from this marriage or relationship?
  - b. Are they affected by your husband's or boyfriend's incarceration? If yes, how so?
5. How does the incarceration of your husband or boyfriend affect you?
  - a. What new roles have you taken in the family/community?
  - b. What role does your husband or boyfriend have in the family now that he is in prison? Have there been any changes in this role?
  - c. Does the presence of the prison itself affect your marriage?
  - d. What do you believe is the most difficult part of your husband or boyfriend being in prison?
6. How do you think the community perceives wives, girlfriends, and families who are connected to the prison?
  - a. Are there any stereotypes that the community seems to have toward prison wives or girlfriends?
    - i. If so, does this stereotype affect you? How so? If not, why not?
    - ii. Do you believe this stereotype accurately represents prison wives? Why or why not?
7. Do you associate with other wives or girlfriends of prison inmates on a daily basis?
  - a. If so, in what ways do you associate with them?
    - i. Are these connections formal or informal? Explain.
    - ii. With what frequency do you associate with them?
  - b. If not, why do you believe that is?
8. Do you feel generally supported by the greater community in which you live?
  - a. Are there specific groups or types of people in the community that you find to be especially supportive to you? How so?

- b. Are there specific groups/people in the community that are especially unsupportive? How so?
  - c. Do you perceive a difference in how community members of the city in which you live act towards you or treat you following your husband's or boyfriend's incarceration as compared to before his incarceration?
9. What types of activities are you involved within the community?
- a. Have these activities changed since your husband or boyfriend was incarcerated?
  - b. Do these activities help you in coping with the incarceration of your husband or boyfriend? If yes, how so?
10. Do you feel isolated, physically or psychologically, because of your husband's or boyfriend's incarceration?
- a. If yes, are there specific ways you deal with the isolation?
11. In what ways do you cope with the incarceration of your husband or boyfriend?
- a. Do you believe these ways are effective? Why or why not?
12. Do you consider yourself "religious?"
- a. Why or why not?
    - i. If yes, with what religion do you identify?
  - b. What does the word "religious" mean to you, in a general sense?
  - c. Have you become more or less religious in your personal life and practices since your husband or boyfriend was incarcerated?
    - i. If there has been a change in how religious you are, why do you believe that has occurred?
    - ii. Do you value certain aspects of your religion more so now because of the incarceration of your husband or boyfriend?
13. How often do you attend a place of worship?
- a. If rarely or not at all, are there other ways that you practice religion?
14. Since the incarceration of your husband or boyfriend, how does religion affect your everyday life, if it does at all?
15. Does religion play a role in how you cope with the incarceration of your husband or boyfriend? If yes, in what ways?
16. Are you involved with a support group for prison families?
- a. If yes, is the group religious?
    - i. Does the group help you? If yes, in what ways?
  - b. If no, would you join a support group for prison wives or girlfriends if one was available?
17. If you do consider yourself religious, do you feel that people within your church or place of worship are more accepting of you than those who are not? Why do you believe that is?

- a. Have you told the people with whom you practice religion that you are in an intimate relationship with a prison inmate? What are your reasons for doing so or not?

18. Do you have anything else you would like to add?

## APPENDIX D— Example of Interview Consent Form

(Which was read aloud to every woman I spoke with)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview! The purpose of this research study is to understand the role of religion in the lives of women whose husbands or boyfriends are in prison. You will only be asked to participate in the research for the duration of one interview session (a maximum of one hour). The interview will begin with a set of questions, but we may talk more or less about certain questions or areas of interest if you so wish. Some of the kinds of questions I want to ask are:

What difficulties do you experience because your loved one is in prison?

Are you religious? Does religion help you in coping with your loved one being in prison?

Do you feel that you are looked down upon because your loved one is in prison?

Please feel free to talk more about the areas of the discussion that you find are important for my study. At the end of each interview, you will be able, if you so wish, to ask questions about any part of the session. I will record the conversation *only* if you allow me to do so. Only I will listen to the recording. You will always have the right in the interview to refuse to answer a question with no penalty. Be assured that *all* information talked about in the interview will be completely confidential. However, I legally have to report information about suspected abuse of children or dependent adults. After the interview, your responses will be given a random ID number and a false name. No data presented to anyone besides myself will identify you.

There are no expected risks to you in participating in the research. If any aspect of what we talk about causes discomfort, please let me know and we will skip that question and proceed without causing further discomfort. You will always, as stated above, have the right to refuse to answer any question(s). You also have the right to stop your participation in the study at any time with *zero* consequences. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, or your rights, please feel free to contact me or my senior thesis advisor (both of whose contact information is above).

Your participation in this research is greatly appreciated! I believe that this research is important for understanding the experiences of wives and loved ones of prison inmates. The study will benefit both you and those sharing your experiences because the research will show others the hardships that families of men in prison endure. I believe there are unfair judgments held about women who are in a relationship with an inmate and I want to use this research to combat those. Once again, your time and willingness to help is greatly appreciated.

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