



Islamisation and Ethnic Conversion in Nigeria

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Abstract. – In the Middle Belt of Nigeria, between the Muslim north and the Christian south of the country, ownership of land is contested between Hausa-Fulani “settlers” from the north and “indigenous” ethnic groups which are mostly Christian and traditionalist. The migrants, who are still a minority, try to spread their faith among the “native” population. Those who convert tend to assume the language, culture, and political loyalties of the Hausa-Fulani settlers. This process of ethnic conversion has been reinforced by the recent Sharia campaign. With the call to fight for Sharia, indigenous Muslims are put under pressure to prove that their new faith is more important to them than their old “tribal” loyalties. Where armed conflicts broke out, most converts sided with the Hausa-Fulani migrants and fought, in the name of religion, against their (former) Christian or traditionalist kin. [*Nigeria, Middle Belt, proselytism, Sharia, Hausa-Fulani domination, land conflicts, minority rights*]

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the state favouring or hindering any of them. Religious competition would then have a “level playing field,” a kind of market where ideas can be exchanged without hindrance and citizens are free to decide whether to accept or reject them (An-Na’im 1999: 6; Lerner 1998: 4). To make this liberal model work, all participants simply have to agree on a number of rules which focus on the protection of individual human rights: everybody is free to spread his ideas and win converts, provided he does not use unfair or coercive means.

In northern Nigeria, where some state governments have introduced a strict form of Sharia law, it is obvious that citizens are exposed to undue religious pressure. Muslim politicians use the police and other state institutions to enforce religious conformity within their own community and to marginalise the minority of non-Muslims. Members of small ethnic groups, which are largely Christian or “traditionalist,” complain that the Muslim majority, most of them Hausa-Fulani, have been spreading their religion by illegitimate political means. But their concern is not just about unfair methods. Many of them resent Islamic proselytism as such, as they feel it may erode the social cohesion and integrity of their ethnic groups. Muslim proselytisers try to change radically the identity and lifestyle of their target groups, because they assume that their own culture is superior to others. Those affected, however, may see the attempt to dissolve the religious and cultural traditions of “infidels” as an intrusion, which is threatening the survival of their community: “The indigenous ethnic groups ... will not want to

Freedom of religion, as it is understood in the context of Western human rights, includes the right to proselytise. Believers may talk freely about their convictions, and they are entitled to share and practise their faith with others. These rights are only limited where they violate the rights of other persons. No citizen must be exposed to religious messages where he or she cannot evade them, say in a classroom or in an office. In order to protect the rights of individuals from being infringed, state authorities may have to restrain obtrusive propaganda, but otherwise religious organisations should be allowed to compete freely, without