Nearer, My God, to Thee: Religion in Executed Persons' Last Statements

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Abstract

This study aims to answer three questions: does religiosity increase with the amount of time spent on death row as indicated by religion in the person’s last statement; what themes occur in the religious last statements; and what can we learn about religiosity based on the different mechanisms employed by the religious and nonreligious statements? Using available data from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, I perform a content analysis on all 409 last statements of persons executed between 1982 and 2014. Using interviews with death row chaplains and the theory of theodicy, I conclude that religiosity does not increase with the amount of time spent on death row, but serves as one of two important mechanisms to make meaning out of time on death row and to transcend their impending death.
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Early on the morning of May 9, 2002, Reginald Reeves processed into a quiet room and situated himself in the proper place. With the attention of a small congregation, he delivered his message, “I pray that we all may learn to love and forgive so that we can have peace in the world. It is with love and forgiveness and living to learn to love and loving to live that we can learn the power of forgiveness and learn to live as brothers and sisters on this earth...if we don’t forgive, sooner or later we will all self-destruct. You need to open up your heart and let God in...We should forgive and love...God dwells within us and we are all one big family of humanity; we must all learn to love and live together.” At first glance, these profound words appear to be an excerpt of a preacher’s Sunday morning sermon. However, these words were spoken by a person who is often labeled a monster, a person representative of the lowest of the low in our country, a person who a majority of Americans still believe deserves to die: a death row inmate (Pew Research Center).

Despite the shrinking majority, 55% of adults in the United States still believe that a person convicted of murder should receive the death penalty (Pew Research Center). According to a Pew Research Center survey, this number has declined from the 78% in favor of capital punishment in 1996 and the 62% in favor in 2011. When stratified by race and religion, the survey indicates that white evangelical Protestants most commonly support the death penalty (67%), with 63% of white Americans in support of the death penalty overall. For black adults, the numbers are nearly opposite with 58% of black Protestants in opposition and 55% of black Americans overall. For both whites and blacks, support for the death penalty has declined over the past two decades (Pew Research Center). The dramatic differences in the racial composition of death penalty supporters are not surprising given the racial makeup of America’s death row and our incarceration
system as a whole. As of February 2014, 41.75% of death row inmates are black, 43% are white, 12.69% are Latino, and 2.54% identify as other (Death Penalty Information Center). Since 1976, 35% of those executed were black, 56% were white, 8% were Latino, and 2% identify as other. However, over 75% of the murder victims resulting in an execution were white (“Facts About the Death Penalty”). Our system of mass incarceration incarcerates black men in dramatic disproportions, with 3% of all black male residents incarcerated as of December 31, 2013, and only 0.5% of white male residents (Bureau of Justice Statistics). Michelle Alexander labels mass incarceration as the “New Jim Crow” (Alexander). Much research has been done on the political, public opinion, and religious discourses surrounding the death penalty debate, but little attention has been given to death row inmates themselves.

My research works to understand the experiences and values of death row inmates in Texas through the religiosity of their own last statements; in turn, their religious last statements give a clearer picture of religion as a mechanism for transcending the death penalty and making meaning out of death row. Before exploring religiosity within executed persons’ last statements, it is important to give an overview of the death penalty in both the United States and Texas and to describe life on death row. I will then consider the existing literature and theodicy, the theoretical framework that informed my research as discussed by Weber, Berger, and Geertz. After describing the data and methods used, I will discuss the answers to three questions: does religiosity increase with the amount of time spent on death row as indicated by religion in the person’s last statement; what themes occur in the religious last statements; and what can we learn about religiosity based on the different mechanisms employed by the religious and nonreligious statements? I conclude with a
discussion of my results compared to the predictions of theodicy, asserting that religion is used to make meaning out of time on death row and serves as one of two mechanisms to distance oneself from the death penalty.

THE DEATH PENALTY IN THE UNITED STATES

Despite a report by the National Research Council stating that the death penalty does not lower homicide rates, 32 states still use capital punishment as of March 2015 ("Facts About the Death Penalty"). In Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington, and Wyoming, capital punishment remains legal ("Facts About the Death Penalty"). The remaining 18 states have abolished the death penalty.

The death penalty in America began in the 1600s as the original colonies were heavily influenced by the European settlers and their practice of capital punishment (Bedau). The death penalty was public and used for an array of crimes from rape to horse stealing (Masci and Merriam). Despite abolitionist efforts by Quakers and other religious or secular groups, Michigan, the first state to abolish the death penalty, did not outlaw capital punishment until 1847 (Part 1: History of the Death Penalty). With increased reform efforts in the early 1900s, nine other states abolished the death penalty or strictly limited it between 1907 and 1917 (Part 1: History of the Death Penalty). At this time, electrocution was the method of execution (Masci and Merriam). However, these abolitions did not last as class conflicts rose with the start of World War 1 (Part 1: History of the Death Penalty). The use of the death penalty increased between 1920 and 1940, with an average of 1,670 deaths in the
1930s (Bohm; Schabas). After the 1940s, the number of executions decreased dramatically, with only 191 executions nationwide in the 1960s (Bohm).

Though there were previous Supreme Court cases involving the death penalty, *Furman v. Georgia* placed a moratorium on the death penalty between 1972 and 1976 (Bohm; Bedau). However, this moratorium was overturned in 1976 at the culmination of *Gregg v. Georgia* (Bedau). In the 1970s and 1980s restrictions were placed on the death penalty with *Coker v. Georgia, Godfrey v. Georgia, Enmund v. Florida, and Ford v. Wainwright* (Bohm). The death penalty was now unconstitutional for rape of an adult if the victim lived, ordinary murder\(^1\), a minor involved in a felony not resulting in death, and persons labeled mentally insane (Bedau). In 2002, *Atkins v. Virginia* outlawed execution for people with mental retardation; *Roper v. Simmons*, in 2005, labeled the death penalty cruel and unusual punishment for minors who committed a crime (“The Death Penalty for Juveniles”). Finally, *Kennedy v. Louisiana* ruled that the death penalty could not be imposed for crimes where no death occurred in 2008 (Part 1: History of the Death Penalty).

The number of executions per year increased steadily between the 1976 re-enactment and the year 1998. Since 1998, in which 98 people were put to death, the death penalty has slowly declined with only 35 executions in 2014 (“Facts About the Death Penalty”). Despite the decrease in the number of executions, inmates are spending more time on death row than ever before (Snell). In 1984, the average death row inmate spent 74 months, or 6

\(^{1}\) A murder in which the primary aggravating factor is not “outrageously or wantonly vile” (Bedau)
years, on death row before their execution. However, in 2012, the average death row inmate spent almost 16 years waiting for execution, a 257% increase from 1984 (Snell).

THE DEATH PENALTY IN TEXAS

For my research, I have chosen to focus on the state with the largest number of executions and the most available data from these executions: Texas. Widely known for its use of the death penalty, Texas has executed a total of 1,273 people, 755 before 1972 and 518 between the re-enactment and 2015 (State by State Database). Between 1928 and 1965, death row was located in the East Building of the Huntsville Unit (Texas Department of Criminal Justice). During this time, the electric chair was used to carry out executions. Following the Furman v. Georgia decision, Texas re-enacted the death penalty on December 31, 1976 (State by State Database). The first execution after the re-enactment, and the first execution by lethal injection in the United States, was Charlie Brooks on December 7, 1982 (State by State Database). Texas’s death row for men was housed at the Ellis Unit in Huntsville, Texas, from 1965 until 1999. The Ellis Unit was labeled not suitable after an inmate escaped, and death row moved to the Polunsky Unit, formerly named the Terrell Unit, in Livingston, Texas, in 1999 (R. Lopez, personal communication, January 2015). The women on death row are held at the Mountain View Unit in Gatesville, Texas (Perkinson). However, death row is not where the executions take place; all lethal injections are administered in the northeast corner of the Walls Unit in Huntsville, Texas.

As of March 2015, Texas has 274 people housed on death row. Blacks are 41.6% of the death row population, 28.6% are white, 28.3% are Hispanic, and 1.5% identify as another race (Texas Department of Criminal Justice). Similar to the national trend, Texas’s death row inmates spend more years awaiting the death penalty than ever before. Figure 1 below
displays this increase, with inmates spending an average of 10.74 years on death row before their execution.² David Lee Powell, executed on June 15, 2010, spent 31 years on death row (Texas Department of Criminal Justice).

Figure 1

![Graph showing average number of years on death row](image)

A NOTE ON GENERALIZABILITY

The data used for this study consist only of last statements from Texas’s death row inmates. Though Texas has a specific political and religious climate, it is the only state with a large enough collection of published statements for systematic analysis. Despite Texas’s political and religious environment, there is little variation among death row conditions.

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² The drastic increase in the number of years inmates served on Texas’s death row between 1991 and 1993 can be attributed to an increase in the usage of the death penalty in the wake of the re-enactment.
from state to state. Additionally, the demographics of those on death row—primarily minority populations who complete little formal education—are consistent throughout America’s death rows. The similar conditions and demographics of inmates on death row increase the generalizability of my results, despite the specific location, as Texas’s death row inmates are generally similar to those of other states.

**LIFE ON DEATH ROW**

To further explore possible explanations for religion in executed persons’ last statements, the following highlights life on death row. Unlike prison, death row does not have any rehabilitation services or programs because it serves only as a holding place for inmates until their execution (Magee). Most inmates spend close to twenty-three hours every day inside their two-paces-wide and three-paces-deep cell (Von Drehle). The cell involves three concrete walls, a concrete ceiling, a concrete floor, and a steel sink and toilet (Von Drehle). An inmate’s cell on death row has been described as a “concrete tomb” (Von Drehle).

Based on his time spent with inmates on Florida’s death row, Von Drehle describes the most difficult task each prisoner faces—“filling the hours until he can fall asleep again,” as sleep is the best way to pass time (Von Drehle). To help one better understand life on death row, three inmates outline a typical day in Texas’s Ellis Unit:

**4:00am** – The lights come on.

**5:30am** – The radio, which primarily plays the news, is turned on.

**6:00am-6:30am** – The breakfast tray is slid into the cell; meals are virtually the same everyday.

**7:30am-8:30am** – The inmates take showers on a rotating schedule.
10:30am-11am – The lunch cart arrives and the lunch tray is slid into the cell.

11:00am – The televisions are turned on. Each inmate has a view of the television, but no control over the channel. The same series of soap operas and news stations play every day. Televisions were allowed in the Ellis Unit but are not permitted in the Polunsky Unit.

8:30am-3:00pm – Three of the four groups are allowed 1.5 hours of recreation. Similar to showers, recreation times operate on a rotating schedule. Each of the four groups is allowed recreation three times a week for a total of 4.5 hours each week. This recreation is spent inside a day room, consisting of 4 tables, dominoes, and a chess set. The only time inmates are allowed outdoors is the occasional recreation time held in an enclosed yard.

3:30pm-4pm – The dinner tray arrives.

7:30pm – Mail is delivered to the inmates’ cells.

11pm – The lights, radio, and televisions are turned off.

The schedule on the Polunsky Unit is similar to that of the Ellis Unit, except that televisions are no longer allowed (Jackson and Christian). In the Ellis Unit, inmates could watch the public televisions through the bars on the cell, but the Polunsky cells involve solid doors with small windows, so inmates would not be able to see public televisions even if made available (Jackson and Christian). The Polunsky Unit operates more strictly than the Ellis Unit previously did. Largely, the difference between the units is a result of the stricter conditions implemented in the Polunsky Unit after an inmate escaped from the Ellis
Unit. One inmate who has lived in both units describes the Polunsky Unit: “the unit’s mentality is, ‘we keep you kenneled until your date’” (Perkinson).

As there are several hours a day left unscheduled, other common pastimes include push-ups or sit-ups inside the cell, aimlessly talking, writing letters, or reading, for those who are literate (Von Drehle). Though there are several restrictions, inmates can request certain books in the mail (Von Drehle). While this schedule may not seem difficult, it is important to remember that this is the daily routine of a death row inmate for 365 days every year for several years at a time. The inmates on death row live in a “world of terrible pendency. They find little things that at once consume the time and hold time at a distance” (Jackson and Christian).

Death row is very different from prison. As prisoners move closer to freedom, death row inmates move closer to death (Jackson and Christian). It is also unlike a cancer ward. While patients with a chronic illness can rest in the “hatred of the random, the gratuitous, the inexplicable, the death sentence comes with all the considered logic the state can accumulate” (Jackson and Christian). Strangely, death row is like a combination between prison and a cancer ward as inmates are held in a controlled, closely monitored environment as they approach death.

Finally, the isolation experienced by death row inmates is unmatched. Anthony Graves, who spent 18 years on Texas’s death row before his exoneration in 2010, describes the isolation:

“I had no television, no telephone, and most importantly, I had no physical contact with another human being for at least 10 of the 18 years I was incarcerated...Today I have a hard time being around a group of people for
long periods of time without feeling too crowded. No one can begin to imagine the psychological effects isolation has on another human being” (Reassessing Solitary Confinement, 2012).

The feelings of isolation are compounded by the total dependency inmates experience. Inmates on death row are dependent on the prison for everything from food to their ration of toilet paper (Radelet). Additionally, it is common for inmates to request that their families do not visit because of shame and guilt, which furthers the feeling of isolation (Arriens). However, when families do visit, they are only allowed to interact through a non-contact visiting booth (Perkinson).

In order to better understand life on death row, particularly religious life, I conducted semi-structured interviews with three death row chaplains from Texas. The chaplains each had different perspectives to share. Chaplain Vitela served for 7 years in the Ellis Unit (1990-1997), Chaplain Lopez for 14 years in the Polunsky Unit (2000-present), and Reverend Pickett for 16 years at the Walls Unit (1982-1998), or the death house. According to the chaplains, there is little religious life available to the inmates outside of individual meetings with the chaplains or spiritual advisers. In the Ellis Unit there were three death row chaplains, but due to budget cuts in 2003, the Polunsky Unit has only two permanent chaplains (R. Lopez, personal communication, January 2015). However, there are about 200 volunteer chaplains that visit the unit regularly. Additionally, inmates can write to religious leaders to request a visit with them at the unit. At the Ellis Unit, inmates could meet with visiting chaplains in the visitation room and communicate through a barricade. At Polunsky, inmates can only communicate with visiting chaplains while talking through a phone on opposite sides of a glass wall (Perkinson).
For a brief period of time at the Ellis Unit, 1990 to 1999, there was a weekly religious service held (R. Lopez, personal communication, January 2015). This service involved music, prayer, scripture reading, a sermon, and communion. The service, held in the day room, was one of the few times during the week that inmates were allowed to congregate. However, when death row moved to the Polunsky Unit, these services were no longer permitted.

Chaplain Vitela, who served for 14 years on Texas’s death row, describes the religious life in the Polunsky Unit. There are no religious activities held, but chaplains and spiritual advisors are available to meet with inmates everyday (J. Vitela, personal communication, January 2015). Contact with the chaplains and spiritual advisors is largely the only human contact inmates are allowed. The chaplains and spiritual advisors are available to talk with inmates about any subject, and the conversation only becomes religious if the inmate expresses interest in a religious conversation (R. Lopez, personal communication, January 2015). There are also religious books available to the inmates upon request. To obtain a book or a religious text, the inmates can write to bookstores to place their orders. Vitela shares that about half of the people on death row entered with a religious identity. He says that every inmate experiences personal and religious changes while on death row because of the length of time they spend in isolation. Lopez also reports that inmates experience personal growth and change while on death row, though many of them enter with a pre-existing, familial religious identity (R. Lopez, personal communication, January 2015).

My interest in religion and religiosity in last statements comes largely from the conditions on death row and an impending death. Because inmates are faced with the horror of death row conditions as well as their approaching death date, there is a need to
create discourse to respond, both cognitively and emotionally, to these horrors. According to Foucault, when a problem arises—in this case the death penalty—people create discourses and symbols to respond to the problem or to gain control over the problem (Foucault). This research examines the religious discourses created by death row inmates—whether it increases with time spent on death row, its contours, and how it compares to nonreligious discourses—in order to respond to the death penalty and death row.

A NOTE ON PERSONAL BIAS

As a researcher, it is important for me to note my personal bias—an unequivocal opposition to the death penalty. I do not believe the death penalty is a tool for justice, but instead, a mechanism to continue the systematic killing of a minority population. As Justice William Brennan states, “It is tempting to pretend the minorities on death row share a fate in no way connected to our own...[however] the way in which we choose those who will die reveals the depth of moral commitment among the living” (Ingle). While my feelings against the death penalty are strong, I will outline clear, objective research methods that work to eliminate biases in my analysis of religiosity among the executed persons’ last statements.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Little research has been conducted on the statements of executed persons. In spite of the adamant, opposing political viewpoints on the death penalty, there is limited research on the last words of the people most deeply affected. Because there is little research on the last words of executed offenders and subsequent themes, there is also a narrow understanding of possible influences on the persons’ last statement. The following highlights the existing literature on executed persons’ last statements and focuses on possible factors that contribute to the high level of religiosity within these statements. Additionally, using the theory of theodicy in the sociology of religion, I outline a theory that describes religion as a mechanism to make meaning out of suffering.

LAST WORDS OF EXECUTED PERSONS

Primarily, the existing literature on last statements is journalistic. These accounts include a few statements of executed persons but provide little systematic analysis (Vollum). The literature is based on interviews with inmates and prison employees or letters written by the condemned (Dicks; Arriens). Other anecdotal accounts are written from people like prison chaplains who have interacted with death row inmates or witnessed executions (Pickett; Robertson). Robert Elder provides 110 statements from executed persons with brief biographical data, but he provides no analysis of these words (Elder). Few death row inmates have also written autobiographical accounts of their experiences (Rossi). While the accounts are important in sharing the stories of inmates and lending a voice to the condemned, they provide little to no analysis or comparison.

There are three known, published analyses of last statements. All three use available data from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. One study examined 237 last
statements from January 1997 to April 2005 and identified six themes: “afterlife belief, silence, claims of innocence, activism, love/appreciation, and forgiveness” (Heflick). The study involves a discussion of these themes and provides several examples, but it does not include how often these themes appear or provide an explanation for why these themes are the most prevalent. The second study analyzed 285 last statements from Texas to develop a typology with four identity types: philosopher, externalizer, defiant, and contrite (Slone). The four categories were also examined with respect to characteristics of the offender, but, with no significance testing, there are no firm conclusions (Vollum). Both studies provide limited, analytical understanding of the statements but include helpful descriptions of primary themes.

Finally, Vollum provides the most comprehensive analysis of last statements to date. Vollum analyzes both the last words of the executed persons and the statements made by the victims of the crime or their families. Similar to Heflick and Slone, Vollum uses 321 last statements from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, beginning December 1982 and ending in March 2004. Through coding and statistical tests, Vollum finds that the most common themes in the last statements of executed offenders are related to well wishes, religion, contrition, gratitude, and personal reconciliation. Within religion, Vollum notes the primary subsets as discussion of the afterlife, a proclamation of faith, preaching, prayer for others, thankfulness towards God, an unspecified prayer, prayer for self, and a plea for God’s forgiveness. In considering change over time, each of the five common themes is examined over four broad ranges of time, 1982-1989, 19990-1995, 1996-2000, and 2001-2004. Religiosity in the last words increased in “the late 1980s and early 1990s but leveled
off after that.” While there are several demographics considered in the statistical analyses, Vollum does not research change in religiosity based on the number of years spent on death row. Though Vollum provides a statistical analysis of multiple themes, there is little explanation for why religious themes occur or the possible reasons that religion is employed. Additionally, in identifying overarching themes for the religion in executed persons’ last statements, researchers generate new categories with little explanation of existing theoretical frameworks. Finally, my analysis examines a larger collection of last statements than previous studies by including every publicly available statement between 1982 and 2014 for a total of 409 statements.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The sociological theory of theodicy provides a context for possible motivations behind the religiosity in executed persons’ last words. The term theodicy, or using religion to make meaning out of death, pain, and suffering, provides a helpful framework (Weber; Berger; Geertz). Theodicy, coined by Gottfried Leibniz, first emerged in the field of sociology through Weber’s *Sociology of Religion* as Weber outlined the problem with the discontinuity of a good God and a world with evil, pain, and suffering (Kalberg; Beckford and Walliss; Turner). According to Weber, religion provides “paths of practical action in the face of the vast array of social inequalities” and seeks to explain “an irrational world of undeserved suffering” (Beckford and Walliss; Swedberg). The theory of theodicy is central to Weber’s understanding of religion, specifically the role that religion plays in the development of modern societies (Beckford and Walliss).

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3 Vollum does not offer an explanation for the statistically insignificant increase in religiosity, but it should be noted that the increase in religiosity coincides with the implementation of a worship service on death row (R. Lopez, personal communication, January 2015).
Weber outlines three typologies within theodicy that seek to explain the ways people assign religious meaning to suffering and pain (Weber). The first typology, karma, attributes present suffering to past conduct and labels individuals as responsible for their own destinies (Farris; Turner). Next, dualism describes a battle between good and evil, with good triumphing in the end. In dualism, pain is often seen as a necessary period of religious growth (Farris; Turner). Finally, the concept of predestination depicts God as an omnipotent, inscrutable, eternal judge who grants eternity to those who have worked to earn it (Farris; Turner). Primarily, Weber’s theodicy is concerned with the problem of evil, but he also believes theodicy is a “dimension of the politics of exclusion” as he incorporates theology into his understanding of power relations (Turner).

The understanding of theodicy within the sociology of religion expanded under Berger and Geertz. In The Social Reality of Religion, Berger explains the theory of theodicy as a way to establish “an all-embracing sacred order, that is, of a sacred cosmos that will be capable of maintaining itself in the ever present face of chaos” (Berger). Contrary to Weber, pain and chaos present problems because they disrupt the societal order (Beckford and Walliss). Religion, fundamentally, functions as a way to explain death or suffering (Berger; Geertz). Theodicy affirms a sacred order in the face of pain and evil, or the human desire to restore meaning when encountering suffering or chaos (Berger; Geertz). While religion is constantly working to assign meaning, theodicy describes the ability of religion to assign meaning during chaos and pain (Berger; Geertz). Theodicy works to “account for, and even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradox in human experience” (Geertz). Because of our human desire to meaningfully interpret our existence, theodicy strengthens the network of symbols that allow us to do this (Geertz). While there are small differences,
Weber, Berger, and Geertz each claim that religion serves as a mechanism to make meaning out of pain and suffering. The idea of theodicy informed my research questions and my analysis of the executed persons’ last statements. During the unique instance of execution, theodicy attempts to explain the religiosity within the executed persons’ last statements.
DATA AND METHODS

HYPOTHESIS

Based on previous studies of the last words of executed persons and the theoretical framework outlined, I anticipate religious language and themes to appear throughout the last statements. As chaplains and spiritual advisors affect the religious life of inmates on death row, I hypothesize a relationship between the number of years a person spends on death row and the level of religiosity of their statement. A null hypothesis predicts no association between number of years on death row and the level of religiosity of the person’s last statement; my alternative hypothesis anticipates that increased time on death row will increase the level of religiosity of the person’s last statement.

Given the theory of theodicy, I predict that inmates will work to assign meaning to their time and experiences on death row through religion. Similarly, in my comparison between the religious and nonreligious statements, I anticipate the religious statements to more commonly assign meaning to the person’s approaching death. I will test the aforementioned hypotheses through a statistical and content-based analysis of last statements from executed persons on Texas’s death row.

DATA

To study the last statements of executed persons, I used available data from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). These statements were collected in the Walls Unit of Huntsville, Texas between December 7, 1982 (Charlie Brooks Jr.) and October 28, 2014 (Miguel Paredes). I decided to use data from Texas because Texas has executed the largest number of inmates and because the last statements, as well as demographic information, are easily accessible through the Texas Department of Criminal Justice’s (TDCJ) website.
For each executed person, the Death Row Information website lists their name, TDCJ number, age, race, gender, date of execution, county, date of birth, date received, age when received, date of the offense, age at time of the offense, education level, hair color, height, weight, eye color, native county, native state, prior occupation, prior prison record, summary of incident, the co-defendants, and the race and gender of the victim(s). The table below indicates the racial composition, age, sex, education level, prior criminal record, and prior occupation of the 518 people executed.

**Table 1**

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<th>Frequency</th>
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<th>No</th>
<th>224</th>
<th>43.24%</th>
<th>Not Available</th>
<th>17</th>
<th>3.28%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prior Occupation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laborer</td>
<td></td>
<td>153</td>
<td>29.54%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5.02%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanic</td>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4.05%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrician</td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3.47%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.09%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.51%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welder</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.32%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truck Driver</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.32%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auto Repair</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.12%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roofer</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.74%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painter</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.54%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Available</td>
<td></td>
<td>45</td>
<td>8.69%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td>174</td>
<td>33.59%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 518 people executed between 1982 and 2014, 109 (21.04%) people declined to give a last statement, leaving 409 (78.98%) statements for analysis. Approximately 392 people gave only spoken statements, 2 provided only written statements, and 16 had both written and spoken last statements. During an interview with death house chaplain Reverend Carroll Pickett, he explained the process of recording the last statements. The only people allowed inside the death chamber are the warden, the death house chaplain, and the inmate. After the inmate is on the gurney, the warden asks if the person has any last words. Through a microphone, the person speaks their final words, which are recorded in writing by an assistant warden in the hallway. The assistant warden then calls the secretary in the administration office to report the last words. The secretary relays the statement to death row public relations who will release the statement to the press.

Because a statement is channeled through four people before it is published, the statement
listed on the website may not be the exact last words spoken by the executed person. Inmates who decide to give a written statement hand the written statement to the death house chaplain, who distributes the statement to the assistant warden and any family members requested by the inmate. The last statements displayed on the TDCJ’s website are the same statements released to the media.

LITERARY FORM

While my research primarily focuses on the religious themes within the last words, the last statements as a whole provide an interesting set of data. While the content of each statement differs drastically, there is limited variation in the literary form of the last statements. The statements often read like a prayer in solitude, a provocative charge at a rally challenging the audience to take on a cause, an acceptance speech at the Academy Awards expressing gratitude to family and friends, or an intimate letter to a loved one. Tones and moods within the statements range from melancholy to anger, from peace and happiness to passivity. Though the forms are similar, the content within the statements varies significantly.

METHODS

To test my hypotheses, I used statistical tests and content analysis. As I predicted a positive relationship between the number of years spent on death row and the level of religiosity, I first assigned a level of religiosity to each statement. Initially, as I read through the entire set of statements to gain a better understanding of their religiosity, four levels of religiosity emerged. The four categories are: not religious, a mention of religion, religion as a primary theme, and almost entirely or entirely religious. I then assigned each category a numerical value with not religious as zero, a mention of religion as one, religion as a
primary theme as two, and almost entirely or entirely religious as three. *Table 2* displays an example of each level of religiosity.

*Table 2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Religiosity</th>
<th>Last Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>I would like to thank all of you for coming. I am sorry for all of the pain I have caused both families – my family and yours. I would like for you to know that I am sorry for all the pain I caused for all these years. I have had time to understand the pain I have caused you. I am ready, Warden. <em>(Kenneth Harris; June 3, 1997)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>What is about to transpire in a few moments is wrong! However, we as human beings do make mistakes and errors. This execution is one of those wrongs yet doesn’t mean our whole system of justice is wrong. Therefore, I would forgive all who have taken part in any way in my death. Also, to anyone I have offended in any way during my 39 years, I pray and ask your forgiveness, just as I forgive anyone who offended me in any way. And I pray and ask God’s forgiveness for all of us respectively as human beings. To my loved ones, I extend my undying love. To those close to me, know in your hearts I love you one and all. God bless you all and may God’s best blessings be always yours. Ronald C. O’Bryan P.S. During my time here, I have been treated well by all T.D.C. personnel. <em>(Ronald O’Bryan; March 31, 1984)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>First of all, I want to say God bless everyone here today. For many years I have done things my way, which caused a lot of pain to me, my family and many others. Today I have come to realize that for peace and happiness, one has to do things God’s way. I want to thank my family for their support. I love you. I am taking you with me. You all stay strong. I love you. I also want to say thanks to the Chaplains who I have met through the years and who have brought me a long way. And I cherish you as my family and at this time...oh, Ken, my little son, I am coming to see you. Oh Lord, into your hands I commit my spirit. Thy will be done. <em>(Allen Janrecka; July 24, 2003)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Maggie, I am sorry. I always wanted to tell you but I just didn’t know how. I have been praying for y’all. I hope that y’all find the peace that y’all have been wanting. Lord, thank you for all my family, all my friends, and all my brothers on the row. Thank you for my spiritual family. Lord, be merciful with those who are actively involved with the taking of my life, forgive them</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For each of the 409 last statements, the name of the person, the number of years they served on death row, and the level of religiosity of their statement was recorded in an Excel file. I used STATA, a statistical software package, to test my hypothesis.

To examine a possible relationship between the number of years on death row and the level of religiosity of the statement, I used a bivariate regression model. Additionally, I measured a possible change in religiosity over time by analyzing the bivariate relationship between the level of religiosity of the statement and the year the statement was recorded or the year of the execution. Finally, using a multivariate regression, I examined the relationship between the level of religiosity of the statement and the influence of number of years on death row compounded with the year of the execution.

Next, I employed content analysis to thematically explore and compare religiosity in the statements of the executed persons. Vollum defines content analysis as “a research methodology that utilizes a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text. These inferences are about the sender of the messages, the message itself, or the audience of the message. The rules of this inferential process vary with the theoretical and substantive interests of the investigator” (Vollum). Primarily, content analysis is used to transform qualitative data into meaningful and discrete categories in order to better interpret the data or systematically compare the units of analysis. These units of analysis can be word, word sense, sentence, theme, paragraph, and whole text (Berg). Content analysis provides a
method to quantify verbal or written messages to determine the presence of themes or certain categories within a data set (Berg).

Within content analysis, there are two primary forms (Berg). The first form, manifest content analysis, is defined as “those elements that are physically present and countable” (Berg). This method is often used to count word or phrase frequency in order to identify categories or concepts. The second form, latent analysis, involves a more “interpretive reading of the symbolism underlying the physical data” (Berg). Latent content analysis can involve quantitative coding, but is more likely to involve a general analysis of themes and concepts. Berg summarizes the two methods stating, “manifest content is comparable to the surface structure present in the message, and latent content is the deep structural meaning conveyed by the message” (Berg).

In the analysis of the last statements, I used a blend of manifest and latent content analysis strategies. As my study primarily involves an exploration of the executed person’s last statements for religious themes, I more closely followed a latent content analysis approach. To involve manifest analysis, I measured the frequency with which each theme occurred, but I was less concerned with specific word choice.

After an initial read-through of the statements, I divided the statements into two categories: religious statements and nonreligious statements. The religious category included every statement that referenced God or a belief in an afterlife. The nonreligious last statements did not indicate a belief in God or in an afterlife. To thematically explore the religious statements, I developed a coding schema in order to perform content analysis. The codes were determined based on the religious themes I encountered while reading the last statements. Each last statement served as the unit of analysis. After developing the
schema, I closely read the last statements and kept a record of the following themes within each statement. The codes and themes are listed in Table 3.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>RH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>GFS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>GFO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>GFTDCJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>GC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>IS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>PR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>RT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>PHJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>CDR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>PT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>TPG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>GBY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>GJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>DMC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>NF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>AG</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I read and coded the entire set of religious statements twice, marking the above concepts I found in each statement. This method of analysis allowed me to identify themes and concepts within the religious statements.

In order to compare and contrast the religious and nonreligious statements, I developed a different set of codes, listed in Table 4. Using content analysis, I coded for the concepts in both the religious and nonreligious statements:

Table 4
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Concept</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>PFM  Please forgive me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>CI   Claim innocence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>RG   Reference guilt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>DPW  Death penalty is wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>CDR  Reference personal change on death row</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the following section, I will discuss the results of both the statistical and content-based analysis.
RESULTS

This study aims to answer three questions: does religiosity within the last statements increase with the amount of time spent on death row; what themes occur in the religious last statements; and what can we learn about religiosity based on the different mechanisms employed by the religious and nonreligious statements? First, I discuss the relationship between religiosity and the number of years spent on death row. This section explains the findings from statistical bivariate and multivariate regressions. Next, I use reoccurring religious themes to thematically explore the last statements. Finally, I contrast the religious and nonreligious statements to explore the differences in peoples’ approaches at the end of life.

Of the 409 last statements from executed persons, I identified 246 statements (60.15%) as religious and 163 statements (39.85%) as nonreligious. Statements labeled as religious reference the person’s belief in God, heaven, or an afterlife. Two religions, Islam and Christianity, are represented in the statements. Approximately 96.82% of the religious statements refer to the Christian faith, while 3.18% of the religious statements indicate that the inmate is Muslim. When stratified by education level, there are no significant patterns within the religious or nonreligious last statements. Both the religious and nonreligious last statements were written by individuals who completed an average of 10 years in school.

Below, Table 5 describes the religious and nonreligious statements when stratified by race.
There are no major differences between blacks and whites in the indications of religiosity within last statements. Both whites and blacks show a higher percentage of nonreligious statements. However, Hispanic inmates show a higher frequency and percentage of religious last statements. This result is not surprising given the large population of Hispanics in Texas who identify with the Catholic faith (Gray).

**RELIGIOSITY AND TIME ON DEATH ROW**

The result from the bivariate regression to measure a relationship between the level of religiosity and the number of years on death row is statistically insignificant, with a p-value of 0.47. Additionally, the multivariate regression measuring a relationship between the level of religiosity and the number of years on death row controlling for the year is also statistically insignificant, with a p-value of 0.74. Finally, when comparing the difference in the number of years on death row between the religious and nonreligious statements, disregarding different levels of religiosity, the difference is insignificant. For both religious and nonreligious statements, the average number of years spent on death row is between 10 and 11.

Therefore, I fail to reject the null hypothesis, and my hypothesis is not supported. Using last words as a measure of religiosity, religiosity does not increase with the number of years spent on death row. The results from the statistical tests suggest that the influences
of death row, such as the effects of isolation and meetings with chaplains, are not the leading causes of religiosity among last statements of executed persons, as religiosity does not increase with the number of years spent on death row. Instead, my discussion of the present religious themes and the comparison between religious and nonreligious last statements provide alternate explanations for religion within the last statements.

**RELIGIOUS THEMES**

As the amount of time on death row does not have a relationship with the level of religiosity of the last statement, religious themes and a content comparison between religious and nonreligious last statements allow for a better understanding of religion as a mechanism within last statements. Analyzing the religious statements thematically allowed me to categorize the themes into larger groups to explore the utility of religion among executed persons. *Table 6* displays my results after coding for the themes previously mentioned in *Table 3*.

**Table 6**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reference to heaven and/or afterlife</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>51.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking for God’s forgiveness for self</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>18.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gratitude towards chaplains and/or spiritual advisors</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>16.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanks or praise to God</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>15.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preaching</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>14.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference change or conversion on death row</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>13.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mention of peace, happiness, or joy</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10.98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to a religious text or scripture</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God bless you or God bless y’all</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privileging themselves on the basis of religion</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God is the judge or God’s law is superior</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not mourn my death; celebrate</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.07%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receive my spirit</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.07%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking for God’s forgiveness for others</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.66%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After exploring the similarities and differences across the above themes, four larger categories among the religious statements emerged: reframing death through religion, forgiveness, religion as a mechanism for acceptance, and positively reclaiming a person’s years on death row through religion.

**REFRAMING DEATH**

In my content analysis, I find that religion serves as a mechanism to reframe death. Heaven or the afterlife is the most common theme among the religious last statements. Through references to heaven, victims on death row express hope as they approach the end of life. Jason Massey says, “when I leave this body, I am going home to be with the Lord forever...tonight I dance on the streets of gold.” Similarly, in Clifford Boggess’s last statement, he shares, “Remember, that today I'll be with Jesus in paradise.” Over half of the last statements include a reference to heaven, with the most repeated refrains being “I am going to a better place,” “take me home,” and “I’ll see you on the other side.” Heaven not only provides hope for life after death in executed persons’ personal lives, but it also allows for the opportunity to see their families and friends in the future. As the inmates have largely been separated from their loved ones while on death row, the repeated refrain “see you on the other side” brings comfort at the end of life. Talking to his family, Irineo Montoya says, “I will wait for you in Heaven. I will be waiting for you. I love my parents.
am at peace with God.” Approaching death through the lens of heaven provides comfort in executed persons’ individual lives and through the possibility of reuniting with their families.

More obvious indications of optimism at the end of life are the victims’ references to peace, happiness, joy, or a lack of fear. Jermarr Arnold shares his outlook at the end of his life: “As for me, I am happy, that is why you see me smiling, I am glad I am leaving this world. I am going to a better place.” Additionally, Charlie Brooks expresses, “at this very moment, I have absolutely no fear of what may happen to this body...unto Allah do we belong, verily unto him we do return.” Despite facing impending executions, 13.41% of the religious statements express happiness, peace, joy, or a lack of fear in their last words. Similarly, 4.07% of people tell others, as Kevin Varga did, “I do not want anyone to mourn my death, celebrate my life,” or exclaim, “this is a celebration of life, not death” (Ivan Murphy). The religious statements demonstrate the idea that death calls for rejoicing when the inmates tell others, primarily family members, that their death is for celebration instead of mourning. To reframe death through religion, victims of the death penalty reference heaven for themselves and their families, indicate happiness or peace, and call for celebration as opposed to sadness.

FORGIVENESS

Another common concept within the religious statements is forgiveness. This includes God’s forgiveness for oneself, God’s forgiveness for others, and God’s forgiveness for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. When referring to personal forgiveness, the victims either state an assurance of forgiveness, like Charles Thacker, who comments, “I am sorry for the things I have done. I know God will forgive me,” or they ask for God’s forgiveness:
“God, please forgive me of my sins” (Harold Barnard). Referencing God’s forgiveness on an individual level is the second most common theme. In most of these occurrences, the victims ask God for forgiveness. However, they also ask for the forgiveness of others.

In his last statement, Rex Mays says, “I ask You for forgiveness for the ones that need to be forgiven. Dear Lord, deliver us from evil and give us the comfort and peace and joy that we need.” In these statements, it is unclear who the people are that need forgiveness.

Finally, seven victims ask for forgiveness for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. In his final words, Garry Miller pleads, “Lord, be merciful with those who are actively involved with the taking of my life, forgive them as I am forgiving them.” Two people use the same language that Jesus used when dying the on the cross, saying, “forgive them for they know not what they do” (Stephen Moran; John Amador). In these statements, the reference to Christian scripture positions the victim of the death penalty as Jesus and links the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to the government that killed Jesus. Words that Jesus said on the cross, like “It is finished” and “Into your hands I commit my spirit,” commonly occur.

Receiving forgiveness is important among the religious statements of executed persons as it is referenced in relation to self, others, and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

A MECHANISM FOR ACCEPTANCE

Through preaching to others and referencing God as the ultimate judge, religion serves as a mechanism for acceptance. Several people talk about their inclusion in salvation and challenge others to strive for this same inclusion. Ron Shamburger asks, “Who goes to Heaven? I believe that it is those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ.” In Rex Mays’s last statement, he expresses acceptance by God and distance from death row: “I’m leaving
you behind, when I am going to a better place. Y’all still have to go through this hell on earth.” Similarly, Ronford Styron preaches, “I worry more about you all because I know where I am going. I want to see you there, so get your heart right.” In these statements, victims distance themselves from their current surroundings by referring to their impending acceptance by God in heaven. Religion is used in these instances to privilege the inmates on death row during their final moments.

Executed persons also include rhetoric about God’s law or God as the ultimate judge to explain their acceptance. Jason Massey states, “That’s what counts in the end; where you stand with Almighty God,” while Jamie Elizalde says, “we talk about a reprieve or stay from the Supreme Court, but the real Supreme Court you must face up there and not down here.” In the same way the executed persons preach to those around them, these victims distance themselves from the earthly justice system by including themselves with God. Because inmates on death row are ostracized from society, religion—specifically heaven and God’s law—serves as a mechanism for acceptance.

POSITIVELY RECLAIMING TIME ON DEATH ROW

Within the religious statements, inmates positively reclaim their time on death row by discussing the personal changes they have experienced and by expressing gratitude to prison chaplains and spiritual advisors. Herman Clark Jr. shares his personal growth in saying, “the bad evil man I was when I came to death row 13 years ago is no more – by the power of God; Jesus Christ, God Almighty, Holy Spirit, he has transformed me as a new creature of Christ.” Similarly, Jason Massey remarks, “I know that God has used this to change my life. And it’s all been worth it because of that.” Some people express gratitude to God for their time on death row, like John Cockrum, who states, “Lord Jesus, thank you for
giving me the strength and the time in my life to find Jesus Christ and to be forgiven for all of my sins.” By centering their time on death row around a personal and religious transformation, the prisoners can positively reflect on the years spent in routine and isolation.

Additionally, the important role of prison chaplains or spiritual advisors is apparent in the last statements of executed prisoners. Over 15% of the religious last statements include thanks or gratitude to a death row chaplain. Jeffrey Tucker references three spiritual advisors in his statement, saying, “Irene, you have been like a mother and Jack, you have been like a father...Father Walsh, you have helped me so much to come to knowledge of the Lord. I would never have understood that without you.” Through the gratitude expressed to chaplains and spiritual advisors, the executed prisoners recall positive, influential people they encountered while on death row.

**CONTRASTING RELIGIOUS AND NONRELIGIOUS STATEMENTS**

To understand the differences between religious statements and nonreligious statements, I compared the two groups using the codes outlined in the methods chapter. Below, *Table 7* displays the frequency of each theme, as well as the percentage as it relates to the specified group and the percentage as it relates to the statements as a whole. By comparing and contrasting the differing results, religion, as opposed to claiming innocence, emerges as an instrument to distance oneself from the death penalty.

*Table 7*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic or Theme</th>
<th>Nonreligious Statements</th>
<th>Religious Statements</th>
<th>Comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percentage of Nonreligious Statements</td>
<td>Percentage of Total Statements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TRANSCENDING THE DEATH PENALTY

As displayed in the above table, religious statements are approximately 15% more likely than nonreligious statements to reference the person’s own guilt in committing the crime of which they are accused. Both religious statements and nonreligious statements mention guilt most often in the context of an apology to the victim’s family, likely because the family is often present for the execution. Robert Carter indicates his guilt while addressing the victim’s family—“To the Davis family, I am sorry for all of the pain that I caused your family. It was me and me alone.” Similarly, in a statement that does indicate religious beliefs, John Alba tells the victim’s family, “Wendy’s family, I am sorry for taking something so precious to you and to my kids.” Though both religious and nonreligious statements reference their own guilt in a similar context, religious statements are more likely to reference their guilt in the crime committed.

The religious statements are also approximately 12% more likely to ask for forgiveness from the victim’s family and to reference a change or conversion on death row. John
Moody, who references a personal belief in God, says, "I’d like to apologize and ask forgiveness for any pain and suffering I have inflicted upon all of you." Similar to the pleas for forgiveness in religious statements, the nonreligious statements that ask for forgiveness are primarily speaking to the families of the victims; David Martinez says, “I am asking for forgiveness...I hope one day you can find peace. I am sorry for all of the pain that I have caused you for all those years.” Again, both the religious statements and nonreligious statements ask for forgiveness in a similar context, but the frequency of their pleas differs based on religiosity within the statement.

As discussed previously, thirty-three of the religious statements indicate a positive change or conversion during their time on death row. John Chavez says, “I am a different person now, but that does not change the fact of the bad things I have committed.” While Chavez references his personal change but ultimately highlights his own guilt, the three nonreligious statements that indicate a personal change pair this change with their opposition to the death penalty. Joshua Maxwell expresses his views on the death penalty in saying, “This [the death penalty] is not gonna change anything. This person that did that 10 years ago isn’t the same person you see today.” Similarly, Napolean Beazley states, “the person that committed that act is no longer here – I am...but I’m saddened by what is happening here tonight.” When talking about change or conversion, the religious statements reference guilt or gratitude to God for the changes experienced on death row. On the contrary, the nonreligious statements that indicate change while on death row use this change to fuel their arguments against the death penalty. This discrepancy between the religious and nonreligious statements displays that the religious statements are less
concerned than the nonreligious statements with innocence and opposition to the death penalty.

Arguments against the death penalty and the sentiment that the death penalty is wrong are more common in the nonreligious statements as approximately 15% of the nonreligious statements challenge the practice of the death penalty. The nonreligious statements often refer to the death penalty as murder, as did Robert Drew who stated, “Remember the death penalty is murder.” Additionally, nonreligious statements are more likely to challenge the living to combat the death penalty. In Randy Wools’s last statement, he says, “I want those out there to keep fighting the death penalty.” Among the religious statements, the opposition to the death penalty is often connected to what the inmates believe about God’s opinion on the death penalty. Ricky Green shares that, “I am sorry but killing is not going to solve nothing. I really do not believe that if Jesus were here tonight that he would execute me. Jesus is all about love.” Other statements express that God’s law does not support the death penalty. As Tony Roach says, “I cannot agree with this injustice. The Bible says that you shalt not kill.” Evidenced by the last statements, inmates who do not indicate a religious belief in their last words are more concerned with sharing their opposition to the death penalty than those who indicate a belief in God.

Congruent with the developing pattern, the religious statements are approximately 12% less likely than the nonreligious statements to claim innocence. Of the total last statements, about 9% of nonreligious statements assert innocence while only 6% of the religious statements claim innocence. In his nonreligious statement, Jonathan Green said, “I’m an innocent man. I did not kill anyone. Y’all are killing an innocent man.” In a similar nonreligious statement, Gary Graham says, “I did not kill Bobby Lambert. I’m an innocent
black man that is being murdered. This is a lynching that is happening in America tonight.”

Within the nonreligious last statements, claiming innocence is also commonly paired with an argument against the death penalty.

Among the religious statements that assert innocence, there are two patterns. About one-fourth of the statements reference acceptance in heaven or God’s forgiveness. Jackie Wilson said, “all these people here will find out who did this crime. I am going home to be with God.” A few of the religious statements that claim innocence preach to those who are murdering an innocent man. Roy Pippin states, “You will answer to your Maker when God has found out that you executed an innocent man.” The nonreligious statements declare innocence at a higher rate than the religious statements and use their proclaimed innocence to oppose the death penalty, while the religious statements that assert innocence commonly mention their acceptance by God or refer to God as the judge of those responsible for the execution.

In a 2014 study released by TIME Magazine, David Von Drehle cites evidence that close to 4% or 5% of inmates on death row are innocent of their crimes (Von Drehle). As there are roughly 3,000 inmates currently on death row in the United States, the results indicate that almost 120 inmates are not guilty. Based on the results of this study and the fact that 5.8% of the total statements that indicate religiosity claim innocence, it is possible that many of these people who claim innocence are indeed innocent.

In summary, religion among death row inmates is employed largely in one of two ways: to make meaning out of a person’s time on death row and to transcend the death penalty. While the nonreligious statements claim innocence, the religious last statements
highlight a belief in heaven, reference their acceptance and forgiveness by God, and positively reclaim their years on death row in order to transcend their impending death.
DISCUSSION

Because the number of years spent on death row does not indicate a change in the level of religiosity, the influences of death row chaplains and the effects of isolation do not seem to be the primary causes of religiosity within executed persons’ last statements. While the experience of death row itself and an approaching death could contribute to religiosity among the statements, the elements of death row that inmates increasingly experience over time, such as chaplain visits and extreme isolation, do not contribute to increased religiosity.

To interpret the results from my analysis, it is important to consider Weber, Berger, and Geertz’s theory of theodicy within the sociology of religion. Theodicy predicts that religion will serve as a mechanism to make meaning out of inmates’ time on death row and their approaching death. When comparing my results with this theoretical framework, I find that religion serves as a way to make meaning out of life on death row. However, contrary to the theodicy, religion emerges as a mechanism to create distance between oneself and the death penalty as opposed to making meaning. Likewise, in the nonreligious statements, claiming innocence emerges as a tool for distancing from or transcending the death penalty.

As previously mentioned, Foucault explains the need to respond to problems with a specific discourse. In the case of death row inmates, the ones who indicate religious preferences respond to the problem of death row by making meaning out of their years served. Additionally, executed persons who indicate religious belief respond to the problem of the death penalty by distancing themselves and using religion to transcend the death penalty. However, those who do not indicate religious belief in their last statements
assert their innocence and argue against the death penalty as a way to create distance or transcend their impending death.

MAKING MEANING OUT OF TIME ON DEATH ROW

Congruent with theodicy, specifically Weber’s dualism, religion is used within the last statements to assign meaning to an inmate’s time on death row. Dualism explains pain by saying that it is necessary for religious growth. As inmates discuss change or conversion experiences on death row, they explain these years as an opportunity to find God and strengthen their faith, primarily through reclaiming their time on death row. More generally, the religious statements assign meaning to their time on death row. When compared to nonreligious statements, religious statements more frequently reflect on positive experiences or personal change on death row; therefore, religion is used as a mechanism to make meaning out of time on death row. Nonreligious statements are more likely to reference negative experiences on death row or label years on death row as unnecessary through their assertion of innocence.

DISTANCING FROM THE DEATH PENALTY

To distance oneself from the death penalty, two mechanisms emerge in the last statements: religion and claiming innocence. While theorists describe religion as a method to make meaning out of pain and suffering, death row inmates indicating a religious preference employ religion to distance themselves from pain and suffering. Primarily, religion serves as a mechanism to transcend the death penalty, rather than assign meaning to it as predicted by theodicy. The religious last statements often discuss their time on death row or the afterlife they will soon experience as opposed to talking about the death penalty or the present moment. Executed persons who indicate religious beliefs discuss
their divine acceptance as a way to create distance. Through their mention of heaven, God’s forgiveness, and God’s law, inmates discuss their impending acceptance by God as a way to create distance from the present circumstances. My analysis of religiosity within last statements indicates that religion is a discourse utilized by inmates to distance themselves from their impending death.

The nonreligious statements also work to distance inmates from their death sentences. Statements that do not indicate a religious belief are more likely to claim innocence and present a critique of the death penalty. Through claiming innocence, executed persons create distance from themselves and their own death sentences; moreover, by asserting innocence, they label their death sentence as an undeserved murder and place the blame for this injustice on the criminal justice system. While a different mechanism is employed, last statements that do not indicate a religious belief also work to distance themselves from the death penalty and an approaching death.

**FURTHER RESEARCH**

To improve generalizability and expand the scope of this research, future studies should analyze the last statements of executed persons in states other than Texas. For example, a comparative study between the last words of executed persons in Texas and last words of executed persons in California would serve as good comparison because of the differing political and religious climates. To further understand a possible relationship between time on death row and the level of religiosity within the last statements, future research should test for a curvilinear relationship, as it is possible there are low levels of religiosity at the extremes. Additionally, as inmates on death row spend twenty-three
hours in isolation every day, further research should explore the effects of isolation on religious beliefs.

To better understand religion on death row, there is also need for academic research about conversion experiences of people on death row as present research is limited. While my research seeks to understand religion as a mechanism within executed persons last statements, I was not able to analyze inmate’s religious identities before they entered death row. A study about conversion experiences on death row would also contribute to an understanding of religion on death row and religion within the last statements of executed persons. Finally, an exploration of the rhetoric and final words of people with a chronic illness would also contribute to our understanding of theodicy and the ways that people approaching death—whether state-ordered or caused by illness—employ religion.

**CONCLUSION**

While there is need for future research, it is important to remember that men and women continue to die at the hands of the lethal injection in most states. Kent Sprouse is scheduled to be executed by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice on April 9, 2015. Capital punishment continues. The death penalty works to dehumanize and silence people, telling us they have nothing left to contribute to the world. However, as evidenced by the humanity present in countless last statements, our society still has much to learn from the people on death row. Reginald Reeves, whose earlier statement mimicked that of a preacher’s sermon, concludes his last words: “God dwells within us and we are all one family of humanity; we must all learn to love and live together.”
References


