

## **A Comparative Analysis of Religions among Nigerian Prison Inmates in Calabar, Cross River State.**

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**ABSTRACT:-** The overwhelming impact of religions in Nigeria has been very glaring over the years. Many religious organizations in Nigeria have dedicated themselves to different activities to help the downtrodden, the oppressed, the poor and the prison inmates in various Nigerian societies. This, to a large extent, is based on their concept of the Almighty God as a God of justice, love and mercy. This paper examined the roles various religions, such as Christianity and Islam, play in the transformation, rehabilitation and reformation of prison inmates through their chaplaincy programmes, compassion and prison ministries. As a comparative study, the paper examined the impact of Islamic and Christian teachings on inmates in prisons in Calabar, Cross River State and outlined the similarities and dissimilarities. The study adopted qualitative research method and descriptive analysis of data derived from oral and group interview from ex-convicts, prison inmates, prison officers (warders), chaplains and compassion and prison ministries of Christianity and Islam. In the findings, the study discovered that Islam and Christianity have been contributing greatly to the reformation of prison inmates, yet have not been recognized or appreciated by the government. Instead, these religions have only been seen in the light of causing insecurity in Nigeria through their religious intolerance. Based on these findings, the paper recommended among others that there should be a strong synergy between religious organizations and the government in the reformation, rehabilitation and transformation of prison inmates during and after their incarceration.

**Keywords:** Christianity and Prison Inmates, Islam and Prison Inmates, Transformation, Rehabilitation and Reformation of Prison Inmates.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Religion remains one of the basic institutions that permeate all aspects of life in Nigeria. John Mbiti had rightly noted that Africans are the most religious conscious people on earth, as they do all things religiously. With this assertion in mind, Nigerian prisons are characterized by religious activities, observed at a highly flourishing tempo. The basement of the involvement of religions in prisons lies in the fact that inmates and incarcerated persons are adherents of one religion or the other. Seemingly, religions also take advantage of the prisons for evangelism of their faith through the show of underlying love and care to inmates.

More so, the fundamental religious conception of prison institutions is that it is not only a place to restrict those that violate societal norms and order, but, a place where different offenders are reformed and rehabilitated to become better citizens (Kadiri & Haliso, 2011: 173). One must also agree that curative, reformatory and rehabilitative contents underlies the idea of religion in prisons especially that of the Christian and Islamic religious traditions considered in this work. In line with the above, the fascinating contrast between religion and the prison institution is of ought most importance here.

Todd, R. Clear, *et al* (1992) have helped out with the contrast stating that it lies in the fact that the prison is synonymous with bad things- crime and punishment. Conversely, religion is about good things – holiness and devotion. The prisoner is conceived as a deviant, an outcast, condemned by the people of the society. Thus, the religious experience of conversion or reversion is a platform to transform the prison's experience of inmates from "you are caught" to "you are free". This is true in that religions are keenly interested in winning the soul of sinners (offenders) and societal rejections as the meeting point between the prison institution and religion is on the task of rehabilitating those who grossly erred in their conducts (19). Further, the role of religion and its attendant religious activities in the social reformation and rehabilitation of prison inmates cannot be overemphasized. This is vividly observed in the Nigerian prison in Calabar. The prison flourishes in diverse religious activities organized by Christian and Muslim faithful through the chaplaincies. They thoroughly ensure that inmates who profess their religious faith, although incarcerated are actively or at least passively involved in the religious activities they offer in prisons. Prison inmates and the religious programmes providers have been profoundly committed to these activities, in a more animating phenomenon, which suggest that inmates find succour in the faith based activities. It is also plausible that the spiritual nourishment which the inmates receive helps to reform their thinking and perception of life, which also helps to

fill the gap of their incarceration and thus restores their hope in life. Also, religion offers an emotional balm through their programmes, as that has helped inmates to overcome strain and depression that comes with incarceration. This, to a large extent, is the basement of an inward premise of change, reformation and rehabilitation of societal deviants in prison custodies (Afzal, 2010: 71).

In summary, it must be noted that the prison-religion relationship is founded on the fabrics of divine mandate to reach out to the outcast, the downtrodden and prisoners in particular. As such, both religion and prison institutions are co-hunters for persons to reform, and should be seen as associates in the provision of psycho social, spiritual therapy and rehabilitation of societal deviants.

### **Brief History of the Nigerian/ Calabar Prisons**

The origin of the Nigerian prison dates back to 1861 when Lagos was made the crown colony by the British colonialists. Many prisons have therefore been established before and after independence in Nigeria. Nigeria however had a dual prison system for more than half a century until the consolidation of the Federal and Local prisons in 1968. The Nigerian prison service, a Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs is headquartered in Lagos. Its facilities since 1975 came under the control and the supervision of an assistant director of prisons and each of these facilities had its own prison headquarters (Agomach 2003: 17, Ndukwe and Nwuzor 2004: 21).

Seemingly, the Calabar prison camp was established in 1890 for the purpose of harbouring some inmates. The prison is headquartered in the city of Calabar, the capital of Cross River State, Nigeria. The Calabar prison camp now known as the Calabar prison has changed its status to a convict prison without adequate structural modification put in place due to the increasing number of inmates. Uket Raymond in an interview explained that the original carrying capacity of the prison was one hundred inmates, but it presently has a surplus of five hundred inmates. "The prison has a kitchen, and an administrative block, alongside the cell blocks. There is also a dilapidated and unequipped clinic in the prison environment". The rehabilitative workshops are in bad condition, as there is little or nothing to show in respect to training and equipping of inmates to be self reliant after incarceration (Ayuk et al, 2013: 2-3).

### **Christianity and Prison Ministries**

Christianity over the years has been greatly involved in social care delivery and social works of helping the needy and the vulnerable which has extended to the prisons. Today, faith based prison services remain a great part of the Christian faith, with the mandate to provide support and succour to prisoners during and after incarceration. The Christian faith prison service also renders professional development of prison chaplains, whose training and mentorship requires further development. The institutions synonymous with chaplaincy religious activities include prisons, hospitals, military formations, schools, police units and chapels. The group of clergy who administers sacred religious duties to these chaplaincies are called chaplains. The main aim of chaplaincies is offering spiritual nourishment in such a marginal and transient human settlement like the ones aforementioned. They extend spiritual services to people in these institutions that are semi detached from the general life praxis of society. The chaplains are mostly assigned by his or her main religious body to minister in such institutions, with people momentarily separated from the mainstream society (Ihenacho, 2015: 113).

In the Calabar prisons, the most active Christian chaplaincies are that of the Catholics, and the Protestants/Pentecostals. In an interview, Rev. Dr. Ubong Eyo, a scholar and cleric who ministers in the chaplaincy sometimes, explains that the chaplains approve and coordinate all religious activities in the prison based on tradition and doctrinal differences. The Christian chaplains represent their Churches; they organize religious activities for the inmates according to their peculiar denominational practices and administer sacraments. In the Calabar prisons, the Protestant chaplains of the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria (PCN), the Methodist Church of Nigeria and the Anglican Communion, hold their Sunday services depending on which denomination is slated to do so. The Catholic chaplains celebrate Sunday and morning masses too for their respective members. The Pentecostals are not left out as they troop in to conduct services and other activities in the prisons weekly. It is also the chaplaincies that organize the Bible study sessions which has been grouped according to denominational lines. It is more of an inmate fellowship, where they are being taught deep truths in the Scriptures. This Bible study sessions hold periodically depending on the activities within the prison. It is said to be open to non Christian inmates who wish to participate.

The Christian chaplaincies also organize the daily morning and evening devotions which is observed in the prison cells. From the Catholic perspective, which is undoubtedly the most active chaplaincy, some of their basic religious activities include celebration of the Holy Eucharist (Mass), administration of the sacrament of reconciliation, which encapsulates confession sessions, administration of the sacrament of anointing of the sick, rosary sessions, honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Bible study session by the Catholic Biblical Instruction Union (CBIU), intercessory prayers by the Legion of Mary and other pious organizations.

The Christian chaplaincy activities can be summed up as 'priest in military uniforms' who have deeper pastoral care to God, Church and government. They are committed to the Christian ethics of cooperation,

community growth, equality, human justice and grace. They as well promote the value, dignity and worth of each person they encounter, even as they seek to imitate Christ (Okafor, 2015: 7). Thus, one can say that the chaplaincy units of Christianity uses their religious activities to instil the consciousness of civility and good behaviour used for social control into the psyche of inmates (Ihenacho, 2015: 114).

Interestingly, there are designated departments/ministries, formed by mainline churches in Calabar whose responsibility is to pay regular visits to the prisons with relief materials (clothes, Bibles, food and toiletries). These departments also cease the opportunity to preach to the inmates across religious lines. This enterprise has yielded positive results as they impact directly on the lives of the inmates and often witness converts and true repentance within the prison walls. However, there are organized interdenominational prison ministries across the Christian faith in Calabar. Such include the Prison Fellowship of Nigeria. The fellowship is an organization of prison departments/ministries of different denominations in Calabar. The fellowship exhorts, trains and equips Christians to reach out and identify with prisoners, ex prisoners and their families in line with practical Christian living and social gospel of Christ pristine ministry.

The Prison Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) is a member of the Prison Fellowship International (PFI), a global movement founded in 1976, through the initiative of Charles Colsin, a special counsel to president Nixum of the ISSA Operation as an NGO, and more of a voluntary Christian body. The Nigerian branch was formed in 1985, and officially inaugurated on 1 April, 1989. The fellowship has membership of over 100 churches, spread across over 21 states of the nation. Their mandate is to proclaim and demonstrate the redemptive power of Christ's profound love for people in the praxis of physical and spiritual reconciliation and rehabilitation. Their mission statement is to serve the body of Christ and minister to prisoners, ex prisoners and families and its advancement of biblical standards of justice in the criminal justice system. As an avenue for those who are mutilated to extend God's love to prisoners, the PFN has been involved in programs, projects and services aimed at healing, reformation, rehabilitation, restoration and reintegration of prisoners as part of practical Christianity. They use visitation periods to carry out Bible studies and worship services which has helped inmates reduce the depression, guilt and self contempt that often hold them sway. The PFN seeks to change the lives of inmates across the prisons, through constant preaching of the gospel and meeting some of the basic needs of the inmates (Ogwezzy 44-56).

### Islam and Prisons

In the Calabar prisons, the presence of the Islamic religion is not as strong as that of the Christian faith. Mr. Usang Uket, a prison Warder in the Calabar (Afokang) prison reiterates that the lukewarm activities of the Muslim faithful in the Calabar prison holds to the fact that there are quite a few number of Muslims in incarceration. This could be well understood based on culture area, and the dominance of the Christian faith in the South-South region of Nigeria where Calabar is located.

However, notwithstanding, Islam has a foothold in the Calabar prisons. At first, the Calabar Muslim community regularly pay visits to the prisons to pray, encourage and give the inmates relief materials. They also exhort them not to lose faith in Allah and his religion of peace. The delegate chosen by the Muslim community as well work out modalities to support their own inmates through the ordeals of court trials. When asked of the Islamic position on imprisonment, Muslims interviewed such as Sadiq and Salihu posit that the concept of imprisonment contradicts the Islamic view which holds the Shariah law in high esteem to be meted to people who commit heinous crimes. The Shariah law for example punishes theft by amputation of the right hand. To them, since they live in a secular society, they have to accept the pattern and model of punishment for crimes and offences.

Further on this, the Calabar Muslim community upholds the fourth pillar of Islam commonly called *zakat*, meaning charity. In doing this obligatory principle, the community contributes and sends a portion of their wealth for the benefit of the inmates. Seemingly, it must be noted that the Muslim Students Association which comprises all Islamic adherents studying in higher institutions in Calabar champions the course of prison visitations in the Calabar prisons. They do so along their counterparts, the Muslim Corpers Association of Nigeria (MCAN). This association pays regular visits to the prison to talk to fellow Muslims in incarceration. They go alongside with relief materials, books, Qurans and drugs. During their visits, they exhort the inmates to change their mindset towards crime and also away from sin. They as well, pray with them and encourage them in their faith.

In relation to the above, Ihenacho, notes that Muslim inmates are also encouraged to practice *sadaqah*. They are admonished to give alms to the less privileged among them, as a way of extending the love of Allah and as well foster the Islamic spirit of brotherhood. Conversely, those who do not have anything to offer are encouraged to engage more in meditation of the course of Allah, be more prayerful and of good conduct in and out of prison custody (110).

Salihu Abubakar in an in interview elucidates that one of the aims of Islamic organizations visit to the prison is for *Da'wah* or evangelism. The *Da'wah* is basically observed with two purposes. One is to call their

fellow Muslims in prison to fear God Almighty Allah, even in their state of incarceration, upholding the Islamic tenets. Sadiq Maumar also in an interview agrees with Salihu but adds that the second aim is also to call the non-Muslim inmates unto Islam in a way of evangelism, by preaching the holy Quran, the Hadiths of the prophets and also some historical details of the righteous attitude and way of life of some of the previous and present prominent Muslim faithful, that happens to be good examples to humanity and also worthy of mention.

### **Comparative Analysis of Islam and Christianity in Prisons**

In comparing Christianity and Islamic faith's activities in the Calabar prisons, this will be done by highlighting the similarities and differences based on Louis H. Jordans definition of comparative religion as, "... that science which compares the origin, structure, and characteristics of the various religions of the world, with the view of determining their genuine agreements and differences, the measure of relation in which they stand one to another, and their superiority and inferiority when regarded as types" (Jordan 63). This study undoubtedly recognizes and agrees with the fact that the job of a comparative researcher excludes the passing of value judgement which is evidenced in Jordans' definition above. Ntamu rightly points out that the evaluation as to the superiority or inferiority of themes in religion falls outside the ambit of a comparative research. Thus, should the study favour one religion against the other, it ceases to be a comparative, but apologetic (61). It also brings to the fore that this research be seen as a contribution to the understanding of the followers of both religions on love, care and compassion for one another.

### **Similarities and Differences**

**Chaplaincy Compared:** In the Calabar prisons, the Christian chaplaincy is noted to be more active in their services to inmates, which is quite different from that of Islam, who is understandably lukewarm in their activities due to the minimum number of Muslim inmates in the Calabar prisons and also due to the dominance of Christianity in the region. In another vein, the Christian religion have a chaplain in charge of all Christian activities in the prison, whereas, the Muslims do not have an Imam in charge of the prison inmates, rather, they pay visits to the inmates through Islamic organizations like the Muslim students organizations, etcetera.

**Religious Programmes Compared:** The Christian chaplaincy in the Nigerian prisons, Calabar activities borders around Sunday services/masses, Bible study sessions, daily morning and evening devotions, administration of the sacrament of reconciliation by the Catholics which encapsulates confession sessions, anointing of the sick, etcetera. Sadiq Maumar in an interview explains that the Muslims carry out their own unique activities according to the tenets and practice of their faith. It is said that the inmates observe the *Jumat* prayers of Fridays at 12:30 to 2:30pm, coupled with their daily five times a day prayers (Afzal 16).

**Prison Ministries/Organizations Compared:** Interestingly, the Christian faith boast of designated organizations/ministries in charge of prison's visitation and inmates welfare. Such include; the Prisons Fellowship of Nigeria, wherein about a hundred churches are members. Differently, the Islamic faith does not have designated ministry or organizations for prison visitations, but rather, regular visits are paid as a community and also through the student's and corper's associations who provide relief materials to inmates.

**Evangelism Compared:** The mandate of the Christian faith at the Calabar prisons is to evangelize and convert non-Christians to the fold. They do so by making open their teachings on insightful and deep truths of the Scriptures. During an interview Salihu Abubakar, argues that the Muslims also have the intention to call people unto Islam with wisdom and beautiful preaching (Surah 16:132). They do so by the show of love, and the modest and exemplary lifestyle to inmates in incarceration.

### **Achievements of the Religions in the Lives of Inmates in and Outside of Prisons.**

Christianity and Islam have achieved so much in the transformation and rehabilitation of many prison inmates in many Nigerian prisons. Their contribution in this respect has gone a long way to make sense out of a people the society may see as nonsense. It has also helped the inmates overcome "depression, guilt and self-contempt that so often accompanies the prison sentence" and in some cases the tendency to contemplating suicide. (Todd Clear *et al*, 1992: 1). Some of these inmates have come out from prisons to become great preachers of their religion. In this part of the paper, these researchers examine the achievements of Christianity and Islam in the reformation and rehabilitation of Calabar prison inmates.

**Christianity:** The Christian prison ministries and chaplaincy programmes have made remarkable marks in the lives of prison inmates in Calabar prison and after their terms in prison. These achievements are mostly in the area of character reformation which has eased the job of the prison warders.

The Calabar Chaplaincy known as the Chapel of Mercy, courtesy of Williams Anwan Foundation (WAF), has among its members an evangelical team, who are also inmates who have experienced

transformation of life from the gospel shared in the prison. They have become involved in preaching to their fellow inmates testifying to the transformative power of the gospel if they will also believe in Christ. The vision of the chaplaincy is to reform, transform and restore men and women to be better citizens of the society.

Another aspect of the work of the Chapel of Mercy is the education of the inmates. This chaplaincy has contributed in no small measure in the formal and informal education of the inmates in Calabar Prison. For instance, The Believers Love World organised a foundational training which is known as the School of Discipleship for the inmates which took up to six (6) weeks. At the end of the period, the participants were examined and successful persons were awarded certificates. The Chaplaincy also works with the Calabar prison authority to educate some of the inmates so that some of them registered and wrote their West African Senior School Certificate Examinations (WASSCE) and National Examinations Council (NECO). Some passed and have also written JAMB examinations with the intention of getting admission into any tertiary institution in Nigeria. This is a laudable achievement.

In the area of human rights and justice, the chaplaincy assists in facilitating legal representation of inmates in courts by liaising with legal organisations who will offer the inmates free *probono* services. This service is very important because some of the inmates may have been innocent but could not afford any form of legal representation and are therefore found guilty in cases they know nothing about.

Furthermore, the chaplaincy encourages the inmates to be serious about the skill acquisition programme of the Calabar prison. This is to enable the inmates become self sustaining after their years of incarceration as each inmate on release is given a special financial support to enable him/her establish a small business that will help eradicate any form of desire that will cause him to return back to what took him/her to prison.

Another major achievement is in the provision of care in the prison. The chaplaincy and the prison ministries provide drugs, toiletries, clothes and food for inmates. In this way the health of the inmates are cared for. It must be recalled that the number of inmates awaiting trial in Nigerian prisons are more than the convicted persons. Those awaiting trial are not so much cared for as those convicted persons. The convicted have approved clothes to wear but those awaiting trials do not have clothes. This is where the clothes supplied by the chaplaincy and prison ministries are very important.

Ubagha Peter Uko narrated the story of his sojourn in Calabar prison. He explained that having being sentenced to prison, he felt that life is hopeless and meaningless. One day, he paid attention to the preaching of the Chapel of Mercy and choose God's plan for his life. He registered in a discipleship Christian programme organised by the chaplaincy and studied so many things about Jesus Christ and His saving power and also discovered what it means to be successful in life and live one's life to the fullness. He surrendered his life to Christ and has since been a successful Christian. Having been released from Calabar prison, Ubagha is now living his new found life in Christ. He has not only married a beautiful wife and has gotten children; he is also a loving husband, a godly father, and a successful and prospering businessman. In the church, he is a committed, active and faithful Christian serving in his church. This is what chaplaincy has done. These achievements by the Christian religion in Calabar prisons through the chaplaincy and prison ministries have been made possible by the support of various organisations, governmental and non-governmental.

**Islam:** According to the Pluralism Project,

Muslim chaplains often serve both Muslims and non-Muslims, offering spiritual support and guidance, and in recent years, chaplains have acted as intra-institutional leaders who work towards greater interfaith understanding and community engagement. Muslim chaplains are often the face of Islam in these institutions and beyond, and their history in America is intricately interwoven with social attitudes about Islam and the changing demographics of the nation's Muslim population (2017:1)

It is believed that chaplaincy in Islam actually originated from Christian concept of chaplaincy. It is the Christian model that they follow to provide "faith-based guidance in institutional contexts, particularly in the military, on campuses, in hospitals, and in correctional facilities and prisons" (2017:1).

James K. Dooghan in a monograph that deals with "Muslim Prison Ministry: Hindering the Spread of the Radical, Militant, Violent and Irreconcilable Wing of Islam" argues that "prisons and detention centers are recruiting grounds for radical Islamists" (2006: 2). He therefore advocated that "addressing the violent Islamic ideology at the grass roots level may decrease the number of terrorist recruitment and increase the number of Muslims appealing to a non-violent interpretation of the Qur'an" (2006: 2). With this view of decreasing the ideology of terrorism even in prison, the chaplaincy are now working with serious minded moderate clerics and Islamic fellowships and Islamic Corpers Fellowship in Calabar to educate and encourage Islamic faithful to be guided and committed to the worship of Allah.

They have established a good evangelism team to propagate Islamic faith in Calabar prison. This has helped to support Muslim inmates and contributed to de-radicalize those who would have the tendency to

become radicals if such moderate teachings were not part of the prisons ministry in Calabar prison. They have also converted some non-Muslims to their faith through this evangelism outreach in the Calabar prison.

Furthermore, Muslim Chaplaincy through the Muslim Corpers Fellowship in Calabar has also been involved in the donation of clothes, food, toiletries, drugs and medical treatment to inmates. This has helped to keep the inmates healthy as they serve their sentence.

The Islamic community in Calabar does not rest on the fact that they are a religious minority in the area but join hands to provide a good legal representation to assist those who were cast into detention out of injustice. They also provide financial support to encourage Muslim inmates to cope with their sentence by visiting them with gifts.

However, it must be made clear that because the number of inmates in Calabar prison are more Christians, Islamic Fellowships are not too pronounced in their activities towards the inmates, yet the little they have been doing is worthy of note.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

This work being a comparative analysis of religions among Nigerian prison inmates in Cross River State recognizes that the role of religious activities in the social reformation and rehabilitation of prison inmates cannot be overemphasized. This is evidently observed in the Calabar prisons as the prison premises flourishes with religious activities, as the Christian and Muslim faithful in the state ensure that inmates who profess their religions are actively or at least, passively involved in the religious activities they offer in the prisons. Study also stated that the Muslims and Christians also take the opportunity which the prisons avail them to convert non-members, as well as believers of other religions. The research thus noted that the practices and activities of the religions in Calabar prisons have given the inmates succour and solace in their faith's teachings even in incarceration. These teachings with time thus brings to the fore an inward change, reformation and repair of the societal deviants in the prison custody. The basement of comparative religion in this study is found in the ecumenical sessions for interfaith dialogue, understanding and tolerance. It therefore showcases that the role of prison-religion relationship is founded on the foundations of each religion to reach out to the outcast, the downtrodden and prisoners in particular as envisaged by their Scriptures.

## **III. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the above conclusion, these researchers therefore, make the following recommendations:

1. There should be a strong synergy between religious organizations and the government in the reformation, rehabilitation and transformation of prison inmates during and after their incarceration.
2. That the Christian and Islamic faiths should intensify their activities and welfares to the prison inmates in Calabar prison.
3. That the Islamic faith should appoint a moderate Imam to coordinate the affairs of the Muslims in incarceration, whose interpretation of the Quran will not serve as a means of recruitment for terrorists.
4. That religious bodies and the government should work out modalities to partner in the rehabilitation and restoration of inmates.
5. That the prison commission should build a cathedral and a mosque at the Calabar prison to give the inmates a suitable place of worship.

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ORAL INTERVIEW

Names	Religion	Age	Place of Interview	Date of Interview
Saliyu Abubakar	Islam	37	Muslim community (Bogobiri), Calabar	14/5/2017
Uket Raymond	Christianity	40	Calabar Prison	13/5/2017
Rev. Ubong Eyo	Christianity	47	Calabar South Council	13/5/2017
Sadiq Maumar	Islam	50	Calabar Prison	13/5/2017
Akpan Ubongabasi	Christianity	28	Unical	14/5/2017
Ubagha Peter Uko	Christianity	49	Calabar South	20/5/2017
Usang Uket	Christianity	45	Calabar Prison	13/5/2017