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Deradicalizing By Not Intending to Deradicalize: Building Resilience Against Extremism in U.K. and U.S. Prisons

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ABSTRACT

What is the most effective way to deradicalize? Despite decades of investment in counterterrorism, this question remains unresolved. This article introduces a novel Extremism Resilience–Risk Index integrating strengths-based and risk-based approaches to countering extremism. Drawing on original empirical evidence from trials of the PRIMO program in a U.S. and a U.K. prison, it argues that interventions strengthening resilience to extremist worldviews through engagement with religious traditions can generate deradicalizing effects without explicitly intending to do so. By promoting healthy attitudes to rehabilitation and enhancing religious understanding, the program strengthened resilience against the “us-versus-them” extremist worldviews that underpin terrorist offending.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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Introduction

Religion and Extremism in Correctional Policy

Despite extensive investment in deradicalization programs over the past two decades, policymakers continue to face a central challenge: how to counter extremist worldviews without undermining religious freedom or reinforcing the grievances that extremist narratives exploit. Risk-based responses to this challenge have tended to predominate with religious identity across traditions frequently been interpreted as a potential pathway to radicalization requiring monitoring, assessment, and intervention.¹

Although these risk-based approaches have generated structured deradicalization initiatives, they have often prioritized surveillance and behavioral control over engagement with the moral, existential, and identity-based dimensions of extremist offending.² In doing so, they frequently rest on the assumption that terrorist offenders represent an entirely exceptional category of criminality requiring specialized risk governance rather than forms of rehabilitation comparable to those used to encourage desistance from other forms of offending.³

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Religion as a Rehabilitative Resource

Earlier scholarship on religion in prisons, particularly in the United States, took a markedly different view.⁴ It emphasized the rehabilitative potential of faith traditions to support meaning-making, coping, educational engagement, and desistance from crime.⁵ Over time, however, this perspective has been partially eclipsed by counter-terrorism policy and a securitized policy lens. In Anglophone jurisdictions, declining levels of religious literacy and increasingly assertive forms of public secularity have reinforced this shift. Consequently, prison systems in both the United Kingdom and the United States have adopted risk-assessment frameworks, intelligence-led monitoring, and psychologically oriented interventions designed to identify and manage extremist threats.⁶ While these measures pursue legitimate preventive aims, they often position religious commitment primarily as a variable of risk rather than as a potential resource for rehabilitation and worldview transformation.

Risk-Oriented Approaches to Religion and Extremism

This risk orientation is visible in several widely used assessment and intervention frameworks. In the United Kingdom, tools such as Extremism Risk Guidance 22+ (ERG22+) and the Violent Extremism Risk Assessment (VERA-2R) employ structured professional-judgment models to evaluate indicators of ideological engagement, intent, and capability. While these frameworks offer operational clarity, they largely interpret religion through attitudinal and behavioral markers rather than as a substantive normative domain. Empirical evidence regarding their predictive validity remains limited, and critics argue that such tools prioritize risk identification over the measurement of protective factors or rehabilitative change.⁷

Comparable dynamics appear in intervention-based programs. The Healthy Identity Intervention (HII),⁸ developed by His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, seeks to address the psychological and social drivers of extremist involvement through identity reconstruction and cognitive change. Interim evaluations suggest positive shifts in engagement and attitudes among participants, yet long-term evidence of sustained behavioral change remains limited. As with risk-assessment tools, the program addresses belief largely through psychological and social processes rather than through substantive engagement with religious or ideological traditions.

Together, these approaches reflect a broader paradigm in which extremist offending is addressed primarily through risk management and psychological intervention. Within this framework, religion is often treated either as a derivative feature of identity and behavior or as a potential indicator of risk. Such approaches can inadvertently generate suspicion toward faith-based engagement by framing religious commitment as a variable to be monitored rather than a potential resource for ethical reflection and transformation. As one recently trained prison officer told the author in England, *"The only time we learn about religion is when we are taught about extremism."*

The Danger of Universalism

At the same time, rehabilitation initiatives that treat extremist offenders as indistinguishable from other prison populations may face a different limitation. Generic educational or social programs - such as Learning Together-style initiatives - have

demonstrated value in reducing social isolation and promoting pro-social engagement across many categories of offending. Yet where such programs assume no meaningful distinction between extremist offenders and other prisoners, they may fail to engage the ideological and religious frameworks through which extremist actors interpret their actions and identities. In these contexts, participation may reflect behavioral compliance rather than substantive transformation.⁹

Debates following the Fishmongers' Hall attack by a terrorist offender released on license in 2019 illustrated the limitations of both differentiated and normalizing approaches to extremist offending. The case exposed the difficulty of distinguishing genuine rehabilitative change from strategic performance, particularly where interventions emphasize psychological adjustment and social reintegration without substantively engaging the ideological or religious worldviews that often underpin extremist identity. More broadly, the fact that the attacker had been regarded as a highly successful participant in both the Healthy Identity Intervention and the Learning Together program highlighted the shortcomings of both exceptional and universalist models of intervention.

PRIMO as a Strengths-Based Alternative That Mitigates Risk

Contemporary deradicalization practice therefore appears caught between two problematic poles: a securitized approach that treats religion primarily as a marker of risk and terrorist offenders as exceptional, and a universalist approach that neglects the ideological and moral frameworks that sustain extremist commitments and treats terrorist offenders as entirely “normal.” Both risk misrecognizing the role that belief—religious or otherwise—plays in radicalization and disengagement. Effective deradicalization may require approaches that neither pathologize religion nor ignore it, but instead engage it as a domain of meaning, ethical reasoning, behavioral justification and identity formation.

The Prison-Based Interventions for Muslim Offenders (PRIMO) program was developed in response to these tensions but from a different perspective. Rather than treating religious identity primarily as a risk factor, PRIMO seeks to mobilize incarcerated individuals' voluntary commitment to Islam as a pathway to rehabilitation. The course encourages reflection, informed religious practice, and engagement with work and education within a broader ethical framework that aligns with established drivers of desistance, including vocational development¹⁰ and educational attainment.¹¹

Comprising three interconnected courses for incarcerated individuals, correctional staff, and chaplaincy or wellbeing professionals, PRIMO locates the locus of change not solely within individual offenders but within the wider institutional environment and professional culture. Its design addresses deficits in religious literacy, professional development, and prison education while foregrounding structured reflection, pluralism, and ethical responsibility in countering extremist worldviews.

This article examines outcomes from the PRIMO course for Incarcerated Individuals, comparing its delivery in a U.S. maximum-security prison with its implementation in a U.K. medium-security setting. Rather than centering Islam as a problem category, the study situates PRIMO within broader debates about the effectiveness of deradicalization initiatives. The findings indicate that programs which engage identity, belief,

and purpose—rather than treating them solely as risks—can foster resilience against binary “us versus them” narratives that underpin extremism,¹² strengthen commitments to “us with them” mainstream narratives that underpin rehabilitation and reform, and thus support trajectories away from violent extremism. In doing so, the article argues for a recalibration of prison-based deradicalization policy toward approaches that integrate security with rehabilitative, educational, and ethically grounded engagement capable of supporting successful societal reintegration.¹³

Evidenced Gaps in Carceral Education

PRIMO was developed to establish a rehabilitative pathway between naïve universalism and suspicious exceptionalism, grounded in evidence that, under the right educational conditions, incarcerated individuals’ voluntary engagement with faith can support rehabilitation.¹⁴

Foundational research for the program¹⁵ identified three interrelated deficits in religious literacy concerning Islam within correctional settings. These deficits displayed both important similarities and differences across the UK and US contexts.

First, our prior research identified a clear need among correctional staff for basic and accurate knowledge of Islamic history, beliefs and practices, including practical guidance on engaging Muslim prisoners in ways that promote prosocial behavior, de-escalate conflict and reduce the likelihood of violence. Where such knowledge is absent, stereotypes and racialized suspicion may fill the gap, reinforcing institutional mistrust and intensifying latent “us versus them” dynamics within correctional environments. Strikingly, exactly 66% of participating correctional professionals in both the UK and US cohorts reported having received “no training on Islam and Muslims in prison”. In the UK site, this was despite approximately 30% of the prisoner population being registered as Muslim.

Second, Muslim prison chaplains frequently report limited access to Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and insufficient pedagogical training tailored to prison learning environments. The absence of consistent professional development contributes to uneven provision of religious education and constrains chaplains’ capacity to address the complex pastoral and rehabilitative needs of diverse Muslim prison populations. It can also reinforce the siloing of religious traditions within prison institutions, sometimes encouraging interpretations of faith that emphasize difference rather than shared ethical foundations across traditions. More broadly, it leaves the considerable pastoral expertise of Muslim chaplains insufficiently supported and developed.

Third, many incarcerated Muslims are either new converts—approximately 25 per cent in the United Kingdom and up to 60 per cent in the United States—or individuals reconnecting with faith after periods of disconnection. Although many seek structured religious guidance, the obstacles differ significantly between the two jurisdictions. In the UK, professional Muslim chaplains are generally available, but often lack structured educational materials through which to introduce new Muslims systematically to their faith within the relatively short periods that prisoners may remain in a particular institution. In the US, the principal problem is instead a shortage of professional Muslim chaplains, with roughly 200 serving a Muslim incarcerated population of more than 200,000. Religious instruction may consequently fall either to non-Muslim

chaplains with limited knowledge of Islam or to incarcerated individuals acting as informal teachers. Although such peer leadership can be constructive, the absence of appropriate oversight can produce doctrinal inconsistency and, at times, interpretations that encourage separation rather than constructive engagement with the wider prison community. In the US context, the absence of professional Muslim leadership can also create institutional ambiguity where incarcerated individuals assume, or are accorded, informal roles as self-appointed *amirs* or *imams*, potentially generating tensions both with correctional staff and with other prisoners.

The comparison between the UK and USA therefore revealed not a uniform deficit in religious provision, but different institutional pathways to a similar educational problem: insufficient access to structured, authoritative and Islamic education oriented toward rehabilitation.

These three deficits informed the design of PRIMO's three interconnected educational programs, each addressing a different audience within the prison environment:

1. PRIMO for Correctional Staff
2. PRIMO for Prison Chaplains
3. PRIMO for Incarcerated Individuals

Together, these courses aim to foster a more informed and less securitized understanding of Islam within prison culture while strengthening the rehabilitative potential of religious engagement.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The Model of the Muslim “Steward”

PRIMO's pedagogical framework centers on the Islamic concept of *khalifa*—human beings as God's Stewards or caretakers on earth—integrated with a critical realist criminological account of personhood that recognizes the interaction between structural constraints and human agency.¹⁶

Within this framework, the “Muslim Steward” is understood as a moral agent responsible for cultivating personal integrity, sustaining relationships, and contributing positively to the wider world.¹⁷ For incarcerated individuals, this model provides a faith-affirming identity that challenges the reduction of prisoners to their offenses or risk classifications. The concept also resonates with Stewardship traditions in Christianity and Judaism, offering a shared ethical language that supports interfaith dialogue. In contexts—particularly in the United Kingdom—where religious identities are often institutionally compartmentalized, this dimension encourages recognition of common moral commitments across traditions.¹⁸

The PRIMO Stewardship Model was operationalized through four interconnected dimensions of relational action:

1. Reflecting on life
2. Worshiping God
3. Building healthy relationships
4. Protecting nature

These themes translate theological principles into practical forms of reflection and responsibility appropriate to the conditions of incarceration.

Worldviews in Contemporary Islam

Complementing the Stewardship Model, PRIMO employs the concept of worldview as the interaction of belief, belonging, and behavior.¹⁹ Drawing on Wilkinson's typology,²⁰ supported by evidence from the program's pretrial research, three broad Muslim worldview orientations were identified:

Mainstream Islam. An inclusive worldview of "Us" with "Them" affirming the basic equality of all human beings and encouraging collaboration between Muslims and non-Muslims in pursuit of the Common Good. Many mainstream adherents express an activist orientation linking faith with personal development and constructive social engagement within legal frameworks.

Islamism. An exclusivist worldview of "Us" against "Them" emphasizing a sharp boundary between Muslims and non-Muslims, presenting them as fundamentally distinct categories of humanity. The Islamist worldview often includes a political ethos of establishing an Islamic State governed by literalist and "purified" forms of sharia law as the context to enact this exaggerated separation.

Islamist Extremism. A radicalized extension of the Islamist Worldview of "Us" or "Them" in which a narrow in-group of "true Muslims" is contrasted with dehumanized out-groups, including both non-Muslims and "wrong" Muslims, who are stripped of their human properties and rights. Violent forms legitimize physical harm, while nonviolent variants promote psychological and ideological hostility that may facilitate violence (Figure 1).

Although the typology categorizes worldviews into three broad types, it remains analytically sophisticated and validated by empirical research. It explains how an Islamic doctrine, such as Tawhid, can manifest differently in a Mainstream (Us with Them)

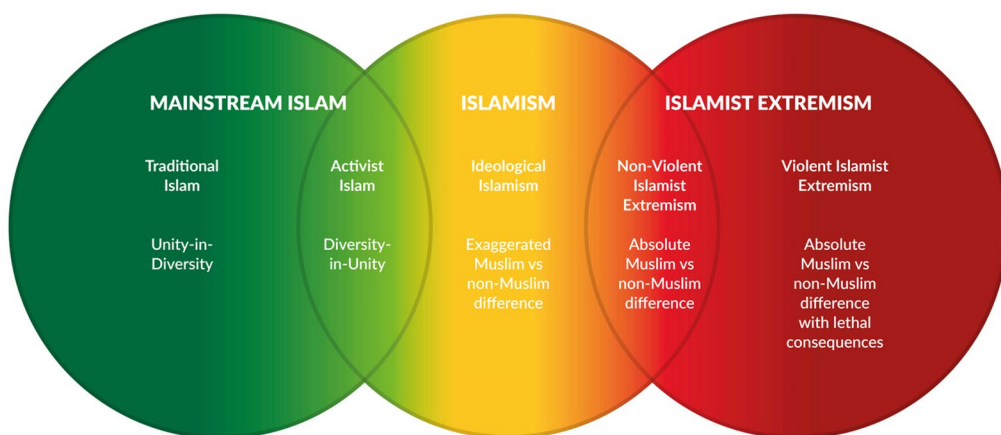


Figure 1. The worldviews of mainstream Islam, Islamism and Islamist extremism.

setting compared with an Extremist (Us or Them) setting, reflecting the philosophical and psychological characteristics underlying these Worldviews.

Previous research in prisons demonstrated that these worldview types mapped accurately onto the worldviews of incarcerated Muslims,²¹ providing heuristic utility for understanding beliefs and behaviors at a granular level, independent of denominational affiliation. This approach avoids stigmatizing any particular type of Islam (e.g. Salafism) and addresses the fallacy of the exception that proves the rule, ensuring that individual examples of extremism are not incorrectly generalized to entire traditions. Furthermore, in our background research it had been found that Mainstream Islam, particularly in its activist expressions, is the most common worldview among Muslim prisoners and is strongly associated with positive rehabilitative outcomes, including commitment to education, engagement in employment, and desistance from crime.

Within PRIMO, this worldview typology was taught explicitly in the PRIMO Course for Correctional Staff to help distinguish between destructive and constructive forms of religious engagement in prison settings. For incarcerated participants, however, the course focused on introducing the worldview of Mainstream Islam without direct discussion of Islamism or Islamist Extremism. This pedagogical choice reflected the course's intended audience—many of whom were recent converts seeking foundational religious education—and the program's broader aim to help participants to mobilize their religious choices to enhance rehabilitation and desistance.

PRIMO was therefore not designed as a deradicalization program. Rather, it sought to cultivate a constructive and informed religious framework that could build rehabilitative reflection and outcomes such as engagement with work, education and a strengthened aspiration to avoid further crime.

PRIMO Course Design, Delivery and Participants

All three PRIMO courses share a common foundation—a concise introduction to Islamic history and core beliefs, practices and ethics built around the Muslim Stewardship model—while tailoring content and pedagogy to their respective audiences. The focus of this paper, PRIMO for Incarcerated Individuals, was designed to address the specific educational and rehabilitative needs of Muslim learners in prison settings.

The curriculum comprised twelve hours of instruction delivered across six sessions, structured around the Five Pillars of Islam and interpreted through the Stewardship model as a framework for personal growth and rehabilitation. Participants examined both the objective Duties of the Pillars (*fard 'ayn*) and their subjective, context-specific meanings. For example, *Hajj* - the pilgrimage to Mecca - was presented both as a physical journey and as a metaphor for repentance and reform, achievable within the constraints of imprisonment through constructive acts such as pursuing education or lawful employment. The curriculum also emphasized common ground across Islamic denominations and framed engagement with scientific and intellectual inquiry as a religious duty, reinforcing a mainstream Islamic worldview compatible with broader forms of learning and knowledge.

Pedagogical design prioritized accessibility. Input from Special Educational Needs (SEN) specialists informed materials suitable for participants with varied literacy levels. Guided by principles of constructive alignment,²² teaching methods included Socratic

dialogue, group discussion, kinesthetic learning activities - such as practising the physical movements of Obligatory Daily prayer (*As-Salah*)- and transparent forms of assessment. The course design and delivery were informed by the Principal Investigator's combined expertise in Islamic Studies and pastoral leadership and refined in a university research setting by an expert Steering Group.

Implementation differed across jurisdictions as a product of the national differences in religious provision identified above. In the UK medium-security prison, sessions were delivered by professional Muslim chaplains who had completed the PRIMO for Chaplains training, with members of the research team observing to ensure fidelity to the curriculum. In the U.S. maximum-security facility, the absence of a Muslim chaplain meant the Principal Investigator delivered the course directly, supported by the Co-investigator and two "Trusted Mentors" drawn from the incarcerated Muslim community. This produced a hybrid model combining instructor-led teaching with peer-facilitated learning, reflecting both the religious diversity of the facility and the potential for incarcerated individuals to support constructive educational engagement among their peers.

The UK course took place in a medium-security prison in southern England and was delivered weekly over eight weeks, including two interruptions due to staff absence and a temporary lockdown. Sessions were held in the prison mosque.

In the United States, the course was delivered more intensively over a three-week period in a maximum-security prison in New England, using a multi-faith chaplaincy space. Both locations provided appropriate teaching environments equipped with tables, seating, writing materials, printed coursebooks, and presentation facilities.

Participants (Please See Table 1 Below)²³

In the United Kingdom, 17 Muslim prisoners started and 19 Muslim participants completed the course, i.e. two participants joined as the course was underway. In the United States, 53 participants started (37 Muslims and 16 of other/no faith) and 37 (26 Muslims and 11 of other/no faith) completed the program. In the USA, individuals from other- or no- faith backgrounds attended primarily for educational or exploratory reasons.

In total 70 individuals started the course and 56 completed it - a completion rate of 80%, suggesting a higher than typical level of engagement for a short correctional education program, where attrition due to transfers, institutional disruption, and competing demands often reduces completion rates to well below 50%.²⁴

While relatively small, the sample provided an indicative sample Muslim prison populations across two national prison systems and provided the basis for meaningful compare-and-contrast statistical analysis across the seven core domains (see below). Participant cohorts also differed between the two sites in ways that are typical of the incarcerated populations of the two jurisdictions.

The U.S. cohort was characterized by:

- a predominantly Black and mixed-race population,
- high rates of religious conversion to Islam in prison,
- lower levels of educational attainment than the UK sample, and
- some very long custodial sentences.

Table 1. Characteristics of PRIMO participants (who completed the course).

Characteristic	United States (<i>n</i> = 37)	United Kingdom (<i>n</i> = 19)
Race / Ethnicity	• 54% Black (<i>n</i> = 19); • 17% two or more races (<i>n</i> = 6); • 14% White (<i>n</i> = 5); • 6% Hispanic/Latino (<i>n</i> = 2); • 9% other/other specified (<i>n</i> = 3)	• 47% Asian (<i>n</i> = 8); • 18% White (<i>n</i> = 3); • 18% Black (<i>n</i> = 3); • 6% two or more races (<i>n</i> = 1); • 12% other/other specified (<i>n</i> = 2)
Religious identification	• 70% Muslim-identifying (<i>n</i> = 26): • 27% Islam, no particular group (<i>n</i> = 10); • 27% Sunni (<i>n</i> = 10); • 11% Salafi (<i>n</i> = 4); • 3% Nation of Islam (<i>n</i> = 1); • 3% Other Islam (<i>n</i> = 1). • 19% another faith (<i>n</i> = 7); • 11% non-religious worldview (<i>n</i> = 4)	• 100% Muslim-identifying (<i>n</i> = 19): • 63% Sunni (<i>n</i> = 12); • 21% Islam, no particular group (<i>n</i> = 4); • 16% Salafi (<i>n</i> = 3)
Conversion status among Muslim-identifying participants	• 65% converts to Islam (17/26); • 35% born Muslim (9/26). • Of the converts, 71% (12/17) reported converting in prison	• 16% converts to Islam (3/19); • 84% born Muslim (16/19). • One of the three converts reported converting in prison
Education	• 70% High School Diploma/GED (<i>n</i> = 26); • 8% Elementary/Primary School (<i>n</i> = 3); • 8% bachelor's degree (<i>n</i> = 3); • 5% postgraduate degree (<i>n</i> = 2); • 5% professional/vocational/technical qualification (<i>n</i> = 2); • 3% College Diploma (<i>n</i> = 1)	• 33% GCSEs (<i>n</i> = 6); • 22% DipHE (<i>n</i> = 4); • 17% no qualifications (<i>n</i> = 3); • 11% A Levels (<i>n</i> = 2); • 6% NVQ (<i>n</i> = 1); • 6% BTEC (<i>n</i> = 1); • 6% undergraduate degree (<i>n</i> = 1)
Age distribution	• 26% aged 20–30 (<i>n</i> = 9); • 35% aged 31–40 (<i>n</i> = 12); • 21% aged 41–50 (<i>n</i> = 7); • 18% aged 51+ (<i>n</i> = 6)	• 38% aged 20–30 (<i>n</i> = 6); • 44% aged 31–40 (<i>n</i> = 7); • 19% aged 41–50 (<i>n</i> = 3); • 0% aged 51+
Selected offense types*	• Homicide 24% (<i>n</i> = 9); • drug offenses 22% (<i>n</i> = 8); • assault 16% (<i>n</i> = 6); • robbery 14% (<i>n</i> = 5); • burglary 11% (<i>n</i> = 4); • sexual offenses 11% (<i>n</i> = 4); • theft 11% (<i>n</i> = 4)	• Drug offenses 42% (<i>n</i> = 8); • assault 26% (<i>n</i> = 5); • homicide 21% (<i>n</i> = 4); • robbery 21% (<i>n</i> = 4); • theft 16% (<i>n</i> = 3); • terrorism 5% (<i>n</i> = 1)
Sentence length	Median reported determinate sentence 8.3 years (IQR 4.0–20.0; valid <i>n</i> = 29), with 3 participants reporting life sentences	Median reported sentence 10.7 years (IQR 5.9–15.0; valid <i>n</i> = 16)

The U.K. cohort was characterized by:

- a predominantly Asian prison population,
- higher rates of born Muslims,
- comparatively higher educational attainment,
- convicted of similar offenses with similar sentences.

These differences reflect broader structural differences between American and British prison systems, as well as between the UK and US Muslim populations and provide important context for understanding the distinct pastoral and educational challenges that PRIMO sought to address.

Methodology²⁵

Iterative Development of the Three PRIMO Courses

The PRIMO curriculum was trialed and refined through an Action Research methodology,²⁶ enabling cycles of design, delivery, evaluation, and modification in direct response to the lived experiences of participants and instructors. This iterative process was not simply a technical adjustment mechanism; it was a deliberate attempt to democratize curriculum development by incorporating the perspectives of chaplains, correctional staff, and incarcerated Muslims themselves. For instance, early pilot sessions in the UK revealed that certain topics (such as “music” as a site of moral debate) were of limited relevance to the learner cohort, prompting their removal in favor of more context-specific discussions. Each revision was thus intended to sharpen the course’s capacity to meet educational needs while resisting securitized framings of Islam.

Data and Methods

A Mixed-Methods Assessment Strategy

Evaluation of PRIMO for Incarcerated Individuals employed a mixed-methods approach designed to capture both the breadth of measurable change and the depth of participant experience. This triangulation was critical in a carceral context where quantitative measures alone risk flattening complex identity shifts into narrow performance indicators²⁷ and in which cohort numbers tend to be small.

Quantitative Component

Participants completed *Before-PRIMO* and *After-PRIMO* course surveys. These surveys were analyzed using Principal Component Factor Analysis (PCFA) to identify seven domains of change. (Please see [Appendices 1–8](#) for variables and factor construction):

1. **Attitude to Rehabilitation** – Four items measured commitment to future education, employment, continued religious or worldview practice, and avoidance of further crime.
2. **Basic Knowledge of Islam** – Five knowledge items assessed understanding of core Islamic beliefs and practices, including stewardship, the Five Pillars, the Day of Judgment, the Prophets, and the Angel Gabriel. Responses were scored as correct or incorrect and combined into a knowledge score. This measure was available for the US cohort only.
3. **Understanding Religious Duties** – One item assessed participants’ perceived understanding of what their religion or worldview required of them, ranging from no understanding to strong understanding.
4. **Commitment to Stewardship** – Three Likert-scale items assessed practical dimensions of the Muslim Steward ideal through commitment to worship, constructive relationships with other incarcerated people, and care for the environment.

5. **Resilience against Extremism** – Three Likert-scale items assessed endorsement of prosocial Islamic values indicative of Mainstream Islam: treating all types of people kindly, actively promoting justice, and valuing all human life. Together these represented resilience to exclusionary “Us versus Them” worldviews.
6. **Vulnerability to Extremism** – Three Likert-scale items assessed endorsement of exclusionary attitudes indicative of an Islamist Worldview: avoiding people of other faiths or worldviews, treating members of one’s own faith or worldview better than others, and believing that one’s faith or worldview removes the obligation to obey the laws of the country. These were combined into an exploratory **Vulnerability to Extremism** index.
7. **Acceptance of Religious Pluralism** – One item—“My faith or worldview teaches that wisdom is found in many religions”—measured openness to the possibility of wisdom being sourced beyond one’s own religious tradition.

Survey responses were scored on a 1–4 scale, with composite scores categorized as *Poor*, *Moderate*, or *Strong*. Exploratory Factor Analysis validated the construct integrity of each domain, and internal consistency was confirmed using Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy.

Qualitative Component

While quantitative analysis offered insight into the broader effect-patterns of the PRIMO course, in-class observations and semi-structured audio-recorded interviews provided richer insights into how participants interpreted and applied course content. These qualitative data were crucial for identifying the generative mechanisms of change—such as shifts in self-identity, interfaith attitudes, and desistance motivations—that are often invisible to quantitative measures but central to rehabilitative work, as well as for corroborating, providing a counter-point, nuancing and illustrating the relatively blunt instrument of the before-and-after survey.

Findings: The Before-and-After Impact of PRIMO for Incarcerated Individuals

Participants in PRIMO for Incarcerated Individuals demonstrated statistically significant gains across all assessed domains in both the U.S. and U.K. samples, despite the small sample sizes.²⁸

Attitude to Rehabilitation

This measure reflected an underlying commitment to reconnect with work and education, continue religious or worldview practice after release, and aspire to desist from crime. Across both sites, the mean **Attitude to Rehabilitation** score rose from 81% ($n=68$) before PRIMO to 87% ($n=56$) afterwards. Among the 53 participants with matched before-and-after data, scores increased from 80% to 87%, a mean gain of 7 percentage points of positivity ($p=.038$; $d=.29$).

The categorical distribution also shifted positively across both sites:

- “Strong” Attitude to Rehabilitation increased from 79% (n=54) to 84% (n=47);
- “Moderate” Attitude to Rehabilitation declined from 19% (n=13) to 16% (n=9);
- and “Poor” Attitude to Rehabilitation fell from 2% (n=1) to 0%.

There were identifiable differences in the effect of the course on Attitude to Rehabilitation in the two jurisdictions.

For the UK sample:

- “Strong” Attitude to Rehabilitation increased from 94% (16/17) before PRIMO to 100% (19/19) afterwards. Among matched UK participants, the mean increased from 90% to 94% (+4 percentage points; $p=.024$; $d=.61$).

For the US sample:

- “Strong” Attitude to Rehabilitation increased more modestly, from 75% (38/51) to 76% (28/37), while “Poor” Attitude to Rehabilitation fell from 2% (1/51) to 0%.
- However, among matched US participants, “Strong” Attitude to Rehabilitation rose from 75% to 83%, a gain of 8 percentage points ($p=.100$; $d=.28$).

The U.S. cohort therefore showed the larger numerical within-person improvement, although greater variability meant that this change did not independently reach conventional statistical significance. By contrast, the UK cohort began at a considerably higher baseline and showed a smaller but statistically reliable increase.

The difference between UK and US change scores was itself not statistically significant ($p=.519$), so the data do not support claiming that PRIMO was demonstrably more effective in one setting than the other. Nevertheless, the relatively larger numerical gain in the U.S. may nevertheless be understood in the context of longer or life sentences and the relative religious neglect described by a number of participants before PRIMO. Three U.S. participants explicitly expressed gratitude that the prison authorities had introduced PRIMO to address this perceived deficit, with one participant (Somali, c.35) describing participation as a “gift.”

Qualitative evidence showed that this measurable shift was expressed in a variety of rehabilitative behaviors.

“Salah” (African American, ~28) described PRIMO’s role in sustaining a constructive mindset while encouraging personal responsibility:

“It [PRIMO] helped me understand... we’re locked down all the time. And it just enforces it because I’ll be trying to tell [others], ‘Yes, we in here, but we put ourselves in here. So, we have to make the best of it. Don’t make a bad situation worse.’”

Taking responsibility for one’s past behavior is widely identified in the desistance and restorative-justice literature as an important component of rehabilitative change.²⁹ It entails moving beyond the neutralization of offending and externalization of blame toward acknowledgement of personal agency, recognition of the consequences of one’s actions and the development of alternative ways of acting

in the future.³⁰ In this respect, Salah's account is significant: he explicitly accepted responsibility for his own imprisonment—"we put ourselves in here"—while simultaneously drawing on his faith, as reinforced through PRIMO, as a framework for exercising agency within confinement and "mak[ing] the best of" his present situation. Responsibility was therefore expressed not as passive self-condemnation, but as the starting point for a more constructive orientation toward present conduct and future change.

While bespoke Islamic religious provision was less novel in the UK, participants described the specifically rehabilitative framing of PRIMO as distinctive. "Zaid" (Asian British, ~30), for example, connected the course to improved self-regulation:

"Since taking the PRIMO course, I've been able to pull back from anger and violence."

Zaid's account is consistent with an important psychological dimension of desistance: the development of greater capacity to regulate emotions and interrupt previously criminogenic patterns of response. Emotional processes have been identified as significant to criminal continuity and change,³¹ while anger dysregulation is specifically associated with violent offending where self-regulatory controls are insufficient.³² The participant's description of being able to "pull back" therefore suggests more than reduced anger: it describes an enhanced capacity to intervene between an emotional trigger and a violent behavioral response, a form of self-regulation consistent with the process of rehabilitation.

Such accounts suggest that constructive and structured engagement with faith could function as a coping resource while simultaneously supporting rehabilitative dispositions.

For "Mike" (Native American, non-Muslim, ~40), completing PRIMO "with distinction" became a catalyst for further educational engagement. Six months later he had obtained his High School Diploma, which he attributed in a follow-up conversation partly to his experience of PRIMO. He particularly recalled completing the course and being publicly recognized at the graduation ceremony for passing "with distinction." His account illustrates a possible knock-on effect whereby success within values-based education strengthens confidence and motivation to pursue broader rehabilitative achievements.

Religious Knowledge and Understanding of Religious Duties

PRIMO was associated with significant improvements in participants' understanding of their religious duties in both the UK and US samples, although the pattern of change differed between the two settings.

For the UK sample

Mean score increased from **2.18 before PRIMO** ($n=17$) to **2.68 afterwards** ($n=19$) on the 0–3 scale. Expressed as a proportion of the maximum possible score, this was an increase from **73% to 90%**.

The principal UK shift was therefore from **Moderate to Strong** understanding of religious duties in Islam.

Before PRIMO:

- **None:** 0%
- **Weak:** 6%
- **Moderate:** 71%
- **Strong:** 24%

After PRIMO:

- **None:** 0%
- **Weak:** 0%
- **Moderate:** 32%
- **Strong:** 68%

US sample

- Mean score increased from **2.09 before PRIMO (n=53)** to **2.30 afterwards (n=37)**.
- This was equivalent to an increase from **70% to 77%** of the maximum possible score.

The principal US shift was the near-disappearance of **None and Weak** understanding, with most participants consolidating in the **Moderate-to-Strong** range.

Before PRIMO:

- **None:** 2%
- **Weak:** 15%
- **Moderate:** 55%
- **Strong:** 28%

After PRIMO:

- **None:** 0%
- **Weak:** 3%
- **Moderate:** 65%
- **Strong:** 32%

A separate measure of **Basic Knowledge of Islam** was available only for the US sample because the constituent questions were not administered in the UK.

Basic Knowledge of Islam for US Sample

- Mean score increased from **91% before PRIMO (n=43)** to **98% afterwards (n=37)**.
- This represented an improvement of **7 percentage points**.
- The post-course score approached the ceiling of the measure, indicating that participants had attained very high levels of factual knowledge after PRIMO.

The qualitative data help explain what these quantitative changes represented educationally. Participants did not describe knowledge acquisition simply as the memorization of doctrinal propositions, but as the acquisition of a foundation from which religious practice could become more intelligible and achievable.

As “Salah” explained:

“You helped put the foundation in... I heard a lot of brothers like, ‘I like this.’ And then I heard some brothers like, ‘I don’t know if I can do all this.’ And I just tell them, ‘Listen, nobody knows if they can do all of it until you try.’”

PRIMO addressed foundational elements of Muslim practice including **salah** (obligatory prayer), **wudu** (ablution), and the recitation of **Surat al-Fatihah (The Opening Chapter of The Qur’an)**. Importantly, these elements were taught within a pedagogical environment designed to reduce embarrassment about not knowing and to normalize asking others for assistance. “Abdullah” (Mixed Race, ~25) contrasted this with his previous experience of religious instruction within his family:

“The prayer... I have a tough time with saying the words... my dad... yells, ‘You’ve got to learn how to say it.’ And now... I can’t be afraid to ask the next Muslim brother, ‘Hey, can you pray with me every afternoon so I can learn it?’”

This account illustrates an important distinction between the two quantitative outcomes. **Basic Knowledge of Islam** measured whether participants knew core Islamic beliefs and concepts, whereas **Understanding Religious Duties** captured a broader sense of knowing what religious practice required of them. The two outcomes are therefore better treated as complementary rather than combined into a single construct. A participant might acquire factual knowledge rapidly while still requiring practice, confidence and social support to translate that knowledge into religious observance.

The course was deliberately structured to facilitate this translation from knowledge into practice. Participants worked in teams of six or seven around round tables, creating opportunities for collaborative exercises, discussion and informal correction. Observations during delivery suggested that a substantial proportion of learning occurred through these interactions, with course-informed peer learning extending beyond the classroom. Peer mentors were available during sessions to discuss course material and support participants, while each session also included structured reinforcing homework. Although completion varied, time was set aside at the beginning of subsequent sessions for participants to complete unfinished tasks. This arrangement reinforced the broader pedagogical message that persistence and diligent completion of tasks could themselves be understood as expressions of religious commitment.

One exercise, involving tracing the Arabic text of **Surat al-Fatihah**, provided a particularly visible example of this process. Participants were initially asked to use tracing as an aid to familiarity with the Arabic text, but some developed the activity further by illuminating their copies with colored patterns. Several reported subsequently pinning the completed sheets to the backs of their cell doors to assist memorization and recitation during prayer. In this instance, a relatively simple classroom exercise appears to have migrated into participants’ everyday religious practice. The course’s discussion of beautifying the prayer, together with the Prophetic teaching that “God

loves beauty,” also appeared to find expression in the care with which some participants decorated and retained the exercise.

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest a common educational mechanism across the two sites, despite different patterns of statistical change. In both countries, PRIMO appears to have strengthened participants’ understanding of what their religion required of them. In the UK, this movement was reflected particularly in movement from “Moderate” to “Strong” understanding; in the US, it was reflected more in the near disappearance of “None” and “Weak” understanding. The US data additionally show near-ceiling levels of factual Islamic knowledge after the course. The qualitative accounts suggest that these gains were not merely cognitive. By combining structured instruction with peer learning, repeated practice and opportunities to seek help without embarrassment, PRIMO helped participants convert religious knowledge into greater confidence in the practical performance of their faith.

Stewardship

As articulated above, values associated with The Muslim Steward - reflection, worship, building relationships and protecting nature- formed a central theme of the PRIMO curriculum. Analysis suggested that these outcomes were best represented through two related but distinct measures: Hope and Purpose, reflecting clarity of goals and hopefulness about achieving them; and an exploratory Stewardship index, reflecting prayer, relationships with other incarcerated individuals and care for the environment.

Hope and Purpose

The two-item **Hope and Purpose** construct showed good internal coherence and a clear improvement following PRIMO. Among participants with matched pre- and post-course data:

- **Overall:** mean Hope and Purpose increased from **3.59 to 3.85** ($n=54$), a mean increase of **0.26 points** ($p=.005$, $d=0.40$).
- **UK:** scores increased from **3.65 to 3.94** ($n=17$; $p=.046$).
- **US:** scores increased from **3.57 to 3.81** ($n=37$; $p=.037$).

Thus, despite relatively high baseline scores, participants in both settings reported significantly greater clarity of purpose and hopefulness about their goals after PRIMO. The effect was somewhat larger in the UK, although improvement was evident in both samples.

This finding resonated with participants’ descriptions of Stewardship as a framework for intentional living. “Bakr” (African American, ~30) explained:

“...it [PRIMO] opened my eyes just to the importance of... living with clear intention, telling the truth, and building healthy relationships. That’s the one thing that’s going to stick with me... for the rest of my life.”

Bakr’s emphasis on “clear intention” and a future-oriented ethical framework closely reflects the increase in Hope and Purpose. Hope can be understood as a goal-directed

combination of agency and pathways toward desired ends,³³ while desistance research similarly links hope, agency and the capacity to envisage a worthwhile future with sustained change.³⁴ Rather than presenting rehabilitation simply as compliance with institutional expectations, PRIMO located purposeful future-oriented behavior within an explicitly religious account of how a Muslim should live.

Stewardship

The narrower three-item **Stewardship index** also moved in the anticipated direction, although the evidence was less strong statistically:

- **Overall:** mean Stewardship increased from **3.26 to 3.43** among matched participants ($n=54$), an increase of **0.17 points** ($p=.064$).

These results should be interpreted cautiously. The three items displayed only modest internal coherence before PRIMO and weaker coherence afterwards, suggesting that prayer, relationships with peers and environmental care functioned more as distinct expressions of Stewardship than as interchangeable indicators of a single latent trait. Stewardship is therefore better understood here as an exploratory, theoretically specified multidimensional index, rather than as a fully validated reflective scale.

This interpretation is consistent with the qualitative evidence. Participants and staff readily recalled Stewardship as a unifying idea, but described its expression through quite different forms of behavior. “Hussain” (British Asian Chaplain, ~45), for example, emphasized the concept’s continuing pastoral usefulness:

“Stewardship is a powerful concept... The PRIMO Course must have been effective because... I talk about it to everyone!”

The fact that Bakr, Hussain and other interviewees could recall and apply the central elements of Stewardship suggests that the model was both accessible and readily operationalized, even though its constituent behaviors did not form a strong unidimensional psychometric scale.

This distinction is particularly evident in the UK trial, where the Stewardship curriculum included experiential activities that were not implemented in the US trial. Participants planted window boxes in the prison mosque and in shared outdoor spaces, translating an abstract theological principle into concrete care for their environment. For prisoners living within a highly controlled and sanitized institutional setting, the experience could acquire unusual significance. As one participant remarked:

“That’s the first time I’ve smelt the earth in years!”

Stewardship was also enacted informally beyond the structured activities. One UK participant reported deliberately picking up litter on his wing that was:

“not even mine”

and expressed pride in discovering an unfamiliar sense of altruism. Such examples illustrate why the multidimensional character of Stewardship is substantively meaningful even if only weakly accessible to measurement at this stage. PRIMO presented prayer,

care for other people, environmental responsibility and purposeful self-development as different manifestations of the same underlying **ethical orientation**, without implying that an individual who changed in one domain would necessarily change to the same extent in every other domain.

Taken together, the findings suggest that PRIMO's Stewardship curriculum operated at two levels. First, it strengthened a more coherent psychological outcome of **Hope and Purpose**, with significant improvements in both the UK and US samples. Second, it provided participants with a broader religious-ethical framework through which prayer, relationships, care for the environment and rehabilitative activity could acquire greater meaning. The qualitative evidence indicates that participants were able to translate this framework into concrete behavior, even where those diverse expressions of Stewardship did not cohere sufficiently to justify treating them as a single latent psychometric scale.

Toward an Extremism Resilience–Risk Index

These were the benefits PRIMO participants reported in relation to rehabilitative goals and attitudes. The next question is whether—and, if so, how—these benefits translated into dispositions that countered extremism.

PRIMO was not designed or delivered as a counter-extremism program. Nevertheless, this paper hypothesized that coherent education in Mainstream Islamic values, explicitly connected to rehabilitation through work, education and the aspiration to avoid further offending, could also generate deradicalizing effects. Rather than confronting extremist ideology directly, PRIMO sought to strengthen constructive religious commitments and embed them within participants' relationships with themselves, with others and with wider society.

To test this hypothesis empirically, we moved toward the construction of an exploratory **Extremism Resilience–Risk Index**. The purpose was to examine whether several theoretically related changes observed following PRIMO could be integrated into a broader measure of orientation toward, or away from, the exclusionary “Us versus Them” and “Us or Them” Islamist and Islamist Extremist Worldviews. The index therefore brings together three complementary dimensions:

1. **Resilience Against Extremism**, reflecting commitment to inclusive prosocial values that are indicative of Mainstream Islam;
2. **Religious Pluralism**, reflecting the permeability of religious in-group/out-group boundaries through recognition of wisdom beyond one's own tradition; and
3. **Vulnerability to Extremism**, reflecting endorsement of exclusionary attitudes that underpin Islamist and Islamist Extremist Worldviews, reversed so that higher scores indicate lower vulnerability.

Resilience Against Extremism

The Resilience Against Extremism measure comprised three four-point Likert items:

1. treating all people kindly,
2. promoting justice in society,
3. and affirming that all human life is valued by God.

Composite scores were calculated as the mean of all three items, with higher scores indicating stronger resilience. Scores were classified as Weak (1.00–2.00), Moderate (>2.00–3.00), or Strong (>3.00–4.00).

Across all available observations, mean Resilience increased modestly from 3.60 before PRIMO ($n=66$) to 3.73 afterwards ($n=54$).

The proportion classified as “Strongly” Resilient rose from 82% (54/66) to 87% (47/54), while Weak Resilience fell from 2% to 0%. The matched-participant analysis produced a similar pattern: among 50 participants with complete before-and-after data, mean Resilience increased from 3.62 to 3.71, although this change was not statistically significant ($p=.315$; $d=.14$).

The country-level results revealed an important ceiling effect.

In the UK cohort, every participant with complete baseline data was already classified Strong (13/13), leaving little scope for measurable improvement; matched scores remained essentially unchanged (3.87 to 3.79, $p=.553$).

In the US cohort, baseline scores were lower and the direction of change was more positive: “Strong” Resilience increased from 77% to 87%, and matched mean scores rose from 3.53 to 3.68 ($p=.192$; $d=.22$).

The results therefore indicate that participants entered PRIMO with already high endorsement of prosocial values associated with Mainstream Islam. PRIMO was associated with maintenance of these high levels and a modest further increase, particularly in the United States, but not with a statistically significant shift in this specific measure.

Vulnerability to Extremism

Conversely, what we term Vulnerability to Extremism - measured through endorsement of an exclusionary in-group/out-group or “Us versus Them” worldview - declined following PRIMO. Participants displaying “Strong” Vulnerability fell from 11% ($n=7$) before PRIMO to 6% ($n=3$) afterwards, while the proportion displaying “Weak” Vulnerability increased from 62% to 73%.

As theoretically anticipated, Resilience Against Extremism and Vulnerability to Extremism were negatively associated. Using the corrected continuous measures, higher Resilience was associated with lower Vulnerability ($r=-.225$, $p=.016$). This statistically significant relationship supports the conceptual distinction between the two measures while indicating that they capture related, rather than simply inverse, dimensions of participants’ orientations toward inclusive and exclusionary Worldviews.

Religious Pluralism

A separate “Religious Pluralism” metric captured participants’ willingness to recognize value beyond their own religious or Worldview in-group. It was measured through the item: “My faith or worldview teaches that wisdom is found in many religions.” This measure is theoretically important because resilience to exclusionary “Us versus Them” narratives may depend not only on endorsing prosocial values, but also on the permeability of perceived boundaries between one’s own in-group and others. Religious pluralism therefore captures a more demanding form of intergroup openness than general commitments to kindness or justice.

Across all available observations, Pluralism increased from 3.15 before PRIMO ($n=65$) to 3.57 afterwards ($n=53$) on the four-point scale. The proportion selecting the maximum response increased from 45% (29/65) to 68% (36/53).

The matched-participant analysis showed a stronger shift. Among 46 participants with valid responses before and after PRIMO, mean Pluralism increased from 3.02 to 3.59, a gain of 0.57 points (paired t -test, $p=.003$; Wilcoxon $p=.005$; $d=.47$).

An Especially Pronounced Effect in the UK. The change was particularly pronounced in the UK cohort. Among 12 matched participants, Pluralism increased from 2.25 to 3.42 ($p=.015$; $d=.83$). The proportion giving the maximum response across all available UK observations rose from 13% before PRIMO (2/15) to 56% afterwards (9/16). In the US cohort, where baseline Pluralism was already appreciably higher, matched scores increased from 3.29 to 3.65 ($n=34$; $p=.063$; $d=.33$).

These results suggest that one of PRIMO's more distinctive effects concerned not so much the acquisition of basic prosocial values, which were already highly endorsed, but a greater willingness to recognize wisdom beyond participants' own religious tradition. This widening of the perceived moral and religious boundary is theoretically relevant to resilience against exclusionary extremist narratives (Figure 2).

Construction of the Extremism Resilience–Risk Index

The preceding analyses indicated that inclusive ethical resilience, religious pluralism and vulnerability to exclusionary thinking were conceptually related but empirically distinguishable dimensions. Rather than treating them as interchangeable indicators of a single latent psychological trait, we therefore constructed a theoretically specified Extremism Resilience–Risk Index as a formative multidimensional measure, incorporating the three domains discussed above.

1. Resilience against Extremism
2. Religious Pluralism
3. Vulnerability to Extremism

Because all component measures were scored on the same 1–4 scale, Vulnerability was reversed so that higher scores consistently represented the more resilient orientation:

$$\begin{aligned} &\text{Extremism Resilience – Risk Index} \\ &= [\text{Resilience} + \text{Pluralism} + \text{Reversed Vulnerability}] / 3 \end{aligned}$$

where Reversed Vulnerability = 5 – Vulnerability.

The resulting index therefore ranges from 1 to 4, with higher values representing the conjunction of stronger Mainstream ethical commitments, greater permeability of religious in-group/out-group boundaries, and lower endorsement of Islamist and Islamist Extremist exclusionary attitudes.

Importantly, the three domains were given equal conceptual weight. This means that Pluralism was treated as a distinct domain rather than simply being added as a

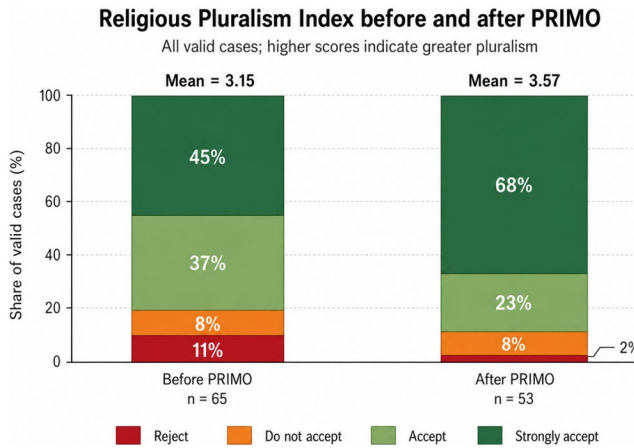


Figure 2. Religious pluralism before and after PRIMO.

fourth item to the Resilience scale. This specification was theory-driven rather than selected to maximize statistical significance. It reflects the proposition that resilience against extremist narratives involves not only prosocial beliefs and rejection of explicitly exclusionary attitudes, but also the capacity to recognize moral or religious value beyond the boundaries of the in-group.³⁵

Changes in Extremism Resilience–Risk Following PRIMO halving the risk of extremism

The theoretically specified Extremism Resilience–Risk Index showed a positive shift following participation in PRIMO. Across participants with complete data for all three constituent domains, the mean Index increased from 3.39 before PRIMO ($n = 57$) to 3.59 afterwards ($n = 52$) on the 1–4 scale.

The more rigorous matched-participant analysis produced a similar result. Among 39 participants with complete Index scores both before and after PRIMO, mean Resilience–Risk increased from 3.39 to 3.60, a gain of 0.21 points. Rescaled to the theoretical 0–100 range, this represents an increase from approximately 80% to 87%.

For descriptive purposes, scores above 3.00 were classified as **High-Resilience/Low-Risk**. Across all available cases, the proportion in this category increased from 74% (42/57) **before PRIMO to 87% (45/52) afterwards**, an uplift of **13 percentage points**.

Conversely, the proportion classified as **Moderate-Resilience/Medium-Risk fell from 26% to 13%** - approximately halving the risk of extremism across the sample. This is a striking descriptive shift for a program that was neither designed nor delivered as a counter-extremism intervention (Figure 3).

Accounting for Index Change

Participant fixed-effects regression confirmed a significant within-person increase in the Extremism Resilience–Risk Index following PRIMO ($\beta = .211$, $p = .023$), with no significant difference in the magnitude of improvement between the UK and US cohorts. Exploratory analysis found no differential change by age, previous

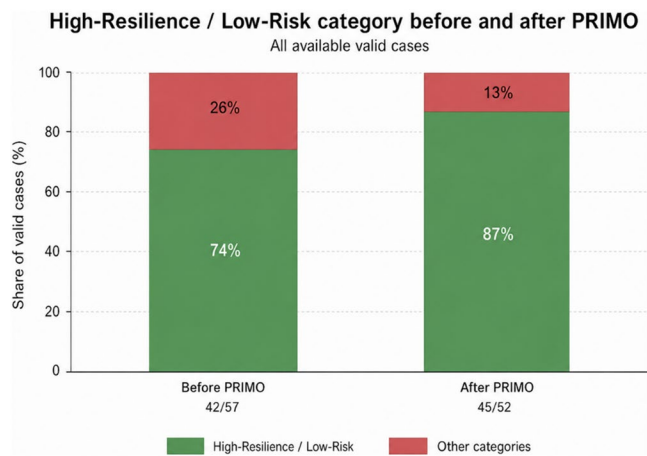


Figure 3. High resilience/low-risk before and after PRIMO.

incarceration, sentence length, being born into a faith, or baseline religious commitment. The only significant predictor was religious identification: participants of another or no faith improved more than Islam-identified participants (adjusted $\beta = .21$, $p = .048$), although the small subgroup warrants caution; conversion to Islam was not predictive.

These findings suggest that PRIMO’s moderating effects were not dependent upon prior adherence to Islam, but were associated more broadly with the prosocial religious and ethical framework conveyed through the Course.

The Relationships between Rehabilitation, Religious Understanding and Resilience to Extremism

Exploration of the relationship between our Resilience-Risk index and the other domains revealed that the relationship between “Attitude to Rehabilitation” and the “Extremism Resilience–Risk Index” was particularly pronounced. Higher Attitude to Rehabilitation scores were strongly and significantly associated with higher Resilience–Risk scores (adjusted $\beta = .81$, $p < .001$), and among matched participants, improvement in Attitude to Rehabilitation was also associated with improvement in Resilience–Risk ($r = .39$, $p = .014$).

In other words, participants who, as a result of PRIMO, became more oriented toward work, education and avoiding further crime also tended to become significantly more resilient and less vulnerable to extremist Worldviews.

Understanding Religious Duties was also positively associated with the Resilience–Risk Index (adjusted $\beta = .13$, $p = .028$).³⁶

Taken together, the findings of these associations strongly support the central thesis of this paper: deradicalization is connected with improved engagement in rehabilitation through work, education and the aspiration to avoid further crime, and both processes may be strengthened and connected by coherent Mainstream religious education.

The Impact of the “Whole-Prison” Approach

The Course for Incarcerated Individuals was delivered within the Programme’s wider “whole-prison” model: correctional staff and chaplains had already completed related training. This created a more supportive institutional environment by increasing understanding of Islamic practice and reducing everyday sources of misunderstanding and conflict.

“Salah” described how the staff training changed his interaction with a correctional officer:

“I had a lot of disrespectful COs when I had my Quran out. But now, my prayer rug and my Quran and my kufi, I shake it out, let you see nothing in it, and then I go.’ And then he was like, ‘They [the Program] told us that.’”

This was consistent with the quantitative staff findings. Among 210 correctional staff, the proportion classified as having a “strong” Professional Understanding of Islam increased from 12% before the three-hour Course to 45% afterwards.

“Anne”, a Christian chaplain who had completed the Chaplains’ Course, similarly described how the training expanded her capacity to provide specifically religious support:

“Before [PRIMO], I wouldn’t have been able to support them on anything, really... But I would not have been able to sit down and counsel them about, ‘What do The Five Pillars tell you right now about what you should be doing?’ It was very helpful, yes.”

The wider institutional effect was also evident to senior prison staff. The Deputy Warden observed:

“I was amazed by the [PRIMO] course. It was completed by some of the most dangerous individuals in this prison who had never completed a course before.”

The Commissioner likewise emphasized that the institutional dimension had contributed to the overall rehabilitative impact of the Course:

“It was important for our staff to receive this training.”

The significance of the whole-prison approach therefore lay in aligning individual and institutional change. Incarcerated participants were encouraged to practise religion constructively while staff and chaplains were simultaneously given greater capacity to recognize and support that practice. The effects observed among incarcerated participants should consequently be understood as occurring within this broader institutional context, rather than as the product of classroom education in isolation.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study began by identifying a simple problem: in early twenty-first-century correctional policy, religion- particularly Islam - has increasingly been framed as a security risk rather than a rehabilitative resource. Deradicalization policy has often oscillated between two unsatisfactory positions. The first is suspicious exceptionalism, in which Muslim identity is treated as a potential security concern requiring surveillance and

control. The second is naïve universalism, which assumes extremist offenders require little engagement with the ideological or religious content of their beliefs. Both approaches risk marginalizing religious Worldviews as a source of prosocial change.

PRIMO for Incarcerated Individuals tested a different proposition: whether coherent Mainstream Islamic education, organized around the model of the Muslim Steward and specifically tailored to the carceral context, could support rehabilitation while also strengthening resilience to extremist worldviews. The study was exploratory, some of the recorded benefits were statistically modest and the study requires replication and expansion with larger controlled samples.

Nevertheless, the pattern of results is important. The proportion of participants at risk of Islamist Extremism was halved due to participation in the Course. Greater engagement with rehabilitation through work, education, and the aspiration to avoid further crime was significantly associated with this greater Extremism Resilience–Lower Risk. Better understanding of religious duties was also positively associated with the change. These findings support the central thesis of this paper: deradicalization is connected with engagement in rehabilitation broadly construed, and both deradicalization and rehabilitation can be strengthened hand-in-hand by coherent Mainstream religious education.

Crucially, PRIMO was not designed or delivered as a counter-extremism program. Its moderating effects emerged instead through religious education, ethical reflection, rehabilitation and constructive engagement with wider society. In this sense, PRIMO offers a model of **deradicalizing by not intending to deradicalize**: rather than subjecting participants to externally imposed ideological correction, it provides the religious and ethical resources through which exclusionary “Us versus Them” worldviews may become progressively less persuasive. The findings support the proposition that transforming “bad” religion into “good” religion may be both more humane and more effective than turning “bad” religion into “no” religion. The latter change risks leaving the underlying Worldview structures associated with “bad” religion untreated—dormant or hidden rather than transformed, and therefore capable of reemerging, as the Fishmongers’ Hall case and others caution.

Policy Implications

This has significant implications for prison-based counter-extremism policy. Strategies in both the United States and United Kingdom have often prioritized risk identification, surveillance and psychologically oriented interventions. While such measures address legitimate security concerns, treating religion primarily as a risk can neglect its rehabilitative potential and leave religious commitment poorly understood and vulnerable to manipulation by more radical actors.

PRIMO points toward a complementary approach in which religious resources are mobilized while religious risks are mitigated through both constructive individual worldview change and institutional alignment. By foregrounding Stewardship, rehabilitation and religious pluralism, coherent Mainstream religious education can help generate outcomes that counter-extremism policy itself seeks: stronger prosocial orientation, greater openness toward others and reduced attraction to exclusionary Worldviews.

Durable deradicalization may depend less on confronting extremist ideas directly than on building the religious understanding, rehabilitative purpose, social belonging and supportive institutional environment that make extremist worldviews—and those who promote them—increasingly unattractive and implausible.

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35. Accordingly, conventional internal-consistency criteria such as Cronbach's alpha are not used to validate the overall index: its constituent domains are intended to capture complementary components rather than interchangeable manifestations of one latent trait. The

index is therefore used as an exploratory research measure of overall resilience–risk orientation, rather than as a diagnostic or individual risk-assessment instrument.

36. Although this relationship was weaker and did not remain independently significant in the fuller multivariable model, it is nevertheless noteworthy given the relatively small sample.

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Appendices. Construction of Variables

Appendix 1. Construction of Attitude to Rehabilitation

Attitude to Rehabilitation comprised four items measuring intention to pursue education, motivation to work, continuation of religious or worldview practice, and belief that faith/worldview would help avoid further crime. Because the items used different response ranges, each was first rescaled to 0–1 and the mean calculated where at least three of four items were valid. Baseline complete-case analysis ($n=67$) supported their combination: $KMO=.691$ and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(6) = 31.56$, $p < .001$. The first principal component had an eigenvalue of 1.93 and explained 48.2% of variance, with loadings of .61, .70, .66 and .79 respectively. Internal consistency was acceptable for an exploratory four-item construct (Cronbach's $\alpha = .63$). Higher scores represent stronger commitment to rehabilitation.

Appendix 2. Construction of Basic Knowledge of Islam

Basic Knowledge of Islam comprised five objectively scored items covering the concept of stewardship, the Five Pillars, the Day of Judgment, the Prophets and the Angel Gabriel. Each response was coded 1 for correct and 0 for incorrect, and a mean knowledge score was calculated where at least four of five responses were available. The measure was administered only to the US cohort. At baseline, 43 participants had sufficient data to receive a score; 36 had responses to all five items. Among these complete cases, KR-20 (equivalent to Cronbach's α for binary items) was .52. Factorability was weak ($KMO=.440$), despite significant Bartlett's $\chi^2(10) = 21.74$, $p=.016$, reflecting substantial ceiling effects.

Appendix 3. Understanding Religious Duties

Understanding Religious Duties was measured by a single item asking participants to assess how well they understood what their religion or worldview required of them. Responses were coded from 0 (**None**) through 1 (**Weak**) and 2 (**Moderate**) to 3 (**Strong**), with higher scores indicating greater perceived understanding of religious obligations. The item was retained independently rather than incorporated into Basic Knowledge of Islam because the two measures capture conceptually different dimensions: Basic Knowledge tests objectively correct knowledge of Islamic beliefs and practices, whereas Understanding Religious Duties measures participants' perceived ability to understand the practical requirements of their own religion or worldview. As a single-item measure, internal-consistency statistics, KMO and factor analysis are neither applicable nor required. The item was therefore analyzed directly as an ordinal/continuous indicator.

Appendix 4. Construction of Commitment to Stewardship and Hope and Purpose

Commitment to Stewardship combined three items representing practical dimensions of the Muslim Steward ideal: prayer/worship, constructive relationships with other incarcerated people, and care for the environment. Scores were averaged where at least two items were valid. Baseline analysis ($n=67$) produced $KMO=.569$ and significant Bartlett's $\chi^2(3) = 19.90$, $p < .001$; the first component explained 54.2% of variance, with loadings of .69, .69 and .83. Internal consistency was modest ($\alpha = .55$), consistent with a multidimensional theoretical construct.

A complementary **Hope and Purpose** construct combined two items assessing having meaningful goals and confidence in achieving them. The items were strongly correlated ($r=.64$) and showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .78$ overall; .75 pre-course and .83 post-course). Higher scores indicated greater hope and future orientation. Together, these measures captured both the practical responsibilities and purposive orientation of the Muslim Steward model.

Appendix 5. Construction of Resilience against Extremism

Resilience against Extremism comprised three items assessing endorsement of prosocial Islamic values characteristic of the Mainstream worldview: treating all people kindly, actively promoting justice, and valuing all human life. Responses were scored from 1–4 and averaged where all three items were valid; higher scores indicate stronger resilience to exclusionary “Us versus Them” worldviews. Baseline complete-case analysis ($n=66$) yielded $KMO=.524$ and a significant Bartlett's test, $\chi^2(3) = 26.49$, $p < .001$. The first principal component had an eigenvalue of 1.66 and explained 55.3% of variance. Component loadings were .87 for kindness, .80 for justice and .52 for valuing human life. Internal consistency was moderate for a short exploratory construct ($\alpha = .59$). The three-item specification excluded Religious Pluralism, which empirical analysis showed to constitute a distinct domain.

Appendix 6. Construction of Vulnerability to Extremism

Vulnerability to Extremism comprised three items measuring endorsement of exclusionary attitudes: avoiding people of other faiths/worldviews, treating members of one's own faith/worldview more favorably, and believing that religious commitment removes the obligation to obey the law. Responses were scored 1–4 and averaged where all three items were valid, with higher values representing greater vulnerability. Baseline complete-case analysis ($n=63$) produced $KMO=.601$ and a significant Bartlett's test, $\chi^2(3) = 9.75$, $p=.021$. The first principal component explained 49.5% of variance, with broadly comparable loadings of .74, .69 and .68. Internal consistency was modest ($\alpha = .48$). The construct was therefore treated as an **exploratory theoretically grounded index of vulnerability**, rather than a diagnostic or psychometric measure of extremism.

Appendix 7. Acceptance of Religious Pluralism

Acceptance of Religious Pluralism was measured by the single item: **“My faith or worldview teaches that wisdom is found in many religions.”** Responses ranged from 1–4, with higher scores representing greater acceptance that religious or moral wisdom may exist beyond one’s own tradition. The item was initially considered alongside the Resilience against Extremism items but was retained as a distinct construct because it did not behave as part of the same underlying factor. Conceptually, it measures the permeability of religious boundaries—or openness to wisdom outside the participant’s own tradition—rather than general prosocial values such as kindness, justice and valuing human life. As a single-item indicator, Cronbach’s α , KMO and factor analysis are not applicable. Religious Pluralism was therefore analyzed independently and subsequently incorporated as a separate, equally weighted domain within the exploratory Extremism Resilience–Risk Index.

Appendix 8. Professional Understanding of Islam

Before the survey, most respondents demonstrated moderate professional understanding (57.6%), followed by weak understanding (30.0%), while only 12.4% showed strong understanding. After the survey, the distribution shifted substantially: the proportion with weak understanding dropped sharply to 3.3%, moderate understanding remained relatively similar at 51.9%, and those with strong understanding increased markedly to 44.8%. The Pearson Chi-Square test ($\chi^2 = 84.823$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$) indicates a statistically significant association between survey timing (before vs. after) and levels of professional understanding. Additionally, the positive symmetric measures (e.g. Kendall’s tau- $b = .423$, Spearman’s $r = .443$, $p < .001$) suggest a moderate positive relationship, confirming that professional understanding of Islam significantly improved from before to after the survey.