Religion in prison in Western societies: from a duty to a right

Once at the heart of prison regime, religion, used as a tool for the moral treatment of convicts in order to reshape their character and make them repent for their transgression, is nowadays a legally guaranteed right for prisoners; religious practice is no longer mandatory and seems to serve a whole new range of spiritual but also social functions for inmates. If this shift has certainly occurred concurrently with the global secularization of Western societies, the links between the place of religion in prisons, the theoretical function assigned to prison sentences and the global political, ideological and economical context also seem to have a noticeable influence on this matter. Starting from the emergence of imprisonment as a criminal sentence in the late 18th century, this presentation will try to expose and analyse those influences, with an emphasis on the role of the rise and importance of liberalism, both in its economical and philosophical acceptations.