

## Article

# The Influence of Spirituality on the Education of Incarcerated Individuals: Reflections on the Exceptional Experience of Police-Free Prisons in Brazil

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**Abstract:** The article seeks to read the contribution of religious practices in prison education within the broader framework of spirituality as a search for meaning in life. It argues that religious engagement can foster cognitive and emotional development, providing inmates with a sense of purpose, community, and resilience that supports their reintegration into society. In light of an exceptional and extremely significant experience with APAC in Brazil's police-free prison model, the authors aim to highlight the nexus between spirituality and re-education in contexts of deprivation and restriction of personal liberty. Indeed, the APAC (Association for the Protection and Assistance of the Convicted) model, central to this study, emphasizes nonviolent coexistence, responsibility, and spiritual care as part of its rehabilitative framework, with a significant reduction in recidivism rates and costs compared to traditional prisons. The model's approach, grounded in a collective sense of responsibility and spirituality, aligns with Viktor Frankl's and Paulo Freire's theories on meaning and liberation, illustrating how spirituality can transform prison environments and promote social justice. The study concludes that spirituality in prisons not only aids individual redemption but also calls for structural changes to support reintegration, marking a shift towards a more human-centered penitentiary system.

**Keywords:** spirituality; religion; prison education; search for meaning; APAC



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## 1. Introduction

The moment of incarceration marks a particularly delicate and complex transition in which, regardless of the legal process and the outcome related to the crime and its personal and social implications, the individual temporarily deprived of freedom re-examines representations and perspectives, reference frameworks, and ideas about their life and experiences, including the spiritual and religious dimension (Beckford and Gilliat 1998; Fabretti 2014). This can heighten the perception of punishment and guilt, increase stigma, but it can also serve as an anchor, helping the individual find key points of reference among the people encountered in prison (Said and Butler 2023).

The hypothesis we start from is that prior spiritual experiences, whether explicitly expressed or not, can influence the period of imprisonment through several elements: (a) the religious content and how it can help in understanding key moments in one's existential journey; (b) the resources in terms of resilience that can be acquired or strengthened through

religious participation in prison—both in rituals and internal communities; and (c) the risk of reinforcing identity and experiencing forms of overt discrimination or facilitation.

In direct experience, many inmates report that religious affiliation in prison can be associated with support upon release (Santoro 2020) and that figures such as chaplains and imams contribute to sustaining not only psychological but also physical well-being (for example, by helping maintain family ties or providing donations of clothing or food). There is a risk that, due to vulnerability and specific needs, an opportunistic relationship may develop, or conversely, forms of discrimination and marginalization could arise because of religious affiliation.

What we want to investigate, particularly in a reflective and theoretical manner, is the connection between religiosity, spirituality, and penitentiary re-education. After analyzing data on religious freedom in prison and the presence of religious figures in the penitentiary context, we aim to explore how interacting with religious leaders and “re-examining” oneself through spiritual paths may support a process of revisiting orientations and meanings. This, in turn, could help reshape educational and re-educational processes.

The hypothesis is that where religious practice nurtures the search for meaning and is linked to a broader path of caring for spirituality, practices can transform the prison experience into an exercise of reflexivity, self-revision, and accountability. The celebration of religious holidays, rituals related to prayer, and adherence to dietary practices can be seen as expressions of the individual’s “vitality” as they question and explore their identity and social connections in light of their sentence. Alternatively, these practices might be emphasized as forms of fideistic “protection”.

Certainly, religion, conceived as a complex of beliefs, emotions, and rituals that connect an individual or a human group to what they consider sacred, as a social and symbolic context, helps shape and fulfill a spiritual tension, a search for meaning (Frankl [1975] 2014). It assists the inmate in seeking personal balance in their situation, while also creating continuity with the past and enabling them to reflect on their life through valuable content and experiences. If it is true that the experience of imprisonment is primarily oriented toward a reevaluation of the past, it is also true that the re-educational process is rooted in the attraction to a possible future and the anticipation of Good, which can be tangibly experienced.

The sacred, as theologian and historian of religions Rudolf Otto describes in his 1937 work, opens up to mystery, offering a way to look beyond the frameworks of past experiences and to discover new interpretative keys. The sacred inspires fear (*tremendum*) while simultaneously offering reassurance and attraction (*fascinans*) through elements of love, mercy, and compassion; it also provides a sense of comfort in response to respect and veneration (*augustum*).

This dynamic is particularly significant during a transitional moment such as incarceration, which can either reinforce a definitive and peremptory stigma or, conversely, create a period of deep uncertainty in which the intensification of existential questions can intertwine with the possibility of encountering a compassionate humanity. The fear of emptiness and the end can merge with trust in the Transcendent.

The case study of the experience of the Associations for the Protection and Assistance of Convicts (APAC), or police-free prisons, in Brazil will allow us to shed light on how spirituality impacts not only an internal and intimate space but also a social and communal one. This transforms the entire penitentiary context, requiring a reassessment of its very “nature” through concrete choices.

## 2. The Prison as an Interreligious Context: The Common Ground of Spirituality

Prisons are increasingly becoming environments marked by the coexistence of people who adhere to different religious faiths. The Italian penitentiary system recognizes the right of individuals temporarily deprived of their personal freedom to practice their faith, engage in religious worship, and receive instruction in their religion (Article 26 of Law 354/1975). Additionally, since 2018, inmates have also had the right to request meals that align with their religious beliefs (Legislative Decree No. 123 of 2 October 2018). Religious and spiritual assistance is ensured for all religious traditions. The presence of a chaplain is mandated and guaranteed in every institution for Catholic worship (there are nearly 1500 prison chaplains in Italy). For other faiths, the access of religious ministers may be arranged either through direct agreements with the Italian government or through specific *ad personam* requests to the Ministry of the Interior's Office of Worship.

The latest report by Antigone<sup>1</sup> on religious freedom in Italian prisons (Paterniti Martello 2017) reveals that 54.7% of the total prison population identifies as Catholic, followed by 11.4% who identify as Muslim. Orthodox Christians represent 4.2% of the total, while smaller percentages (less than 1%) include Evangelicals, Adventists, Hindus, and others. However, 26.3% of the population identifies as atheist or non-believer. A closer analysis suggests that many Muslim inmates either do not declare their faith or claim to be Catholic to “avoid the stigma associated with their religion in recent years” (Paterniti Martello 2017, pp. 3–4) and the risk of being accused of Islamic radicalism. This significantly skews the data and raises important questions about the full freedom of belief and worship, particularly in an environment where stereotypes and prejudices—religious or otherwise—can be amplified or result in harsher penalties.

The presence of chaplains in prisons, along with the many Catholic volunteers often associated with religious organizations, influences the routines and practices within the prisons. The opportunity for prayer and the celebration of Sunday Mass is provided in nearly all prisons. Additionally, religious figures frequently offer daily support to inmates through personal conversations and meetings, assistance with managing personal finances, maintaining contact with family members at home, and providing small goods (such as cigarettes, clothing, food, etc.). Where this occurs, namely, in prisons where chaplains and Catholic volunteers play a supportive and guiding role, similar assistance is also extended to inmates of different religious beliefs, fostering interfaith dialogue, hospitality, and the preservation of human dignity and relationships. As stated in the Antigone report: “The chaplain provides spiritual assistance to his followers but also material help to others, particularly to indigent inmates, who are often foreigners, of other religions, and lacking local connections. The priest brings clothing, tobacco, toothbrushes, and coffee into the prison, all of which are highly valued in this environment. It is also important to acknowledge the many volunteers, both Catholic and non-Catholic, who visit the prison almost daily and who, in many cases, manage the assistance counters” (ibid., pp. 5–6).

The dialogue with religious ministers is very important and plays a “therapeutic” role in the re-education process: the conversations can be much more open and spontaneous, oriented towards expressing emotions and personal experiences, characterized by immediacy and free from judgment. Unlike interactions with educators or psychological figures, these conversations are not part of the formal evaluations and assessments within the detention process. The role of the prison chaplain included pastoral and emotional support as well as religious, practical, and educational input. The impact included rehabilitation, creation of communities, calm, forgiveness and atonement (Jarrett et al. 2024, p. 137).

The idea that religiosity represents a resource both at the individual and collective levels has been the focus of many studies (De Galember et al. 2016) The inner reconstruction

necessary to turn imprisonment into a life-improving experience, rather than a worsening one, can come through the search for meaning, with participation in religious rituals and meetings with religious ministers helping to fill the empty hours, which often become deep abysses where one can feel lost. Inner peace, in a place deeply marked by latent and explicit conflicts, is facilitated by participation in a personal and communal spiritual life. This is often recognized and encouraged not only by those temporarily deprived of their freedom, but also by the other figures who “inhabit” the prison environment (prison officers, educators, nurses, doctors, psychologists, etc.).

Furthermore, adopting a normative and value-based framework that goes beyond a purely earthly view of punishment and justice can help find meaning in what might otherwise seem meaningless, and allow for confronting human fragility from a different perspective.

We will now explore these themes further, drawing on the contributions of two authors: Viktor E. Frankl and Paulo Freire, who, though different in many ways, share a common view on the connection between spirituality and the pursuit of inner freedom, the ultimate goal of re-education following a crime or an existential mistake.

### 3. Spirituality and Re-Education: Their Relationship in the Prison Context

While often treated as synonyms, the terms religion/religiosity and spirituality refer to distinct, yet deeply intertwined, realms of meaning, each with its own specific characteristics.

Religion, by expressing an experience of bond and communal connection through shared rituals and beliefs, reflects a more structured and codified dimension that takes shape over time and space, also manifesting as a form of belonging, social and cultural integration, and a choice of faith.

Spirituality can be conceived as a pre-constitutive element of religious experience, expressing a personal search linked to transcendence and the meaning of life. It is this aspect that we particularly intend to focus on in order to explore the implications of prison re-educational pathways.

According to Viktor E. Frankl, the spiritual dimension lies in the individual’s effort to perceive the unique meaning of each life situation: “every situation confronts us with a demand, a question to which we must respond by choosing how to act” (Frankl [1975] 2014, p. 101) Conscience is the *organ of meaning*, the intuitive ability to uncover the singular significance hidden in each situation (ibid., p. 105) and to respond, not abstractly, but through responsible action. From this perspective, spirituality, as the pursuit of meaning inherent in existence, is universal, shared by all individuals and present in every historical and cultural context.

In addition to the specific meaning of each *situation* and each *person*, universal meanings may also exist that connect different individuals and circumstances. These are referred to as values and relate to the dimensions of *creation* (dedication to work, labor, or commitment to something), *affective experience* (commitment to someone, recognizing their uniqueness, loving them), and the *attitude toward the inevitable sufferings* of life (Frankl 2009, pp. 56–57). Conscience inherently points toward transcendence and reflects the creaturely condition (Frankl [1975] 2014, pp. 61–62): it operates within the realm of the immanent but guides the individual toward transcendence. It opens up the possibility of glimpsing a “super-meaning” within a sequence of contingent meanings. Here, the religious dimension emerges, *bringing together* the various experiences of meaning in life, linking seemingly distant elements, and fostering a *shared communal experience* among individuals.

It is clear that the spiritual and religious dimension of each person's search for meaning can be highly valuable and closely tied to the educational or re-educational process, especially in a prison setting. In such a context, the search for meaning through education can often appear confused and vague, while concrete experiences of such a search, like work and relationships, are often particularly distant, obscured, or fragmented.

According to Frankl, the lack of meaning that can arise during imprisonment should not be viewed merely as a problem but rather as a genuine opportunity to build personal meaning. Like hunger and thirst, this lack of meaning can drive individuals to seek an authentic source of well-being and meaning, thus mobilizing inner resources and energy.

In an educational context, *caring for the soul* in a prison setting does not mean leading individuals towards a singular, predetermined experience of faith, nor does it involve offering pre-formulated answers or maintaining a rhetorical and overly optimistic focus on hope and resilience as the tools to face difficulties. Rather, it involves concretely supporting each person's search for meaning, particularly as they encounter experiences of suffering that raise a multitude of questions. It is precisely this inner process of "questioning" that proves to be especially formative, helping individuals reorient their lives toward new meanings and perspectives.

Refining the conscience, as Frankl suggests, is a significant educational task that can be developed in any situation and context of life. This strongly echoes what Paulo Freire argues regarding the process of raising awareness (Freire 2017) in individuals and groups, particularly those living under conditions of oppression and dependence on total institutions and systems. Conscientization, i.e., the formation of an intentionality that allows one to break out of the state of oppression and actively modify one's life, is fundamentally developed through the practice of dialogue and in the search for generating themes, which allows one to give voice to what one is experiencing (Freire 2017, pp. 77–87).

Both Frankl and Freire agree that these processes are enhanced by giving voice to individuals and, most importantly, by allowing them to become aware of the complex reality in which they live, through generative and meaningful questions, open-ended questions that do not aim for a single, uniform answer.

The ability to question both themselves and reality is a skill that everyone possesses, but it is often dulled or manipulated, especially when individuals living in situations of marginalization and vulnerability become more susceptible to external influences. This can lead them to unknowingly perpetuate forms of dependency and labeling, both on themselves and others. Generative questions are never abstract; they are deeply rooted in reality, emerging from it and arising in moments of life or contexts where individuals experience ambivalence and paradoxes. In times of suffering and inner conflict, they often delegate the responsibility for liberation and change to others or to external circumstances.

Both Frankl and Freire share the idea that questions of meaning and generative questions cannot be delegated to anyone else: the individual who develops them is personally called, starting from their own lived experience, to seek direction and a possible answer, with the help and support of those who share the same condition.

Forms of spirituality in prison, sometimes mediated and supported by religious rituals, processes, and figures, serve to keep questions of meaning alive, guide them in the right direction, and help individuals understand the horizon within which they can seek answers.

From this perspective, mistakes and the punishment associated with them do not necessarily lead to withdrawal or reinforce dependency and stereotypes. Instead, they can become an opportunity for meaningful self-reflection, where individuals can explore important questions about their lives and create personal paths toward rebirth and new life plans.

We now turn to a case study that illustrates the concrete development of these theoretical positions, with these experiences shaped by the reflections of Frankl and Paulo Freire. The general idea behind this approach is the hypothesis that spirituality, while being a deeply personal, intimate, and introspective factor, also unfolds in a social context, in an environment that can either support or limit its potential in a re-educational direction. We hypothesize that the practice of spirituality not only helps individuals reconsider and renew themselves but also “asks” the community as a whole to change, embracing a shared perspective of meaning. Only by allowing the personal and communal dimensions to interact—especially in cases of social vulnerability and deviance—can spirituality reach its full educational potential.

#### **4. Methodology and Case Study Selection: The Experience of Police-Free Prisons by the Association for the Protection and Assistance of Convicts in Brazil**

Here, we aim to emphasize the importance of research focusing on education, spirituality, and prison, and to analyze how the dimensions of spirituality explored so far can be concretely applied to a reality shaped by punishment and the restriction of freedom, radically transforming the very space of detention.

There is a global trend toward imprisoning those who are already excluded from society. According to [Coyle et al. \(2016\)](#), the imprisoned population faces a heightened state of vulnerability, as they generally come from economically, socially, and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Moreover, prisons house a significantly higher proportion of drug addicts, minorities, migrants, and individuals with mental health issues compared to the general population. The number of suicides and cases of self-harm is also higher within this context. Society imprisons and hides its social conflicts within these four walls. Different forms of spirituality coexist in the daily life of various prisons. Prison represents a major issue in today’s society. Acknowledging the challenges posed by this institution, the United Nations (UN) recommends using incarceration only as a last resort. Most incarcerated individuals are considered low-risk by society, having committed non-violent crimes, and could serve alternative sentences ([United Nations-Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC\) 2007](#)). However, alternative measures seem ineffective in reducing the reliance on incarceration.

There is a broad international agreement, particularly prominent in Europe, that prioritizes re-education, rehabilitation, social inclusion, and the reintegration of individuals deprived of their freedom, with a strong emphasis on avoiding the stigmatization of the prison population. Since 2010, the Council of Europe has recommended investing resources in implementing alternatives to imprisonment ([Heard 2016](#)). However, recidivism rates for those released from prison remain over 50% in various countries around the world ([Fazel and Wolf 2015](#)). This highlights the need for ongoing research into alternatives to imprisonment and for developing new models of deprivation of freedom that can provide education aimed at fostering the real social inclusion of incarcerated individuals.

Expanding globally, the model of Social Reintegration Centers (SRC)<sup>2</sup>, proposed by the Association for the Protection and Assistance of Convicts (APAC), has been described by Prison Fellowship International (PFI) as “the most important development happening today in the field of prison reform” ([Fraternidade Brasileira de Assistência aos Condenados \(FBAC\) 2016](#)). PFI has been serving as a special advisor on prison issues to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)<sup>3</sup> since 1983.

APAC units manage more than 40 Social Reintegration Centers (SRC) across four Brazilian states (Minas Gerais, Maranhão, Paraná, Rio Grande do Norte) and are present in more than 20 countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the United

States, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, Germany, Belarus, Bulgaria, Italy, Hungary, South Korea, Netherlands, and others) (Restán 2017). Spirituality is one of the core elements of this model, and its educational impact is the central focus of this article.

Interest in this model, which aims to educate individuals deprived of their freedom for reintegration into society, is growing. Official data show that individuals educated within these prisons have significantly lower recidivism rates compared to the common Brazilian prison system, ranging between 8% and 15%, as opposed to the national average of 70% (Conselho Nacional do Ministério Público 2016)<sup>4</sup>. There are also fewer cases of escape, indiscipline, rebellion, and violent incidents. These results are achieved at less than half the cost per person compared to the expense of maintaining an inmate in a traditional prison in the same context. The role of spirituality, seen as an educational factor, is key in motivating the volunteers involved in the reintegration projects.

We pose the questions: what kind of education takes place in this space, steeped in spirituality and designed to be an educational unit? What education is provided to those deprived of their freedom? What happens beyond the formal school and non-formal education workshops? What is the dynamic of peer education that unfolds in the living spaces when the school lights go out and the educators leave? What is the pedagogical value of the relationships that form between inmates and prison staff, where the staff are constantly present with adolescents without having any formal pedagogical training?

We will now explore how spirituality and education intersect in this model and what they produce in the next step. Next, let us look at the methodology used to study this experience.

### *Methodology*

In order to achieve our goal, we conducted an analysis of the institution. The research was divided into two phases: the first was exploratory, aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the prison model within current policies on deprivation and restriction of freedom, while the second focused on analyzing the educational experience provided by the APAC model.

We began the research with the aim of expanding and deepening our understanding of global policies on restriction and deprivation of freedom, which is necessary to better understand the contemporary prison model. As the first step of the initial phase, we took part in discussions that arose in the second half of 2017 within the working group on “education for youth and adults in situations of restriction and deprivation of freedom”, which is part of the training offered by the Doctoral Program in Education at the Federal Fluminense University (FFU).

In the second step, we carried out bibliographic research aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the prison situation: we examined the number of incarcerated individuals, the characteristics of this population, and the number of staff along with the types of functions performed. We also discussed the so-called alternative sanctions and their effectiveness in reducing reliance on incarceration. Starting with a general overview, we then provided a more detailed description of the situation in Europe and Italy. The results of these first two steps of the initial phase can be found in the first chapter.

In the third step, the prison model was discussed through the theories of two classical authors: Foucault (1975) and Goffman (1961). We also analyzed two contemporary authors who have updated and complicated the theoretical framework regarding prisons: Garland (1999) and Wacquant (1999, 2009). We briefly explored abolitionist theories and, subsequently, Baratta's (1990) theoretical proposal for social reintegration, mentioning the APAC reintegration model.

The fourth step of the initial stage focused on contextualizing the experience of APACs within the Brazilian context. An analysis of the Brazilian legal framework for the implementation of the penal execution policy was conducted, focusing specifically on the examination of the penal execution law. Reports from governmental and non-governmental organizations were also reviewed to illustrate how laws are transformed into practices within the Brazilian prison system. Additionally, the profile of the incarcerated population was analyzed to better understand who the subjects of the re-education interventions are.

In the second phase of the research, an analysis of the APAC model was carried out to understand how the model is described and how this description translates into practice.

The pedagogical concept arising from the spirituality of the model was examined through the study of the works by APAC's leaders, Mario Ottoboni and Valdeci Ferreira, which were used to promote the model. A literature review was then carried out, focusing on the production of theses in Brazil and Italy. Brazilian theses were retrieved from the database of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES). Italian theses were accessed through websites such as Tesionline and Publitesi, as well as the Florence library site, which has collected all Italian doctoral theses since 1995, thesis archives from various universities, and specialized journals on prison studies, such as *Ristretti Orizzonti*.

The main texts describing the APAC experience have been analyzed (Ottoboni 1997, 2014; Ottoboni and Ferreira 2004; Valdeci 2016; Valdeci and Ottoboni 2016), as well as those that critically examine the APAC model (Darke 2013, 2014, 2015; Grossi 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021b, 2021a; Massola 2001, 2005).

This article discusses issues related to education and spirituality.

## 5. Spirituality and Education in a Concrete Experience: The Case of APAC's Police-Free Prisons in Brazil

The APACs, which promote this model, are “nonprofit legal entities under private law created with the aim of rehabilitating inmates, protecting society, assisting victims, and promoting restorative justice” (Restán 2017, p. 6). Founded in 1974 within a Catholic prison ministry in São José dos Campos (São Paulo) under the leadership of lawyer Mario Ottoboni, they currently serve an average of 3500 people (2017 data), spending approximately BRL 1050 (EUR 250) per month for each person housed (Araújo 2017).

Unlike the traditional model, the Social Reintegration Centers of the Association for the Protection and Assistance of Convicts (APAC) are depicted as peaceful and aesthetically pleasing environments, with a relaxed atmosphere that neither humiliates nor generates anger, as is often observed in traditional prisons (Restán 2017). The inmates undergoing social rehabilitation wear their own clothes and are addressed by name, preserving their identity and being treated as citizens—holders of rights—serving a sentence. The spaces are not overcrowded, they are clean and free of unpleasant odors, with an architecture designed to support educational activities aimed at reintegration into society.

The APACs are described as being run by officials and staff who strongly believe in the social reintegration of individuals deprived of their freedom. Many come from strong Catholic and Evangelical spiritual backgrounds but there are also individuals who practice Afro-descendant religions, such as Candomblé, Umbanda, and Kardecist spiritualism (Grossi 2020b). The majority are officials and volunteers, trained to manage relationships and resolve conflicts without the need for weapons. All are considered educators through what is known as the *pedagogy of presence* (da Costa 2010): each person serves as a concrete example for others and, therefore, their life must be exemplary.

Inmates undergoing social rehabilitation are guaranteed spiritual, medical, psychological, and legal assistance provided by the community. Without these services, Restán (2017)

states, a potentially aggressive and violent atmosphere would emerge, leading to escapes, rebellions, and deaths. Restán (2017) also notes that there is no idleness in the units: all individuals deprived of their freedom leave the dormitories at seven in the morning and return only at ten in the evening. These *dangerous criminals* work, study, receive professional training, and engage in various other activities.

Education is considered vital to the social reintegration project of the APACs, and this includes spirituality in a broad sense, without being tied to any specific religious tradition (Restán 2017). Along with attending school and professional courses, the inmates participate in what are called “work therapy” activities during the closed regime. In the semi-open regime, priority is given to the training of specialized labor, with various professional workshops set up within the spaces of this regime. In the open regime, work is aimed at social reintegration, as the inmates work outside the SRC. Throughout these different regimes, they participate in different activities aimed at encouraging personal reflection, known as “human valorization” seminars, which are designed to help inmates reconnect with themselves.

The aspects of informal education are also highlighted as significant: living together in the units is seen as educational, utilizing the various open communication channels between inmates, volunteers, and officials, ranging from dormitory meetings to collective gatherings. The daily routine of cohabitation among inmates, who work within the units without being able to use any form of violence, is described as fostering awareness and enabling mutual education among them, embodying one of the APACs’ slogans: “inmate helps inmate”.

It is worth noting that education in the APAC model is not limited to inmates. Since the APACs rely on active community support to function, educating the wider public becomes another key goal. Volunteers, family members, and society, including its institutions, need to be prepared to welcome the inmates undergoing social rehabilitation once they are released. Restán (2017) highlights the ongoing dialogue with society, which engages with the units through visits, exhibitions, open activities organized at the SRC, and volunteer involvement, while the inmates undergoing social rehabilitation leave to work or provide community services. The SRC also provides spaces for visitors and researchers, which is where we stayed. Research is actively encouraged, and the Brazilian Federation for the Assistance of Convicts, which promotes and oversees the APACs, has established a dedicated research support center in Itaúna (Minas Gerais).

The absence of violence and armed security staff, according to official statements, is achieved through a security policy based on less strained relationships between staff and inmates. This is made possible by respecting human rights and individual dignity, with shared clear and well-known rules. Restán (2017) also emphasizes that trust is built through co-management of the spaces: inmates undergoing social rehabilitation are responsible for managing the keys to the “prison” and also take care of cleaning, organization, discipline, and security, working in “co-management with APAC staff, volunteers, and administrative staff” (Restán 2017, p. 9).

The APACs promote the recognition of humanity in crime and the normality of the person who has committed an offense, breaking away from the image of the criminal as a monster or sub-human, as recommended by current criminological theories (Baratta’s 1990; Garland 1999). The APACs emphasize that “we are all in a process of rehabilitation” and that no one is beyond the possibility of being rehabilitated: everyone is seen as capable of change, regardless of the crime committed, and rehabilitation is viewed as a shared responsibility of society. The success of reintegration is not placed solely on *professionals*—whether social workers, psychologists, teachers, or social educators—nor entirely on the

individuals themselves, as is often the case in some contemporary reintegration programs (Garland 1999).

## 6. Conclusions

Spirituality emerges as a crucial factor in the process of re-education and social reintegration of people in detention, offering a unique opportunity for personal growth and redemption. The theories of Viktor Frankl and Paulo Freire provide valuable conceptual tools for exploring the transformative role that spirituality can play within the prison context, as exemplified by the Brazilian APACs. Although APAC represents a singular and exceptional case, it offers a lens through which we can reflect on possible experimental actions and choices in the legal–pedagogical field. It reveals a possible reality and outlines meaningful directions that highlight how spirituality can be useful in the practice of renewing prison systems.

Viktor Frankl, through his logotherapy, emphasizes how the search for meaning is an intrinsic aspect of the human experience, especially in situations of extreme suffering, such as incarceration.

The existential void often felt during imprisonment can be addressed by discovering a deeper sense of meaning in life. In this context, spirituality helps those in prison find answers to key questions about their lives and choices, transforming the experience of incarceration from mere punishment into an opportunity for reflection and personal growth. Frankl highlights that, even in the toughest circumstances, individuals have the freedom to choose their attitude toward suffering and to find meaning in difficult situations. Spirituality, then, is not just a psychological escape but a concrete path toward rediscovering oneself and building a new, meaningful life plan. The APAC model works to improve harsh conditions in order to enhance opportunities for spiritual growth, learning, and reintegration for those in prison.

Paulo Freire, with his concept of conscientization, encourages us to see education—and the educational effects of spirituality—as a process that reaches beyond the individual and into the social and collective spheres. The pedagogy of presence, central to the APAC model, demonstrates how spirituality can foster a dialogical and participatory form of education, where inmates are not passive recipients but active agents in their own transformation. While in detention, inmates are involved in community management, and many are later employed as permanent staff after completing their sentences.

Freire stresses that education should empower individuals to break free from oppression and dependence on authoritarian structures, helping them become aware of their condition and take steps to change it. Freire stresses that education should empower individuals to break free from oppression and dependence on authoritarian structures, helping them become aware of their condition and take steps to change it. In APAC, spirituality lays the foundation for this liberation, where inmates, through dialogue and collective reflection, can reshape the meaning of their lives and their role in society. The education rooted in spirituality ultimately holds transformative power, not only for the individuals in detention but also for both the prison system and the wider society.

By integrating the perspectives of Frankl and Freire, we can affirm that spirituality in the APACs is not merely an accessory or a source of comfort, but a central component of the re-education pedagogy. It provides a framework that supports both individual and collective transformation, fostering the development of a new identity grounded in responsibility, hope, and redemption. Spirituality not only helps manage pain and existential void but also promotes an education that restores inmates' ability to question themselves, actively engage in their own lives, and imagine a future beyond prison.

In conclusion, spirituality, as interpreted through the ideas of Viktor Frankl and Paulo Freire, serves as a bridge between the inner world of the individual and their social surroundings, connecting the search for personal meaning with a process of collective liberation. The APACs offer a concrete example of how spirituality integrated into education can humanize the prison environment, turning it into a place not just for punishment, but for genuine renewal. However, this transformation can only take root if it is accompanied by a broader rethinking of external social structures, which must be ready to welcome and support reintegrated individuals. Spirituality thus becomes a vehicle for social justice, capable of challenging the traditional penal system and promoting a more humane and inclusive model of rehabilitation and reintegration.

We can thus affirm that spirituality plays a crucial role in radically transforming the prison environment. A different kind of education is possible for those deprived of their freedom, and the APAC model stands as an alternative, with its merits, flaws, and challenges. This model, born and developed first in a Catholic, then ecumenical spirituality, and striving to transcend and embrace other forms of spirituality, offers formal, non-formal, and informal education that can aid in reintegration into society. Additionally, it better respects Brazilian laws and the rights of inmates, presenting a real alternative to the traditional Brazilian prison system. There is potential for global expansion, especially if the model embraces certain changes discussed in the conclusion.

There are, however, various contradictions that the APAC model can generate, as seen in the foundational texts describing the APAC experience (Ottoboni 1997, 2014; Ottoboni and Ferreira 2004; Valdeci 2016; Valdeci and Ottoboni 2016), as well as those that critically examine the APAC model (Darke 2013, 2014, 2015; Grossi 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021b, 2021a; Massola 2001, 2005).

These include the potential for proselytism or the pressure exerted on individuals to engage in specific spiritual practices, issues that have been explored in several studies. Other identified issues include the use of religion for opportunistic purposes and the persistent challenges individuals face upon reentry into a society that lacks essential support services. Another challenge of the model stems from the attempt to create a space that is inclusive of all religions, particularly Afro-descendant faiths such as Candomblé and Umbanda, which hold significant relevance in Brazil. Religion is not a panacea for all the challenges faced by incarcerated individuals. Rather, in exceptional cases such as the one presented, it can serve as a force to mitigate the harms of incarceration and transform these structures, which are notoriously difficult to reform (Foucault 1975; Garland 2001; Goffman 1961; Wacquant 1999, 2009).

Spirituality and education alone, however, are not always enough to change the world outside of prison. Structural challenges like unemployment and the lack of opportunities for a dignified life present significant barriers to social inclusion. It is crucial to view spirituality and education as strategic tools for bridging the gap between prison and society, gradually humanizing those who are incarcerated. Only by re-educating society can we open a dialogue to address the problems caused by the prison system and work towards either resolving them or, at the very least, significantly reducing their impact.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> [www.antigone.it](http://www.antigone.it), accessed on 13 March 2025.
- <sup>2</sup> The Social Reintegration Centers (SRC) within the APAC system, known in Portuguese as Centros de Reintegração Social (CRS), are facilities focused on the rehabilitation and reintegration of incarcerated individuals, operating without armed guards or police presence. They embody the principle of “recovery” rather than “punishment”, aiming to transform individuals through structured programmes in work, education, spirituality, and community support. SRCs provide educational programmes, vocational training, and psychological support, engaging families and the broader community in the reintegration process. This model seeks to reduce recidivism by fostering comprehensive rehabilitation rooted in respect, discipline, and personal accountability. SRCs offer an alternative to traditional prisons, grounded in the belief that, when treated with dignity and trust, individuals in prison can make positive contributions to society upon reintegration.
- <sup>3</sup> The United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is a primary organ within the United Nations responsible for overseeing the economic and social activities of the organization. ECOSOC coordinates the work of specialized agencies, functional commissions, and regional commissions under its purview and serves as the main platform for discussing global economic and social issues and formulating related policy recommendations. Comprising 54 member states, ECOSOC also engages over 1600 NGOs with consultative status to collaborate on UN initiatives.
- <sup>4</sup> The issue of recidivism within the APAC model is a complex one, as discussed in various texts (Grossi 2020c, 2020b). These studies also highlight how problematic it is to use the recidivism rate as the sole indicator for evaluating the success of a reintegration policy. Such outcomes also depend on external factors that lie beyond the control of the reintegration programme itself—including, for example, the availability of employment, housing, and the persistence of societal stigma.

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