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Islam prison conversions

Mark Easton | 13:44 UK time, Tuesday, 8 June 2010

If you were in prison, why might you decide to convert to Islam? A "cushier life" and "nicer grub", according to the Sun this morning.

It is a line that many of the papers plucked from today's report from the Chief Inspector of Prisons [502Kb PDF] to explain why so many inmates of jails in England and Wales decide to embrace the Muslim faith while behind bars.

The idea that halal menus and Friday prayers are such "perks" that young lags queue up to convert surely cannot be the whole story. The perception of "material benefits" might be a factor, but another more compelling explanation is also included in the report. One prisoner convert said: "I've got loads of close brothers here. They share with you, we look out for each other." The Chief Inspector Anne Owers writes:

and even halal food. Many Muslim prisoners also stressed the positive and rehabilitative role that Islam played in their lives, and the calm that religious observance could induce in a stressed prison environment. This was in marked contrast to the suspicion that religious observance, and particularly



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The claim - made by an anonymous prison officer to BBC 5 live's Donal MacIntyre programme in March - that young inmates "were being forced to convert" in order to get "protection from a Muslim gang rather than follow the faith" is dismissed by today's report. It finds no evidence to back up any such claim.

A more compelling narrative might be that young, frightened men, arriving in jail - where physical and sexual violence are meted out to those who appear weak or vulnerable - are drawn to prisoners, as the report says, who offer "support and protection in a group with a powerful identity".

Around 30% of Muslim inmates are converts and many of those are, according to previous Home Office research, from black rather than Asian ethnic groups. In 1999, it was found that 37% of Muslim male prisoners were black compared with 7% of those in the wider population.

While less than 1% of Black Caribbeans are Muslims generally, in jail the figure is almost 19%.

These data are from before 11 September 2001 and suggest, therefore, the rise in Islamic extremism in the last nine years is not an explanation for the rise in prison conversions.

What the inspectorate also reminds us is that 11% of prisoners are Muslims - a very high proportion, since the religion represents only 3% of the population in England and Wales.

Given that close to a third of those are converts and that the Muslim community has the youngest age profile of any religious group in Britain, the figure is not as surprising as first appears.

Dr Basia Spalek, an academic at the University of Birmingham, has argued that the high levels of social and economic deprivation of the Muslim population is "linked to the kinds of offences that are processed by the criminal justice system".

It is certainly true that Muslims are more likely to be unemployed or economically inactive than those in other religious groups.

If the impression left by some coverage of today's report is that Muslim convicts have a "cushier time" in jail, the experience of the wider community is the opposite.

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