

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND THE PERSECUTION OF CONVERTS IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

In Nigeria there are three major religions- Islam, Christianity and traditional religion and none is a state religion so in principle, there is religious freedom. Therefore, it is expected that individuals can convert from one religion to the other.

Nigeria like any other society in the world has experienced intermittent conflicts as a significant feature of its process of development. Most of these conflicts have taken place in the north and have been religiously motivated; usually between Christians and Muslims.

Precisely, the north has become religiously volatile with converts facing persecution. This led to some reverting to the previous religion. It is worrisome why this is so.

Going by the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria:

every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion including freedom to change his religion....

In spite of the above, the citizens are denied religious freedom. This paper sets out to answer certain pertinent questions; why are Muslims who have converted to Christianity persecuted by the Muslims? Are the Christian missionaries to northern Nigeria encroaching on the space of the Muslims which is believed to be predominantly Muslim? Why is there a constant struggle between the Muslims and the Christians in northern Nigeria? Answers to these questions will show if there is any logic in religious freedom and persecution of converts in northern Nigeria.

KEY WORDS: Freedom, Religion, Conflict, Nigeria, Converts, Persecution

Dr Kunbi Labeodan

Department of Religious Studies,

University of Ibadan,

Nigeria.