

RELIGION IN PRISON: THE CHALLENGE OF HUMAN REHABILITATION

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Abstract

Nigerian prisons are characterized by religious activities, at highly flourishing tempo. Prison inmates and the religious programme providers are profoundly committed to the activities, in animating phenomenon, seemingly suggesting that the inmates find succor in faith based activities. The spiritual nourishment which the inmates receive help to reform their thinking and perception of life, from the prism of faith and knowledge of God. Such pedagogy fills the gap of their seclusion and also restores their lost hope in life. This paper responded with the methods of observation and in-depth interview to explore the situation in Port Harcourt prison. The findings of the study were presented in the qualitative analytical mill.

Key words: Religion; Prison; Nigeria; Inmates; Reformation; Rehabilitation

Introduction

In Nigeria, the idea of establishing the modern human cage and reformation institution – the prison, for the purpose of confining convicts of various offences in society, as well as those awaiting trial for heinous crimes, dates back to the colonial period. The institution is periodically followed up with reform policies backed up with legal frameworks. Prisons in Nigeria are meant to perform four basic functions, namely: (1) Taking lawful custody of all those certified to be so kept by courts of competent jurisdiction; (2) Identifying the causes of inmates' anti-social disposition; (3) Setting in motion mechanisms for the in treatment and training for eventual reintegration into society, as normal law abiding citizens, on discharge; (4) Administering prison's farm and industry for the purpose and, in the process generate revenue for the government, (see Olusegun, 2012).

The underpinning idea of the deviant cage institution and seclusion is reformation, rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders in the society, (see Reid 2000).

Disappointingly, the deplorable state of Nigerian prisons' infrastructure and services are suggestive of cage punishment towards deterrence. The deplorable state and services are contrary to United Nations Standard for the Management of Prisons and the inmates therein, (see Ogwezzy 2011). The depreciating human and humane contents of prison operations attract and sustain the attention of religious institutions and movements, in tune with global trend. The Christian and Islamic religious boom in Nigeria have permeated into the prison institutions, so flourishing that the phenomenon calls for exploratory study.

Method of Study and Theoretical Framework

The design of this study is focused on the Port Harcourt prison experience. Port Harcourt is the capital city of Rivers State in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. The thrust of the study is examination of the structure and typology of religious activities and the concomitant and complementary social welfare services. The method of study is phenomenological observation and in-depth interview. Report of the findings is presented in qualitative analysis, aligned to the framework of control theory.

Control theory is a generic discourse on the concept of deviance, as associated with the idea of social disorganization. The theory is rooted in the expositions of Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), on the fetters and fabric of commitment, which build up and exist between and amongst people in their social groups. The fundamental alignment of social control theory with the project of reformation and reintegration activities in the prisons is on the thrust of the theory, that deviance is higher among individuals in less integrated social formations and societies. The theory anchor its strength on Emile Durkheim's analysis of differential suicide rates among Catholics and Protestants, (see Durkheim 1933; Fenton 1984; Makowsky and Collins 2010; Ritzer 2008).

Control theory spotlight the adjourning point of goal and means, as the trajectory for individuals to taking the option of deviant approach to adaptation in their environment and social location. In the main, the theory states that everybody has the intrinsic impulse and propensity to indulge in criminal acts. Therefore, deviance is the product of human nature and encounter with the vicissitudes of life. That is, the moments people feel temporarily released from group commitment and restraints that keep them in check, and at bay with anomie, they commit deviant acts, (see Clinard and Meier 1998: 136). Religious teaching and activities are therefore a paradigm of group commitment and restraint that keep inmates in check against further drifting and misconduct in the society.

As explained by Hirschi (1969:16-26), the efficacy of control theory in providing the needed bond for prisoners' reformation, rehabilitation and reintegration on the platform of prevention against deviance operate on four principles of: profound *attachment*, to one's group; need for *commitment* – such that the individual feels important and conscious of his personality and reputation, in the society and before God, as the religions in reference teach, to control deviant behaviours. Social control theory also draw strength from the principle of *involvement* in conventional activities, which become routinized ways of building intrinsic buffer, in the mind and thought of the deviant (prisoner), against violation of shared values and norms of society. Again, the regular religious activities in the prisons are alignable to the frame of the principles. The fourth principle is *belief*, in the core values and life pattern of the individual's group and society. Correspondingly, religion is the prototype and summit of human belief ingenuity. In tandem with the theory, religion in prison is aimed at rebuilding inmates' faith in themselves – as humans with endowments, dignity and, as beneficiaries in God salvation economy and society's wholesome existence, *ipso facto* the Nigerian project. Thus, control theory possess the properties of citizenship re-orientation and spiritual rebirth, especially as advocated in the cage institution.

The Relationship between Religion and Prison Services

The fundamental religious conception of the prison institution is that it is not only a place to restrict those that violate societal norms but, a place where different offenders are reformed to become better citizens, once more (Kadiri and Haliso, 2011:173). In other words, the curative, reformatory and rehabilitation contents underly the idea of religion in prisons, especially of the Christian and Islam traditions. Dammer, et al, (1992), states that there is a fascinating contrast between religion and the prison institution. They argue that the contrast 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, and outcast, shunned by the people. The religious experience of conversion or reversion is a platform to transform the prisons' experience from "you are caught" to "you are free." After all, religions are keenly interested in wining the soul of sinners and societal rejects. In the main, the confluence point between the prison institution and religion is on the task of rehabilitating the humans who grossly erred in their conducts.

Hallet and Johnson, (2014), recalls that the origin of the prisons is sequel to human quest for humane alternative to the harsh public square punishment of the 17th and 18th centuries. Another link concept here, between religion and prisons is the idea of humane treatment of offenders in society. The industrial revolution also gave impetus to the emergence of prisons. The changing economic and social relations it heralded rendered corporal punishment less effective for serving public order, more than regimented punishments of the soul. According to Jonathan (cited in Hallet and Johnson 2014),

The prison permits a far more graduated system of sanctions, better to encourage full enforcement of the criminal laws protecting property. It operates to enforce discipline and self- control on those subjected to its rigours without the need or occasion for unruly public to gather.

The idea underlying this objective is improved treatment of humans with dignity. This is another fundamental concern of religions.

The role of religious activities in the social reformation and rehabilitation of prison inmates cannot be over-emphasized. For instance, almost every prison in the United States of America has a chaplain or team of chaplains responsible for assisting inmates to exercise the constitutional rights of practicing their faith (O'Connor and Duncan, 2006:84). The above situation is not far from what is in play in Nigeria, (see Ogwokhadembe et al. 2014). This is amply demonstrated in this study, with the Port Harcourt prisons as case study. The prison premises flourish in religious activities. Christians and Muslims ensure that inmates who profess their religions are actively or, at least passively involved in the religious activities they offer in the prisons. The faiths also, take the extra step of trying to convert non members, as well as believers of other religions.

The inmates find solace and succor in the religious activities that orchestrate the culture of Port Harcourt prisons. The emotional balm which the religious programmes

offer inmates help them overcome the strain and depression caused by their incarceration. With time, the inmates become more profoundly involved and integrated in religious activities which begins to take root in their taught and understanding of life. This is the inward premise of change, reformation and repair of the societal deviants in the prison custody. Prison-religion relationship is therefore founded on the fabrics of divine mandate to reach out to the outcast, the downtrodden and prisoners in particular. Even Christ's retort; when I was in prison you never came to see me implies that prison religion and social services are profound Christian duties. It is an extension of the compassion Christ had for the afflicted. In the main, both religion and prison institutions are co-hunters for persons to reform – they are associates in the provision of psycho-social and spiritual therapy and rehabilitation of societal deviants.

The Christian Chaplaincy and Religious Activities

The chaplaincy is a religious organization of a major religious tradition that operate in a secular institution. The institutions synonymous with chaplaincy religious activities include prison, hospital, military formation, school, police units, personal chapel, etc. The group of clergy who administer sacerdotal duties to chaplaincies are called chaplains. In the past chaplaincy was a religious formation traditionally associated with Christianity in social institutions of human cluster. It is aimed at offering such collection of people spiritual nourishment, in such marginal and transient human settlements. Other religions have also embraced the idea of chaplaincy, as a way of extending spiritual service to people in the institutions that are semi-detached from the general life praxis of society, *ipso facto* the religions. The chaplain is therefore a clergy assigned by his main religious body to minister to such institutions, with people momentarily separated from the mainstream society.

In the Port Harcourt prisons are the Catholic chaplaincy unit, the Protestant chaplaincy unit and the Muslim chaplaincy unit. The Chaplains approve and co-ordinate all religious activities in the prison. They however, delegate some of the duties, based on tradition and doctrinal differences. The Christian chaplains represent their churches. They organize religious activities for the inmates according to their peculiar Christian doctrines and administer sacraments. The chaplaincy units operate differently – maintaining religious freedom and tolerance in the prison.

In the main, the Protestant chaplains hold their Sunday services, while the Catholic chaplains celebrate Sunday and morning masses for their respective members. There is also the Bible study sessions and groups. It is a forum of inmates fellowship – sharing the pedagogy of the scripture. The periodic bible study and fellowship meetings are also open to non-Christian inmates. There is yet the daily morning and evening devotions – done in the prison cells. The general religious education for all inmates irrespective of denomination is on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, between 10am and 1pm. This is also an ecumenical session for interfaith dialogue, understanding and tolerance. The religious sessions also have inmate-leaders and organizers.

The different religious groups including those from outside the prison use the free sessions within the routine activities of the inmates. Form the Catholic perspective,

some of the basic religious activities include celebration of the Holy Eucharist (Mass), administration of the sacrament of reconciliation (Confession sessions), administration of the sacrament of the anointing of the sick, Rosary sessions, honour of the blessed virgin Mary; bible study session by the Catholic Biblical Instructors Union (CBIU), intercessory prayers by the Legion of Mary and other pious organizations. There is also counselling sessions. Some of these religious programmes are also done in different praxis by the Protestants and visiting religious groups. Thus, the chaplaincy units of Christianity used their religious activities to instill the consciousness of civility and good behaviour used for social control into the psych of the inmates.

The Prison Fellowship of Nigeria

The Prison Fellowship of Nigeria is a corporate Christian body. It is an organization of prison ministries of different denominations, across the Christian faith groups in Port Harcourt. The Fellowship is aimed at extending the Christ economy to prison inmates and their families. In the advocacy activities of the Fellowship, they exhort, train and equip Christians to reach out and identify with prisoners, ex-prisoners and their families – in line with practical Christian living and social gospel of Christ's pristine Ministry.

The Nigeria Prison Fellowship is a member of the Prison Fellowship International (PFI). The Prison Fellowship International is a global movement, founded in 1976, through the initiative of Charles Colson – a special counsel to President Nixon, of the United States of America. The Prison Fellowship operate as a voluntary Christian body – a Non-Governmental Organization. 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 Federation. Prison Fellowship of Nigeria proclaim and demonstrate the redemptive power of Christ's profound love for people in the praxis of physical and spiritual reconciliation and rehabilitation. Here lies the vision of the movement. To actualize this vision, the mission statement of the Fellowship is to exhort and serve the body of Christ and ministry to prisoners, ex-prisoners, victims and their families and in its advancement of biblical standards of justice, in the criminal justice system.

Prison Fellowship Nigeria is a relying point for those who are motivated to extend God's love to prisoners, ex-prisoners, victims of crime and their families. Since its inception in Nigeria, the Christian faith based fellowship has been involved in programmes, projects and services aimed at healing, reformation, restoration and reintegration of prisoners, as part of practical Christianity. The Prison Fellowship Nigeria use visitation periods, bible study, praise song, prayer and worship service to help inmates reduce the depression, guilt, and self contempt that often hold prisoners sway. This is especially the case for young inmates who lack experience to cope with such strange social location.

According to one of our informants, he was a former prison inmate, converted by members of the Fellowship. He listened to the word of God as preached by the Fellowship members, and embraced Godly living. He said he was awaiting trial when he had contact with the Prison Fellowship Nigeria. The Fellowship members normally visit,

provide basic needs, with reiteration and assurance of God's compassion and love, even in situation of rejection. The informant confessed that it was the pedagogy that made him believe that there is hope, especially by serving God and being consistent in Godly living – he decided to fellowship with Deeper Life Bible Church. The informant concluded his speech by appealing to the Christian community to reach out to convicts in various prisons – that many prisoners are in thirst for the gospel message, *ipso facto* repentance, (Akan Effiong, Oral Interview, March 13, 2014). This care underscore the control effect of the theoretical framework of this study.

The Prison Fellowship seeks to change the lives of prison inmates across the country, through constant preaching of the gospel and meeting some of the basic needs of the inmates. The inmates who profoundly embrace religious programmes are less likely to be re-arrested, after release from prison, and their likelihood of success can be enhanced by the religious involvement. The Prison Fellowship Nigeria provides material assistance and reintegration support. The Fellowship also offer advice to Government for improvement in the criminal justice system to reduce the emphasis on punishment of the offender, and give more attention, reformation, rehabilitation and reintegration. The Fellowship also respond to the needs of the prisoners, in sickness and hunger.

The Fellowship advocates for reform in the penal code and punishment to some offences in the society. Prison Fellowship organize Restorative Justice Events, as a medium of practical appraisal and re-engineering of our criminal Justice system to one that is humane, holistic and consistent with personal responsibility, punishment and restoration of the offender, victim remedy and restoration of societal equilibrium and harmony.

The United Christian Prisons Ministry

In Rivers State, there is also the United Christian Prisons Ministry – a non-Governmental organization of Christian bias. It is a prototype of the Prison Fellowship, Nigeria. The secretariat is in Port Harcourt, the state capital. The UCPM was formed and registered with the corporate affairs commission in 1994. The members, cut across the Protestant and Pentecostal churches, and Christian ministries that provide religious services to the inmates of Port Harcourt prison. In the main, the UCPM is an evangelistic group, with profound Christian pedagogy targeted at converting the prisoners for better life, grounded in Christian principles. Apart from the spiritual reformation scheme, UCPM also offer the inmates social rehabilitation products, such as opportunity for primary and secondary education. Some are even exposed to theological training, for ministry and sacerdotal responsibilities in and out of the prison custody.

The UCPM mobilize resources to maintain the skills acquisition centre in the prison premises, for the inmates to learn the skills of barbing, hair dressing, carpentry and metal works in the Port Harcourt prison. The UCPM extend the religious and social services to other prison institutions in Rivers and Bayelsa States – namely Degema, Ahoada, Elele and Yenagoa prisons. In partnership with other Church organizations, UCPM built a model worship centre in the Port Harcourt prison. The workshop not only keep the prisoners meaningfully busy, they are being armed with legitimate means of livelihood and wholesome life. The post prison plan of UCMP is to build a reintegration

center with adequate infrastructure to receive and train discharged prison inmates for a transition period of about one year. The ex-prisoners' transit centre is to be built at Rumuogbo in Emuoha Local Government Area of Rivers State. The UCPM also provide money and fairly used clothes to discharged inmates, to enable them pay transport back to their homes. The Ministry also partner with the prison authorities for the medical care of sick inmates.

One of the coordinators of the prison Ministry reported that four inmates discharged from Port Harcourt prison, who wished to be Christians in the Anglican Communion were baptized by him in St. Mark's Church, Borikiri. It was the UCPM that directed them to the minister, who is the Niger Delta Diocesan Prisons Chaplain, under the UCPM. The Niger Delta Diocese has functional committee that co-ordinates its prison ministry with the UCPM. The activities of the UCPM has continued to attract many other religious movements and Pentecostal churches.

Muslim Chaplaincy and Prison *Da'wah*

Da'wah is the Islamic concept and interpretation of Mosque activities in the Prison. The terminology consist of two words- Prison and *Da'wah*. The word *Da'wah* is an Arabic word derived from the word 'da'a' – which connotes 'to call', 'to invite' or 'to attract' another person or group of persons to embrace the way of Allah through Islamic pedagogy. Any person who embarks on such project is called *Da'ii /Da'iyah*, meaning 'the caller'. This definition and understanding is underscored by Abdul Ghani and Modibbo (2012), that "*Da'wah* refers to the act of inviting people to the real teachings of Islam through lawful available means". Again, the idea of *Da'wah* is fundamentally rooted in the teachings of the Qu'ran – "and let there be from you, a group of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is evil/wrong, and those will be the successful". (Q3:104).

Prison on the other hand means, a public institution established and operated by the government for the custody and management of convicts and sundry inmates, especially those awaiting trial. Prison *Da'wah* in essence means, inviting, calling and or spreading the light and teachings of Islam, to those who are in captivity, behind the bar and or those whose freedom and liberty have been legally suspended for a given period or withdraw for life. Jomoh (2009) report of the activities of Muslim Chaplain in Ilorin prison, underscore the need for this study, in the Port Harcourt prison.

The Port Harcourt Prison *Da'wah* is not well organized like the Christian chaplaincy formation and fellowship. However, Mosques and Muslim bodies organize themselves under the platform of *Da'wah* to reach out to Islamic inmates in the prison custody. The groups have appointed co-ordinators for the Mosque activities in the prison. Muslim Corpers serving in Rivers State also boost the activities of prison *Da'wah*. In recent time, the various prison *Da'wah* interested Muslim groups have come together to form the *Da'wah* welfare committee, with approval given by the prison authority. In any case, the prison Islam is a cognate and paradigm of the chaplaincy system. There is also the prison *Imam*.

Da'wah activities in the Port Harcourt prison are presented in phases of daily, weekly, quarterly and annual programmes. The spiritual teachings include faith

education. This is designed to rekindle and sustain their total surrender and trust in Allah. The *Imam* and other prison *Da'wah* agents configure programmes such as spiritual diet, lectures, sermons and *Da'wah* – supplications on topics cognate to faith building and the plight of the inmates. There is also the '*Ibadah*' – devotion or worship. The *Ibadah* include, the *Sallawat* (the five daily obligatory prayers), the weekly *Jumat* prayer, the *Tarawih Ramadhan* prayer, as well as the two *Eids* prayer. There is also teaching and encouragement of Muslim inmates to practice *Tatawah* – voluntary fasting, especially on Mondays and Thursdays.

Muslim inmates are also exhorted to practice *Sadaqah* – Charity. They are taught to give alms to the less privileged amongst them, as a way of extending the love of Allah and foster the Islamic spirit of brotherhood. Conversely, those who don't 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 the prison custody. The prisoners are meant to understand that such disposition is rewarding before Allah. According to the Muslim Imam, the basic religious programmes of Muslim inmates are: Friday – Jum'at Prayers at 12:30-2:30pm; Sunday – *Al-Usrah* Lectures at 10:00 – 2.00pm; Wednesday – Arabic/Quranic Classes, at 12.00 – 2.00pm. There is also the social service dimension of the Port Harcourt prison *Da'wah*. The Muslims attach medical team to its operations in the prison. They complement the medical services of the prison management, such as provision of routine check ups, payment of hospital bill of Muslim inmates, provision of drugs and burial of dead Muslim inmates. Part of the duties of the prison *Da'wah* is provision of legal assistance to Muslim inmates awaiting trial and also seek for pardon of Muslim convicts, from the appropriate authorities.

The *Da'wah* activities are also extended to inmates' home, outside the prison confines. The prison *Da'wah* bodies help inmates to send and receive lawful and authorized messages to and from their loved ones. They also co-ordinate contacts between inmates and their family members. Operators of the prison *Da'wah* also participate in reintegration of the inmates discharged or have completed their jail terms. The organization provide money for those who can not afford their transport fair back home. The prison *Da'wah* also contact inmates' families on discharge of their loved one. Yet, the group follow-up Muslim ex-convicts toward directing them for reintegration and wholesome life. This is how the Muslim paradigm of religion in prison contribute to rehabilitation and control of deviants in their fold.

Conclusion

The idea of reformation, rehabilitation and reintegration of deviants into the society is a germane humanitarian project which bring the fundamental functions of the prison institution and the two dominant religious traditions in Nigeria into partnership. In other words, the relationship between religion and the prison is underscored by the need for improved humane content in punishing offenders – to have reservation for the dignity and worth of the human being.

The religion-prison relationship is crystallized by the activities of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria prisons. With the Port Harcourt prison experience, Christians and Muslims use the cage institution as avenue to practically demonstrate their faith and express sense of belonging and of brotherhood of humanity to their deviant faithfals.

Remarkable impacts have been made by the two religions – in engaging prison inmates in religious programmes, as well as for providing them social services that ameliorate the problems they face in the deplorable cage institution. Indeed, religion is an indispensable partner in the task of human ‘repair’ and reintegration, for the individual and societal good, *ipso facto* building control against future deviant conducts of ex-prisoners in association and interaction.

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