

Islam, the Crisis of Modernity, and Islamic Hermeneutics: Lessons from another Land for Northern Nigeria Islam

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Abstract

This article argues that 'detraditionalisation' as a response to the crisis of modernity can be successful if it is embarked upon interreligiously, within the Northern Nigerian context. Otherwise the process will be considered as another instance of 'Western/Christian' hegemony. There are already attempts made within the Islamic tradition in this regard. Abû Zayd, for example, argues that Islam can embrace modernity without much difficulty because the meaning of the Qur'an is not incompatible with the progress of the natural sciences. He argues that Islam is both a "culture of the text" and a "culture of interpretation". Central to the dialogue between traditional Islam and modernism, however, is the rethinking of the privatisation of religion to give it a more communitarian flavour. In addition, deconstructing the embodiments of Political Islam (e.g. Muslim Brotherhood, *Taliban*, *Wahhabism*, Iranian theocracy, *Boko Haram*) is crucial if authentic religious discourse will not succumb to an apologetic and defensive approach when it serves to produce a lame traditionalist political institution in the name of preserving Muslim identity against an intruding foreign system. The unresolved conflict between Muslim identity and Modernity's ethos is captured in the question: is it possible to be 'good Muslims' and 'good citizens' of a modern nation-state? A convincing response has not been articulated because few Islamic scholars have taken Abû Zayd's route.

Introduction

Islamic discourse today is polarised in the response to the challenges of Modernity, especially on the compatibility of Islam with modernity. Beyond the opprobrium generated by *Boko Haram's* activities, the sect

contributes to this polarisation. Instead of an outright condemnation, this article argues for seeing the 'sense' in *Boko Haram*'s 'nonsense'.

Another objective is to revisit Salihu (June 2011) on the detraditionalisation process concerning the absolute normativity of particular religio-cultural narratives (e.g. Islam, Christianity) as the exclusively valid ones in a religiously and culturally pluralist society like Nigeria. This article argues that 'detraditionalisation' as a response to the crisis of modernity can be successful within Islamic tradition in Northern Nigeria if interlocutors like Salihu can hold up Islamic scholars from similar contexts to Northern Nigeria who have articulated the reasonability of this process. Without this, there is the danger of Salihu's forthright intervention being construed as another instance of 'Western/Christian' hegemony. Indeed, Salihu's intervention on Islam is constructed upon Western/Christian narratives. The references in Salihu's article prove this point. Out of the eleven references, none is a Muslim. Only one, a Roman Catholic archbishop, is a Nigerian from the North. If one places this fact alongside the following quotation, one wonders if there are no such narratives in Islam: "Only those who are able to ask hard questions of their religious traditions and are also willing to give a critical account of their religious beliefs and practices can comfortably partake in the exercise" i.e. interreligious dialogue (p. 32).

This article, prodded by Salihu's intervention, presents Nasr Abû Zayd, an Egyptian Islamic scholar. He is from a socially conservative context like Nigeria. He can serve as a model on how to make sense of Islam's pathos towards Western modernity, exemplified in movements like *Boko Haram*, *Hamas*, Muslim Brotherhood, and the Taliban. He shows Muslims how to move beyond this pathos without sliding into fundamentalism or anti-religious secularism.

Introducing Nasr Abû Zayd: an unlikely rebel

Born to a traditional Muslim family in Qufaha near Tanta, Egypt, Abû Zayd is the eldest of five children. As a child of devout traditional Muslims, he went to traditional Qur'anic schools where he learnt the recitation of the *Qur'ân*, which he could recite perfectly by the age of eight. As a teenager, Abû Zayd, perhaps like many pious, rural, and starry-eyed youths of those days, joined the Muslim Brotherhood. The

Brotherhood, like several pan-Islamic organisations, emerged as rallying points to counter the colonialist incursion into the Muslim world. The Brotherhood became more influential later in Egypt with Anwar Sadat's project of Islamisation (Kermani, 2004, 170). Abû Zayd was even imprisoned for some time due to his involvement with the Brotherhood.

Nevertheless, by the time Abû Zayd entered Cairo University, he was beginning to distance himself from the Muslim Brotherhood, even if still sympathetic to it – especially the leader's ideas on social justice (El-Magd, 15-21 June 2000).² Most likely as a young teenager steeped in traditional and popular Islam with which he was at ease, he decided to commit himself to an academic research that would draw upon the sources of his faith on the best way to bring Islam in productive confrontation with modernity. He probably had begun to see that the path taken by the Muslim Brotherhood was not authentic to the Islamic faith. Clearly, the position he took at that time showed that in spite of being at home with popular Islamic knowledge and piety, he exhibited a disposition that was not fatalistic, seeing the goings on as predetermined and thus not needing human engagement or quest.

Between the early seventies and 1981, Abû Zayd specialised in Islamic studies³ that blended his first-hand experience of traditional Islamic knowledge & piety with rigorous scholarship that embraced antiquated Arabic and European literary and methodological approaches. This kind of approach yields a religious discourse which makes full use of human reason while engaged in *ijtihad*. This approach is indeed not novel. A rationalist school in the ninth century, known as the Mu'tazilites, argued for a created Qur'an inspired by the eternal word of Allah. Hence, the word of Allah is accessible to human reason. Though the Mu'tazilites were marginalised by the 'orthodox' view (i.e. traditionalists/literal interpreters), they remain influential down to the present. Abû Zayd (2004, 14-15) explains their position. Some texts are clear in the Qur'an, while some are ambiguous (like predestination; anthropomorphism of God). Hence, those ambiguous texts, in order to be understood, need metaphorical interpretation. Accordingly, the knowledge of God in and through the Qur'an demands the use of human rational faculties.

This kind of discourse is critical because it criticises the past as much as

the present. Above all, it has an objective: to “seek modern answers to modern problems – problems which are inherently different from the problems which our ancestors faced” (Abu Zeid, 12-18 September 2002). This approach, however, led him to recognise that if Islam and the Muslim world profitably confront the crisis of modernity, they must recognise that Islam is both a “culture of the text” (*hadarat al-nass*) and a “culture of interpretation” (*hadarat al-ta'wil*). The Qur'an is both a text and a discourse, and the mode of discourse in polyphonic Qur'an is “dispute, debate, and rejection” because there was “liberty of religious practice... guaranteed on equal footing,” provided all stakeholders are committed to the common good of their community/land, for example defending their land against a foreign aggressor (Kermani, 171).⁴

Abû Zayd affirms this based on his definition of the Qur'an: “... the word of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in plain Arabic language in the span of 23 years” (November 11, 2000). In this definition, there are three aspects: '*kalâm Allâh*' – the word of God, the *Qur'an*, and '*wahy*' – revelation or inspiration. What this implies, therefore, is that God supplied content and the Prophet supplied the words. This is what he refers to as the divine-human communication, and the humanisation of revelation. If this communication took place in simple Arabic language that was common to people at that time, then a history of the linguistic trend, the culture of the original recipient, and the historical context of the Qur'an are all necessary. In other words, the word of God revealed in the Qur'an needs to be understood in the context of current readers and their world. To reject this is to negate the place of human reason in the interpretation of the Qur'an. Kermani (pp. 174, 176-178, 182-183) and Souaiaia (p. 132) aver that early Islamic theological tradition proves that there were attempts at rational interpretation of the Qur'an, within the oral discourse of the Arabic language like other Semitic languages.

Abû Zayd's Theses And Proposed Responses

Abû Zayd has the following theses worth appraising by Northern Nigeria scholars:

1. Islam is not inherently incompatible with modernity and some of its projects, based on some facts of Islamic history, especially the Islamic Renaissance of the 11th and 12th centuries spearheaded by Ibn Rushd (a.k.a. “Averros”, 1126-1198).

2. Islamic literalism (exemplified by 'dogmatic Islam' of the Middle Ages that codified the 'Islamic right' i.e. the Shari'a) may not be compatible with modernity.
3. Islam, with symbolic and hermeneutical/contextual reading of the *Qur'ân*, can be compatible with modernity.
4. The compatibility of Islam with modernity is possible if there is a rediscovery of the importance of hermeneutics through *ijtihad* i.e. the re-application of faith via rigorous human reasoning. Hence, there may not be fixed interpretations of the *Qur'ân*, the *Sunna*, and Islam.⁵

Abû Zayd's theses are not unique to him. They fall within one of the two principal schools of thought in the Islamic world today.

The first is 'Basic Islam'. This school sees Islam as consisting of values that are vital to and in line with the universal needs of humanity. Hence, there is the need for ongoing reinterpretation of the Islamic doctrine. Abû Zayd (2004, pp. 18, 30-31) belongs to this school. For this school, Islamic doctrine and legal prescriptions are not essentialist. Rather, they evolved through "a jurisprudence of reasoned argument and practical wisdom that takes the sacred text only as its starting point" (Souaiaia, p. 123). A Nigerian Islamic cleric, Jaafar Mahmud Adam, was assassinated in 2007, for preaching about this basic Islam. Adam reportedly disagreed with *Boko Haram* on the issue of the compatibility of Western education with Islam. He publicly argued, quoting copiously from the Qur'an and the *Hadith*, that "there was nothing wrong in seeking knowledge that is not based purely on Islam" (Kolawole, December 11, 2011, 120).

The second school is 'Cultural Islam'. This school refers to a specific format evolved at a specific time and within a socio-cultural context. However, this specific format took a monolithic and essentialist form in the last millennium. This school sees no need for ongoing reinterpretation (Alalwani, 2007, 117). This is what many Muslims have come to regard as the 'sacred Islam'. This is what many Westerners call 'Fundamentalist Islam', which in fact is a misnomer. This label is, in fact, not referring to the basic Islam based on divine revelation and which is clearly perennial. Rather, it is referring to a historical, albeit essentialist, version of the original Islamic religion.

Abû Zayd's thesis has made him one of the most controversial Islamic scholars today. Yet, he is one of the most important Islamic scholars, spearheading a movement in Islam on how to confront the Islamic world on the appropriate responses to modernity crisis. He identified three principal challenges from the crisis. These are summarised forthwith.

1. Islam and scientific progress

Modernity was an impetus for Islam to forge a carefully constructed sense of unity, while rejecting modernity's stress on individualism and its freedom of expression. To allow these 'modern' values would mean the possibility of diverging positions that threaten a unified society built on a glorious past which is decisive in the 'fight' against colonial hegemonies. So, all of modernity was shut out of the Islamic world. The exception was technology, which the dictators (like today's 'Islamic' terrorists) in the Islamic world needed to keep control of the people under them (Abu Zayd, 21.02.2003). For instance, in Turkey and Egypt, after the initial revulsion of chemical experiments in the laboratories as 'witchcraft', students were sent to Europe to learn these modern sciences in order to gain power to be able to fight back. This was a wrong response, Abû Zayd contends (2004, 38-39). It gave the impression that there is something inherent in Islam that is incompatible with modernity. Yet, some Islamic institutions paradoxically embraced modernity in matters of technology. Nigerians today are familiar with this paradox considering the polemic and tools of *Boko Haram* (ranging from the use of AK 47s, IEDs, and bombs to teleconferencing and video clips posted on YouTube).

Abû Zayd offers that beyond embracing modernity only in matters of technology, Islam can go the whole way and embrace modernity and its rationalist/scientific approach because the meaning of the Qur'an can be harmonised with modern discoveries of the natural sciences. He hinges his argument on the Indian scholar, Sayyid Ahmad Khân. Khân asserts that modern scientific progresses are "the manifestations of God's promises in reality while the Qur'an presents God's promises in words" (Abû Zayd, 2004, 54). Nevertheless, Abû Zayd does not take Khân's thesis entirely because he (Khân) "uncritically accepted" the Qur'an as a text, neglecting the Qur'an as a discourse (p. 55). Accordingly, the position of Khân led to the Islamisation of knowledge and science (p. 55)

which made “the Qur'an and the Sunna to become the sole authority for judgement and analysis” (Kermani, 184). Beyond Khan, Abû Zayd's avers that the Qur'an presents Muslims with neither islamisation nor the absolute separation of religion from life. Muslims must approach the Qur'an with the awareness of its limitation, in order to grasp the dynamics by which the Qur'an can shape contemporary Muslims without losing their human identity and autonomy that are common to other human beings in the world (Abu Zayd, November 11, 2000).

2. The Muslim Identity vs. Modernity's Reason

The colonialists reduced Muslims to their religious identity, with no sub-identity like African, Asian, Indian, or Indonesian. Muslims unwittingly accepted this label. Therefore, it brought the crisis of bi-polarity: either one is a 'Muslim' (i.e. pre-critical, dogmatic, and hostile to the Enlightenment project) or one is 'Western' (i.e. rational, free thinking, scientific in approach even to religion and its founding texts). There can be one conclusion to be drawn from this. Islam and Modernity are incompatible (Abû Zayd, 2004, 39). This is based on the understanding that Islam's pure monotheism created “a non-bridged distance between man and God, leaving no space for human free will” (p. 40). This position surely brings natural human reason in conflict with the 'doctrine' of predestination. If human beings are already predestined, what is the use of God giving them reason? In the face of the discomfiting tensions, Abû Zayd presents two Islamic scholars that rose in defense of Islam's compatibility with modernity and the use of free will, and scientific pursuit (p. 40).

These scholars are Jamâl al-Dîn Afghânî (1838-1897) and Muhammad Abdu (1848-1905). These scholars noted that the backwardness of Islam was not due to inherent values of Islam, but as a result of a distortion of Islam. This backwardness is related to the crisis regarding the possibility of retaining one's Muslim identity if one embraced modernity. Can one embrace Western values if one subscribed to the label of 'Muslim identity' without distinction? Abû Zayd suggests that one of the ways out is to recognise and reaffirm (contra the secularist project of Western modernity) that religion is not just for individuals. It has a communal dimension. Hence, the privatisation of religion must be rethought to overcome the antagonism between the Islamic world (like

many religious communities) and modernity's secularisation. If modernity is fixated i.e. becomes dogmatised, it becomes a 'religion' quite susceptible to political manipulation. When this happens, as in France where dogmatic secularisation confronts religion, a symbol of religious identity which is not essential to the religion becomes its rallying point, for example the issue of the *hijab*. What Abû Zayd, therefore, advocates in the resolution of the second crisis is similar to some Islamic scholars before him, especially Muhammad Abdu. Abû Zayd was inspired by the vision and project of Abdu with his great confidence in human reason. Abdu, according to Abû Zayd, pushed more for the reopening of the "door of *ijtihâd* in all aspects of social and intellectual life" (2004, 57). This is possible only through "a reform of Islamic thought" (p. 57). This is the core of the process of the recontextualisation of the Qur'an. Abû Zayd's conviction is that if Islam will embrace modernity, and the Qur'an will succeed to be harmonised with science, de-mythologisation of the Qur'an is unavoidable (p. 58).

3. The rise of Political Islam

The emergence of the colonialist West and some of its famed values, like individual responsibility, democratic participation, equality and liberty of all before the secular state's constitution, in religiously monolithic Islamic empires and kingdoms, added to Muslims' identity crisis. How can Muslims 'marry' the *Shari'a*, which constitutes traditional Muslim society, with positive law that is the foundation of modern nation-states? If Islam accepts modernity's principles of democracy, participation and election, with the surety that this would replace the authority of the elite '*ulama* and the traditional institutions of consultations (*shûrâ*), what remains therefore of distinctive Islamic identity? Simply put: with modernity, is it possible to be 'good citizens' and 'good Muslims'? (Abû Zayd, 2004, 40). These questions became more pertinent against the backdrop of extreme violations of Muslim social and political identity by the colonisers (p. 41).

This particular crisis and the historical background gave rise to 'Political Islam', a movement that arose in the 1940s due to the perceived violations of Muslim identity by foreign colonialists and political corruption within the Islamic States. With its promise of liberation for the dispossessed, this movement became popular among the hungry

and destitute. However, therein is its Achilles heel. This movement's rallying song is a wrong response to the crisis of modernity. It is reactionary, anti-progressive, unfaithful to Islam's past whose reformers at various epochs opened up vistas for tolerance, intellectual and cultural renaissance (al-`Ashmawy, 2001a, 108; 2001b, 79-88). In this climate, the Caliphate, perceived as corrupted, was abolished after World War I. Nevertheless, this brought another crisis for Muslims.

Muslims realised that that it was possible to replace the Caliphate with another non-Islamic authority. This led to another crucial question: Was the Caliphate an Islamic institution, or only a form of political system that was replaceable? An answer to this question will determine if Muslims can be 'good citizens' of the modern nation-state and be 'good Muslims'. Abû Zayd attempts an answer (2004, 60-61). To help him, he presents two Islamic scholars with opposing views. On one hand, 'Alî 'Abd al-Râsiq (1888-1966) argued that the Caliphate was not an Islamic institution. Hence, it could be abolished and replaced with another political system that reflected current sensibilities. On the other hand, Muhammad Rashîd Rida (1865-1935) argued that the Caliphate was essential to Islam. Abolishing it, embracing another political institution, would be a return to paganism (*jâhiliyya*). Hence, Rashîd Rida opted for a theocratic state, ruled by the *Shari'a*, espoused by the Wahhâbî ideology. This gave rise to the Muslim Brotherhood, that was intellectually indebted to the Pakistani ideologue and intellectual, Abu 'lâ al-Madûdî (Abû Zayd, 2004, 40-41; Abu Zeid, 12-18 September 2002). We can see by now that this is the 'theological' rationale for *Boko Haram's* Political Islam that has slid into full blown religious terrorism.

Indeed, Political Islam has further polarised the Muslim community by dividing human societies between "Islamic" and "Jahili" (pagan).⁶ To resolve the impasse, Abû Zayd counsels that there must be a differentiation between the inherent and expedient in the relation between religion and politics ("Nasr Abu Zayd," 03.09.2005). This is how, for instance, Muslims can appreciate the value, the place of, and the limitation of Shari'a law in modern life. He observes that those who promote the allure of Shari'a claim that individual confession of Islam and personal commitment to the faith (liturgy) and praxis (ethics) of Islam are not enough. Without an Islamic state ruled on *Shari'a*, all Muslims are personally held responsible before God for this failure.

Scholars like Abû Zayd opine that this perversion of Islam as a monolithic faith must be deconstructed. For instance, it is imperative for Muslims to recognise that Quranic verses with legal connotations upon which *Shari'a* is built form about 16% of the whole of the Qur'an. The Jurists' construction of the *Shari'a* is based on the principles of legislation – '*ilm usûl al-fiqh* i.e. a system of induction and deduction. This form of *Shari'a*, with its emphasis on retribution, without space for mercy, reform and repentance, a clear deviation from the Qur'an (Abû Zayd, 2004, 35-37; Souaiaia), is not binding in a monolithic way on all Muslim communities regardless of time, space and contexts. To claim this is to grant divine status to a body of legislations that are human products (Abû Zayd, 2004, 35-37; al-`Ashmawy, 2001b, 89-90; Alalwani, 118-120; Kermani, 184-185).

The scholars cited above are united on the following position. Deconstructing the embodiments of Political Islam (e.g. Muslim Brotherhood, Taliban, Wahhabism, Iranian theocracy, *Boko Haram*) is crucial if authentic religious discourse will not succumb to an apologetic and defensive approach when it serves to produce a lame traditionalist political institution in the name of preserving Muslim identity against an intruding foreign system. To overcome the impasse which Political Islam has so much accentuated, it is vital to rethink the Qur'an and Islamic tradition which make distinctions between the Qur'an, the oral interpretations, jurisprudence, philosophy and mysticism (Abû Zayd, 2004, 42-44). This will enable Islam to bring its values in the Qur'an in dialogue with other religions and cultures inhabiting the same spatio-temporal space. Nonetheless, this proposal appears tenuous, Abû Zayd concedes, due to the rabid "new American colonizing project." This project inevitably promotes a ghetto mentality among Muslims, who largely adopt Madûdî's hermeneutics of resistance (Abû Zayd, 2004, 62-63). Perhaps this is one of the reasons for the 'success' of *Boko Haram's* religious terrorism.

Boko Haram's hermeneutics and Muslims' ambivalence

Boko Haram exemplifies the Islamic pathos in Northern Nigeria towards the West, its multiple embodiments, and other institutions that are 'guilty' by association (e.g. Churches). Of Abû Zayd's three diagnosis, the most prominent is 'Political Islam'. Prior to the Christmas Day

bombing at St Theresa's Catholic Church, Madalla Niger State, the impression given by Aliyu Tishau, a *Boko Haram* kingpin, was that the sect was fighting for 'social justice'. Tishau articulates the overall 'sense' in *Boko Haram*'s activities:

What we are demanding is that those states that have independently declared their states Sharia states should implement it to the letter. Have you seen Sharia cut the hand of someone who steals a cow head, while someone who corruptly enriches himself is left to go free? They have chased away local prostitutes and brought in international red light prostitutes to replace them. They have also banned local alcoholic drinks, yet they drink imported spirits in their respective government houses. Is that Sharia? They are insincere, so they must be effective in the implementation of Sharia. Sharia is being abused (Agency Reporter, September 21, 2011).

Tishau simply restated what one of this sect's spokesmen, Abu Abdurahman, earlier said to BBC's Jonah Fisher (June 21, 2011): "We are demanding an Islamic government be established in the northern states. Not this kind of democratic government.... There is not real Sharia in northern states."

According to this narrative, *Boko Haram* is fighting against political corruption within the Islamic states, especially the ones that had politically bastardised the *Shari'a*. In addition to political corruption, *Boko Haram* has latched on to the desperation about poverty among the commoners in Northern Nigeria. Hence, *Boko Haram*'s promise of liberation for the masses has contributed to its mass appeal, sympathy and apathy. Another reason for the apparent apathy of Muslims towards *Boko Haram* in Northern Nigeria is its evangelical mission. It was to 'Islamise' the whole of Northern Nigeria, and possibly the whole country. This narrative has become more vociferous since the Christmas day bombings and subsequent ones. The leader of *Boko Haram*, Shekau, has been posting videos on YouTube since mid-January 2012 that its violence will not cease until the whole of Northern Nigeria is Islamised and everyone agrees to the peace terms based on *Shari'a*. Of course, who will canvass and mortally undermine an 'evangelical group' that is intending to spread the message of one's religion? The best one will do is to issue statements and denunciations, as Northern Nigeria's Islamic and political leaders have been doing. But there will not be institutional

actions and strategies to undermine and neutralise this terrorist group. Furthermore, these leaders are circumspect in attacking this group lest they are accused of being part of the politically corrupt system which the masses loath, making them soft targets for terrorist attacks.

Apart from Political Islam, *Boko Haram* also exemplifies the first tension i.e. Islam's relationship with scientific progress. Let's begin with education. *Boko Haram*'s late leader, Mohammed Yusuf, built an Islamic complex in 2002. The complex consisted of a mosque and an Islamic school. While the majority of local Muslims in North East Nigeria still resist sending their children to western-styled schools, many poor Muslim families, even beyond the North East, enrolled their children at Yusuf's school. Perhaps because it was free. This trend has been facilitated by the inertia of the political elite in this region which does not see western education as a priority (Chothia, August 26, 2011).

However, contrary to *Boko Haram*'s narrative, this sect has an unresolved ambivalence towards western-styled education. No western-styled educational institution has been attacked till date (March 2012). Not even the ones owned by Muslims, like secondary schools and universities, in any northern state have been attacked. Hospitals that are products of western education have not been attacked. All these should have been the prime targets if 'boko' indeed is 'haram'. Perhaps, the sponsors and masterminds will be personally affected if these places are attacked. So *Boko Haram* goes after 'soft' targets that are 'nobodies'.

Understanding Northern Nigeria's ambivalence towards Boko Haram's terrorism

How does one understand the ambivalence and ambiguities of Northern Nigeria's Muslims toward *Boko Haram*? The attitude of most Muslims could be said to be characterised by an 'approach-avoidance conflict'.

On one hand, they are attracted to *Boko Haram*, or at least sympathetic to the sect's 'sense' because it is furthering the cause of Islam. Let's not forget that *Boko Haram* promotes 'Muslim identity' in a country that is constitutionally secular yet has almost all its institutions indebted to Christian (Western) ethos and values.⁷ This sect claims that its expensive operations are funded with money from Muslims within the country (Fisher, June 21, 2011). The arraignment of Ali Ndume, a serving senator

Borno South senatorial district, North East Nigeria, in November/December 2011, as a *Boko Haram* mastermind and financier, further proves Abdurahman's claim about *Boko Haram* being funded by Muslims who are attracted or at least sympathetic to its cause. However, by mid-February 2012, we learnt that some of its funds have been traced to some Islamic organisations in the UK and Saudi Arabia.

On the other hand, Muslims in this region are repulsed by *Boko Haram* and its avowed 'political Islam', even though they mostly express their revulsion in secret, for fear of fatal attacks. Realistic Muslims in Northern Nigeria acknowledge that the North East region is actually the poorest region in Nigeria, partly because it has the lowest school enrolment figure in the whole of the country. They acknowledge that there is a causal relationship between poverty and illiteracy (in western-styled education). They acknowledge the truth in *World Bank's World Development Report 2011*, which discussed the interplay of socio-economic factors vis-a-vis socio-economic progress of nations (Komolafe, August 31, 2011, 64). Hence, if the region will escape its self-imposed poverty trap, it must invest heavily in education and campaign vigorously for parents to send their children and wards to western-styled school.

This is the argumentative route that Sanusi Lamido Sanusi took in an interview with the *Financial Times*, in late January 2012. The difference is that Sanusi does not agree that the poverty is 'self-imposed': "There is clearly a direct link between the very uneven nature of distribution of resources and the rising level of violence" (Adebowale & Ogbu, January 28, 2012). Maybe it is in sympathy for this injustice that Sanusi singlehandedly donated one hundred million naira to the victims of the Kano bombings. Yet, one wonders why Sanusi singled out Kano victims. Are other victims less Nigerian? Are the Muslim victims in Maiduguri, for instance, less Islamic than the Kano ones? Or is it because he is from Kano and identifies more with his 'people', so that at the appropriate time in the near future this generosity will be remembered and rewarded?

What the northern elite like Sanusi forget to tell their audience is that there is little causal relationship between poverty and violence. There are several states in Nigeria that have poverty levels comparable to some states in Northern Nigeria. Yet these are not violent. Amartya Sen

(January 2008) points out that there is little connection between 'violence and poverty'. Instead, there is a causal link between 'violence and the problematic history of recollection and interpretation of the past'. Apologists like Sanusi, the Northern Elders Forum, and the Arewa Consultative Forum have unwittingly helped to prolong the menace of religious terrorism by hiding behind poverty in the land, glossing over the historical root of Political Islam. They care less about another root of the problem in Northern Nigeria: the unresolved conflict between Muslim Identity and Modernity's ethos, formulated earlier as a question: is it possible to be 'good Muslims' and 'good citizens' of the modern nation-state? They are yet to articulate a convincing response because few have taken the route of Abû Zayd.

Lessons for Nigeria - in lieu of Conclusion

This article has a central concern: How can Muslims overcome their ambiguities toward sects like *Boko Haram*? Where can we find inspirations for overcoming these ambiguities? These questions led us to the inspirational Abû Zayd who grew up under the influence of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, which like *Boko Haram*, was originally propelled by an incendiary Political Islam.

The crisis of modernity as experienced by Muslims demanded and elicited various responses within the Islamic world. There are the traditionalists, the radical secularists, and there are the reformers; although one can add another type - the revisionists. This proposal makes sense because there are two different approaches that claim the label 'reformers'. There are those who seek reformation of Islam through restoration - a *Ressourcement* (return to the sources) which finds correlation between 'pristine' pre-colonial Islamic culture/tradition and the contemporary world. This position favours a classicist (anthropological; static; idealist) position of Islam and its tradition, and Islamic identity. This school, in my opinion, fits the description of the idealist that constructs how things should be in a romanticised manner. The idealist's approach cannot serve as a reliable interpretive framework for Islam in the modern, pluralist, and globalised world. The other type of reformers belong to the revisionist school which adopts what some Catholic theologians call '*Aggiornamento*' (being up to date with the contemporary world). This school favours a historical consciousness

(sociological; dynamic; realist) model. This is where Abû Zayd belongs, with all its questions and problems. This school, in my opinion, fits the description of a critical realist: one who sees things as they are. Abû Zayd's response to the internal crisis within the Muslim world and its interaction with the modern world is very promising, refreshing, and hopeful, although very dangerous as his travails since the early nineties attest. It is refreshing and risky, for instance, to proclaim that Islam today is largely full of ritualism and formalism without spirituality due to political/ideological manipulation of Islam. Hence, the heart of religion is missing in Islam – the heart being the sharing of the common ground based on universal values common to all religions and cultures. This common ground will lead to the emphasis on 'common citizenship' as against a polarising emphasis on distinctive 'religious identity'. The foregoing assertion formed part of Abû Zayd's concluding remarks during the lecture referred to at the beginning.⁸

Abû Zayd acknowledges the difficulty of internal and open debate among Muslim intellectuals today on the real essentials of Islamic religion, because not many see the need for hermeneutical research on the tradition (save universities in Iran). Nevertheless, his position is not marginal in Islamic discourse and approaches today. He has many contemporaries who hold and proclaim similar ideas – across the pluralist Muslim world. This holds a lot of hope for the future.

Muslims in Nigeria (similar to Egypt, as a secular state 'held hostage' by political Islam) indeed have a lot to learn from Abû Zayd and other 'revisionists'. Their position, in my opinion, is the most promising response to the crisis of modernity in the Islamic world. The task for scholars like Salihu (June 2011) is to find out the Abû Zayds of Northern Nigeria, partner with them, and, if they so desire it, offer them a platform, in their tertiary institutions and theological institutions, to develop their thoughts as done for Abû Zayd when his homeland threatened him. However, it appears Islamic intellectuals in Northern Nigeria in the mould of Abû Zayd are few and far between. For this reason, I am not as enthusiastic as Salihu, quoted below:

The recent crisis exhibited this tendency among common people in Northern Nigeria. Though negatively expressed, the attack on the properties of traditional leaders is an indication of the disaffection with tradition that is gradually brewing in the region, which could lead to detraditionalization. We might be

experiencing the emergence of spring time for interreligious dialogue (pp. 32-33).

The instance that Salihu points to as the basis of his enthusiasm for the possibility of detraditionalisation is indeed an instance of the reasonability of *Boko Haram's* growing mass appeal. The traditional institutions are viewed as seats of corruption and perversion of Islamic values as defined by Political Islam. Hence, they have to be confronted and 'destroyed'. Unfortunately, the masses buy into the rhetoric of the Political Islam movement, which in the long run will undermine the gains they made. This is what we see playing out in the present 'Arab Spring'. Abû Zayd's Egypt profited from the Arab spring. Now in the burgeoning democratic process, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic extremists are gaining legitimacy through the democratic process, just as Hamas did years ago among the Palestinians. This is the kind of paradox that happens when Islamic intellectuals like Abû Zayd are marginalised or frightened into exile. The challenge for Salihu and other Northern Nigeria scholars is to seek out and encourage such Muslim intellectuals because Islam will recreate itself not from outside. Islam's recreation will come from within.

If the intellectuals will equally succeed, it is important to reduce the socio-economic toxicness that gives the ideologues of *Boko Haram* and co mass appeal. Hence, we see the imperativeness of reducing the level of illiteracy, poverty, and desperation in Northern Nigeria, particularly the North East sub-region, the hotbed of Islamic extremism in Nigeria.

Notes

1. Today Abû Zayd regards the Muslim Brotherhood as one of those responses in favour of the theocratic state espoused by the Wahhâabi ideology. The Muslim Brotherhood was "formed in order to be the embryo of the future Islamic State of Egypt" (2004, 41 [footnote 31]).
2. Abû Zayd's area of specialisation for his Masters and PhD theses was decided for him at the Cairo University in 1972. He was reluctant to take this because he was aware that twenty-five years earlier Muhammad Ahmad Khlafallah submitted a PhD thesis in Islamic Studies titled "The Art of Narration in the Qur'an". This thesis subjected the *Qur'an* to a literary approach formulated by his professor, Amin al-Khuly. The university rejected the dissertation and a debate ensued if it was appropriate to use such methodology on the *Qur'an* ("Case of Abu Zaid," n.d.).
3. Abû Zayd arrives at this conclusion based on the *Medina Covenant* "between the Prophet and the Jews, and the pagan tribes of Medina" (2004, 27 & 29).

4. These theses were formulated based on a lecture Abû Zayd delivered during an expert seminar at the Faculty of Law, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium, on March 23, 2007.
5. The consequence of this binary opposition is that 'good Muslims' cannot embrace Modernity, its principles, and its political structure, for that would mean accepting westernisation (the way of 'Jahili'). In other words, there is no mid-way that characterised early Islamic jurisprudence, which took Islamic values, and contextualised them (institutionally, structurally and legally) in their specific contexts (Alalwani, 2007, 120-121).
6. Though not focused on *Boko Haram*, Anyanwu (2005-2006) and Yusuf (April 2007) are examples of the critique against the marginalisation of Islamic ethos and jurisprudence in a constitutionally secular but pro-Christian Nigeria.
7. *Supra* note 4.

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