

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHAPLAIN – IMAM CORPS TOWARDS PROMOTING MUSLIM – CHRISTIAN RELATIONS IN THE NIGERIA ARMED FORCES**

By

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### **Abstract**

This paper assesses the cohesive force that unite the Military Personnel with all their differences of ethnic and religion, such as their recruitment, commissioning, discipline and other military parades. Despite their religious Associations of Muslim women and Kungiyar Matan Zumunta, yet the non-religious Associations such as Officers Wives Associations are more powerful and more uniting the members of the Armed Forces and their families. The findings reveal that the chaplain – Imam Corp contributes immensely through their harmonized sermons and regular preaching of religious tolerance. Avoidance of hate speech made Muslim-Christian Officers relations so cordial. It is also discovered that the influence of politicians in the recruitment exercises do affect the quality of Imams and Pastors recruited and it is having effect on their performances as real men of God.

### **Introduction**

Islam means total submission to the will of Allah. A Muslim is obliged to abide by the Islamic Laws governing all his affairs without hesitation. Among the rules are the relationship between the Muslim and non-Muslims inclusive, such as protection against external enemies or internal oppression, protection of their lives and properties, physical well-being, honour, protection of their religions rights and freedom, freedom in working place and position in public authority, all these among other beautiful rights are part of their entitlements. However, human beings continue to dispute after which clear signs have come to them, yet they still deviate from the right Path. (Allah (SWT) says:

Mankind was one community and Allah sent down messengers with glad

tidings and warnings. And with them He sent down scriptures in truth to judge between people in matters where in they differ concerning it, after which proofs had come unto them, through hatred to one another. Then Allah by His leave guided those who believe to the truth of that wherein they differed and Allah guides whomever He wills to the straight Path. Qur'an (2:213)

According to Ondigo (95), Christian faith has directly descended from the religion of Jews. At the time of Jesus Christ (A.S) this had the following characteristics:

- Belief in the existence of one God, the Creator and Lord of the Universe who is sovereign over all.
- Belief in the fact that man is made in the image of God, but that he

- has rebelled against his creator and stands in danger of judgement.
- Belief that God, who is the righteous judge, is also gracious and merciful, that He also provided a way for man to be set free from judgement by the penitent offering of Sacrifice.
  - Belief that God revealed Himself to the nation of Israel and called them to be his people.
  - Belief that God would someday establish His rule in a sinful world, setting his people free from their enemies, and appointing his chosen agent, the Messiah, to rule over them forever.
  - The practice of a moral life under the guidance of the law given in the Old Testament, the maintenance of a religious ritual based on the temple and involving the offering of sacrifice.

Christianity is one of the major religions starting from the life, teachings and death of Jesus of Nazareth (the Christ or Anointed One of God). Its largest groups are the Roman Catholics Church, the Eastern Orthodox Churches, and the Protestant Churches, in addition to these churches, are several independent churches of Eastern Christianity as well as numerous sects throughout the World (Mc Ginn). Christianity holds on the belief in one God who has revealed Himself in the Trinity, that is, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Christians had Anglican Missionaries and the Methodists, Catholics and Baptists before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century according to Onaiyekan (87 – 88).

The Chaplain – Imam Corp in the Nigerian Armed Forces is to see the spiritual turnaround of the Military with a mind filled with the fear of God as they serve our great nation.

### **Places of worship and their manning personnel**

There are only three places of worship that for now exist in Military barracks in Nigeria; these are the Mosque for the Muslims Personnel and their families and the Catholic, Protestants Churches for the Christians. The personnel that are manning these worshipping places comprise both the commission officers and non-commission officers, depending on the size of the Mosque or Church.

Chaplain and Imam Officers are commissioned to provide for the spiritual well-being of service personnel and their families. For a candidate to be commissioned as a chaplain or Imam, he must have the appropriate requirements of his religious denominations. The effective date of commission shall be published in the respective service orders and the official Gazette of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Candidates for commission as Chaplain or Imam shall, where necessary, be recommended by their denominations. In the case of an Imam, where a candidate does not have a recommendation, members of the commissioning board shall include a representative of the Directorate of Islamic Affairs (DIA).

Successful candidates shall be granted Direct Regular or Direct Short Service Commission. Those granted DSSC shall on application and approval by

the Service Chief be eligible for conversion to the Direct Regular Commission after three years of Service. The Service Chaplains and Imams will maintain their relative seniorities on the roll of their denominations. Religious heads have the right to withdraw any Chaplain Seconded to the Services but the services reserve the right to reject such requests especially when such a Chaplain services are still required. In any case, no Chaplain or Imam shall be withdrawn before completion of five years of service.

### **The roles of Chaplains and Imams in the Military**

The military as an organised body has terms and conditions for all its personnel their schedule of duties for each department, there are stipulated dos and don'ts for each and every department that exist in the military. There is also a general order that affects everyone wearing its uniform to abide which is known as parade. In the case of Chaplain and Imam Corp they have collective responsibilities such as both will attend the Annual Special Prayers for the fallen heroes known as Armed Forces Remembrance Day on every 15th day of January. And both will attend any meeting of Officers and men where they will be required to open and close the meeting with prayers. The Corp also has its separate responsibilities in line with their denominations.

#### **Imams**

- i. Officiating 5 daily prayers
- ii. Officiating Jummat Services
- iii. Officiating Tarawih prayers during the month of Ramadan

- iv. Conducting Tafsir during the month of Ramadan
- v. Officiating Ids prayers after Ramadan fasting
- vi. Solemnization of marriages
- vii. Officiating in naming ceremonies prayers
- viii. Officiating funeral prayers known as Janaza Salat
- ix. Sharing of inheritance in accordance with the Sharia provisions
- x. General guidance and counselling to Muslims personnel on their individual problems
- xi. Teaching Islamic knowledge to both personnel and their families living in the Barracks (Islamiyyah Schools)

#### **Chaplains**

- i. Conducting Sunday Mass
- ii. Officiating Special prayers on occasions of good Friday and Easter Monday
- iii. Officiating of Christmas and New year's special prayers
- iv. Officiating padre hour prayers
- v. Officiating funeral prayers
- vi. Conducting prayers for marriages and naming
- vii. General guidance and counselling to Christians personnel and their families
- viii. Inter-denomination services, which both the Catholic and Protestants will attend in one church.

#### **Impact of the Corp on the Personnel**

The impact of the Chaplain and Imam Corp in Military Barracks cannot be over emphasized. They contribute immensely in making the relationship between the Muslims and Christians

so cordial through their preaching and sermons. They preach religious tolerance, they avoid hate speeches and all that can divide their followers on religious lines. In some cases, they both harmonize their sermons in their own different perspectives but with a view to achieving one goal, for instance, the position of Islam and Christianity on spiritual purification.

### **Purification in an Islamic Perspective**

Spiritual purification in Islam is a means to have access to God because He is pure. Before a Muslim comes to pray or performs some other acts of worship, he must put himself in a state of purity. In Islam, purification is both spiritual and physical. The spiritual kind of purity is achieved through dedicated life in which worship and kindness are paramount. Physical purity on the other hand, is achieved by means of specific ritualized acts. Unless one is in a state of purity, one may not handle the Qur'an, perform the Salat, circumambulate the Ka'aba, or perform the running rite in Mecca (Safa and Marwa), both of which are part of the Hajj (Pilgrimage).

In fact, the importance of purification is further emphasized in Hadith No 23 in the collection of Al-Nawawi, where the Prophet (PBUH) is reported to have said that, "Purity is half of faith". Impurity in Islam can be classified into two types, Hadath and Khabath ie the impurity that comes out from your body such as urine, faeces, wet dream, menstruation etc and the one contacted externally. It is also good to know that wine and alcoholic beverages are najasa (filth) and

contaminate whatever they come into contact with like food.

Purification is preliminary for the purpose of devotional duties. In fact, Islam places great emphasis on cleanliness, in both its physical and spiritual aspects. On the physical, Islam requires a Muslim to clean his body, his clothes, his house, and the whole community, God rewards him for doing so. Allah commends those who are accustomed to cleanliness. "Allah loves those who turn to Him constantly and He loves those who keep themselves pure and clean" Qur'an (2:23).

Allah orders the believers to be tidy in appearance Qur'an (74:4). Therefore, Qur'an insists that the believers should maintain constant state of purity. It should be noted that Muslims use water, not paper or anything else to purify body wastes. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) advised the Muslims to appear neat and tidy in both private and public.

### **The Concept of Purity in Christianity**

Purity in Christianity basically focuses on the purity of the heart, although it does not eliminate the idea of physical purity, which has to do with the cleanliness of the body and surroundings. The Bible warns Christians against uncleanness or impurity. In fact, impurity makes it impossible for a person to come into the presence of God because He is not pure and those who will come to His presence must be pure. The Bible often makes it clear that the way of the Lord is pure and the unclean people shall not pass through it, just as

prophet Isaiah said: And a highway shall be there, and it shall be call the Holy way; the unclean shall not pass over it, and fools shall not err there in". Isaiah (35:8)

According to Franklin Camp (45), "Purity must begin with the heart". Jesus said "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God". Matt (5:8). Franklin, therefore, views Christ's statement during the sermon on the Mont and stated: "The correction of moral evil must begin with a changed heart. Moral evil must be condemned, but it will take more than condemnation to get out of lives. It is necessary to get at the root of moral sins" (45). Purity of the heart seems to be the focus in Christianity; therefore, to obtain holiness, the heart ought to be cleaned. The Psalmist says, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" Psalms (51:10) (RSV). Here the Psalmists request was for God to make his heart pure because without a pure heart, no one can see the Lord.

It is interesting to know that holiness has to do with the heart. The heart here does not refer to the pumping of the blood in the body; rather it refers to the centre and the focus of one's spiritual life. The heart is the source of motivation, the seat of passions, the spring of all thought processes and particularly of conscience. It is from the heart that purity or holiness begins. "Holiness starts inside a person with a right purpose that seeks to express itself in a right performance" Packer (22). Therefore, a holy person will prefer the purity of heart more. Alice Cravens Moore (38)

stated "Our God and Father reigns in holiness, and His people must serve in holiness if they are to be acceptable to Him."

Harmonization of sermon from both Pastors and Imams in Military Barrack such as the need of keeping our environment clean from different perspectives makes it easy to keep Barracks always clean without any pressure from the Commanding or Barracks Officers. From time to time, Reverend Fathers, Vickers and Imams do meet and resolve to carry out a same sermon with backups from the Holy Books of Bible and Qur'an to achieve a particular goal within the inhabitants of a particular Barracks if the need arises, such needs include good neighbourliness, child upbringing, respect for elders, importance of education, decent dressing by both boys and girls living in the Barracks. The Chaplain and Imams may also come together and talk to their members on religious tolerance, shunning from fighting, theft, abortion, cyber crime by the Barracks youth. This type of cooperation by the religious leaders in the Military Barracks makes the Muslim – Christian relations among the officers and their families so cordial.

#### **Factors that facilitate the cordial relations**

Muslims and Christians in Military Barracks live side by side. The living side by side is the fact of life as they share the same military culture and way of life. They operate within the same economic and political system. The facilitating factors include; festive

periods in Barracks and formation of non-religious Associations.

### **Festive periods in Military Barracks**

There are two notable festivals that are celebrated according to the Shariah, these are Id ul Fitr which is celebrated on the first day of Shawwal the tenth month of the Islamic Calendar, ie immediately after the fasting of Ramadan and the Id ul Adha which comes up in the 12<sup>th</sup> Month of Islamic Calendar with a sacrifice of an animal, Ram, goat, cow or Camel. These festivals celebrated by the Muslims in the Barracks, Christians resident in the same Barracks too are feeling the impact because they are carried along in terms of sharing gift, food and visitations.

Christians on the other hand are celebrating Christmas, New Year, Good Friday and Easter Monday. Christian officers and their families attend church services in respect of these celebrations, offers special prayers and exchange gifts. They also invite Muslims in eating their Christmas lunch and give to all children Muslims inclusive, happy Christmas in cash or in kind. These festivals are celebrated purposely to commemorate religious events that are of great importance and significance to the Christians. These festivals are also avenues where some Muslims and Christians relate and interact as majority personnel living in the Military Barracks are either Muslims or Christians. And by relating and interacting during these celebrations, it promotes cordial relationship among them.

### **Formation of Non-Religious Association**

The cordial relationship between the Muslims and the Christians personnel and their families in the Military Barracks is also extended to the spiritual leaders. There are women Non-Religious Associations that do exist in all Military Barracks for instance Naval Officers Wives Association (NOWA) and Naval Rating Wives Association (NARAWA). These Non – Religious Associations unite all the women in the Barracks under one umbrella depending on the cadre of their husbands. All Barracks Women belong to this Association irrespective of their faith. The formation of these Associations boosted the relationship between the Muslim and Christian women in all the Military Barracks. But this does not mean that there are no religious associations within the military barracks. Of course, association like Muslim Women Association do exist in the Barrack mosques and “Kungiyar Matan Zumunta” in churches. Those religious associations are only functioning in the places of worship but the non-religious association is the most powerful and most uniting the barracks women.

### **Challenges of the Chaplain and Imams in the Military**

The chaplain and Imam Corp in the Military are facing numerous challenges some of which are the influence of politicians in either recruitment of its men or commissioning of its officers. This influence diminishes the status of the Corp before the personnel because there is a tendency that due process in

the recruitment will not be followed and subsequently sub-standard pastors and imams will be recruited or commissioned which at the end affects their performance. These incompetent imams and pastors are always found wanting in one way or the other. For instance, a Pastor officer with a rank of Lieutenant Commander was found guilty of impregnating his church member in Navy town Barracks in the year 2000 and was Court Marshal and later dismissed from the Service. An Imam also in Calabar Akim Barracks Mosque was found guilty of mismanagement of Mosque funds and was locked up and compelled to pay the funds.

Chaplain and Imam Corp suffers most in comparison with other departments during promotions of officers and Advancement of men. This is because there are no designed courses either local or abroad the Corp members usually attend and give them upper hand for consideration unlike their colleagues in the other departments.

Lucrative trips that can attract ester code such as bringing ships from China or United States to Nigeria, Chaplain and Imam would not be found among the team members. It is among the team members, somebody who is not an ordained priest will be carrying out mass for the period of their trip, the same thing happens with the Muslim party; one of the team members will assume imamship whether he qualifies or not. This remains a big challenge to the Corp in the military particularly, the Nigerian Navy.

### **Conclusion**

Muslim – Christian relation has been an issue since the historic rise of Islam, more than fourteen centuries ago when Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was confirmed the last Prophet around 610 C.E. The history of their relationships was in many cases characterized by constructive living together of individuals and communities of the two faiths and the theological challenges, including the questions of Christian self – identity and self-expression in relation to Islam and Muslim Self – Identity and Self-expression in relation to Christianity have engaged Christians and Muslims through the centuries in struggle. It is observed that the type and level of the relationship between the two faiths have been paralleled at the level of their theological thinking.

Since man cannot live in isolation, the Muslims and Christians live together in the same communities in many parts of the World. Therefore, it becomes imperative that they relate and interact with one another peacefully. This interaction takes place in many climes be it social, religious, political, cultural and economic spheres. The Nigerian Military have some kind of strong bond that prevent them from seeing the diversity in religious affinity which may cause hatred, suspicion and competition among them. They are united in recruitment, training and discipline. They also attend all Military parades irrespective of their religious background.

The kind of relationship and interaction that exist between the Muslims and Christians among the

members of the Military on socio-religious plane is cordial and fantastic. Most of them see no barrier in the two religions that could hinder their relationship on socio-religious activities like marriage, naming ceremony, festivals, funeral ceremony and financial assistance between them. You find them during the social gathering in officers' mess wining and dining together and engaging in all sorts of merriments. Chaplain – Imam Corp are doing wonderfully well in strengthening this Military Unity in their places of worship while preaching to officers and men of the Forces in their respective Barracks.

### Recommendations:

It is recommended that:

- a. Nigerian Armed Forces should liaise with Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Ja'amatu Nasirul Islam (JNI) for the recruitment of Chaplains and Imams.
- b. The chaplaincy department in the Military should be motivated like any other corps.
- c. Bad eggs among the Chaplain and Imams should be compulsorily retired to serve as deterrent to others.

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