

With regard to Islamic Jihadist Movements in Nigeria, is it equally unhelpful to argue either that they have everything to do with Islam or nothing to do with Islam?

Kathleen McGarvey

Abstract

Nigeria has been identified as a global hotspot for jihadist activities. Islamic jihadi groups, such as Boko Haram, are often considered as an expression of religious fundamentalism, which in itself is not a clearly defined category. Boko Haram is listed as “the second-deadliest terrorist group globally, and the deadliest in sub-Saharan Africa, according to the 2020 Global Terrorism Index. The global rhetoric of the ‘war on terrorism’, designed from a secularist perspective, pretends to compartmentalise, and separate ‘religion’ from ‘rational’ discourse. This hesitancy to identify religious discourse as a critical factor in analysing and responding to such terrorist groups as seen today in Nigeria, where Islamic radicalism has been a central component in the nation's history, requires much deeper analysis. In a bid to counter terrorism from the root and build sustainable peace and co-existence in Nigeria, dialogue is required in which the ideological objectives of Boko Haram and the other jihadi groups in Nigeria must be understood.

Keywords: Religious Fundamentalism; Islamic radicalism; Boko Haram; Dialogue; Nigeria

1. Introduction:

Nigeria is located in Sub-Sahara Africa, which has been identified in a recent European Parliament Report as “a new global hotspot for jihadist activity” (EPRS 2021:1). In this multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, religion and politics are very much intertwined, often described as “Siamese twins. Ignoring their relationship, and how both are instrumentally used for real and self-serving purposes, is to create crisis, which has been continuously ignited in the country” (Igboin 2022:1).

Beginning with insights from some studies on Religious Fundamentalism, I give a historical overview of Islamic radicalism in Nigeria which is the soil from which today's jihadi movements have evolved and continue to grow. Whether and to what extent it is useful to acknowledge the religious ideology of the jihadi groups in Nigeria today is what this paper seeks to examine.

2. The Global Resurgence of Religious Fundamentalism

There are today a great many studies on what is termed religious fundamentalism, of which the increasing strength and spread of jihadi Islamic groups, including those in Nigeria, are considered a primary example. Religious Fundamentalism is certainly not easy to define. The Fundamentalism Project (TFP - 1988-1993), directed by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, produced five volumes of case studies and analytical essays of modern religious fundamentalisms, in which they categorised fundamentalist movements according to five overarching hypothetical 'family resemblances', basically being: a revolt against secular western modernity, a literal and exclusive interpretation of their religion and its sacred text, a dualistic view of the world in terms of good and evil or present reality and imminent utopian future, a charismatic leader, and a patriarchal ordering of gender relations. Writing about this project some years later, the directors, in an apparent recognition of the growing anti-religion, especially Islamophobic, sentiments today, wrote: "Clustering movements, for comparative purposes, that share broad 'family resemblances', may lead untutored onlookers to wrongly conclude that all believers are fundamentalists, that all fundamentalists are terrorists, and therefore that every form of orthodox religion should be banished from public expression" (Appleby & Marty 2002: 18).

People and movements who are considered fundamentalist tend to be spoken of as the 'other', a deviant psychology, irrational, dogmatic, reactionary, and so on. Charles B. Strozier sees fundamentalism as an epidemic spreading amid the world religions. In his psychoanalytical analysis of the Fundamentalist Mindset he portrays adherents who would come under this category in very essentialist and one might say extreme, almost barbaric, terms, as regards their 'Apocalyptic imagination' and their 'paranoid' beliefs and attitudes (Strozier et al, 2010; Strozier 2017). This representation of fundamentalism as 'the repugnant other' is challenged by Susan Harding, who sees such representation as a refusal in secular modern societies to critically examine itself. She believes the resurgence of religious fundamentalism is a call to move beyond the We and Them, to include those on the margins of our cultural and social outlook and to recognise that fundamentalism is part of modernism's history, not something alien or stuck in the past (Harding 1991).

Appleby, as indeed many others, sees that there is need to rethink "the relationship between the secular and the religious" (2011: 295), to rethink "the roles of 'strong religion' in politics" (ibid: 312) and in the public space. "Fundamentalists, like other religious and secular thinkers, are engaged in negotiating the boundaries between and the interpenetration of the religious and the secular" (ibid: 311). The 'Immanent Frame' of secularism and its excessive humanism leaves no room for the transcendent, or even of

transformation beyond our present reality, which is what religion in many ways speaks of and moves people towards. Thus, “fundamentalism has increasingly become a default mode for those who fear the loss of the sacred” (ibid: 318), and today's resurgence of religious fundamentalism, including that of the most violent radicalised jihadi movements, including in Nigeria, calls all of us to deeper dialogue.

There are also today many studies on terrorism. However, it has been noted that such studies are limited since they are event-driven, focused on jihadi terrorist attacks, and on government counter-terrorism responses (Schuurman: 2019). With reference to Boko Haram, Pérouse de Montclos believes that while much analysis has been done, especially in the field of security studies, there is need to “investigate Boko Haram from a political, sociological, religious, and anthropological academic perspective” (2014:2). The jihad of Boko Haram, and the other expressions of radical Islamism prevalent in Nigeria today, destabilize the Nigerian state and challenge its secularity, and raise “many fears regarding Shariah, freedom of religion, the clash of civilisations, and the prospect of a civil war with Christians. Yet all these issues are usually oversimplified in the rhetoric of the war on terrorism” (ibid).

3. Islamic jihadism in Nigeria: Boko Haram and its splinter groups

Before Independence, especially from the time of the jihad of Uthman dan Fodio (1804), the Hausa and Fulani tribes, both Muslim, dominated in what is today Northern Nigeria, with adherents mainly of Sufi sects, the Tijjaniyya and Qadariyya. Since Independence in 1960 the struggle for Muslim dominance and Islamic rule in the country, especially in the North, has continued, as expressed through the birth of various Islamist Salafi groups which have ensured ongoing, and unchecked, radicalization, and which shows division among the Muslim community as well as their difference and opposition to Christians as a body and Western (presumed Christian) influence in the state. Indeed, “there is a correlation between the persistence today of a violent interpretation of Islam found in northern Nigeria and the grief of the conquest of the Sokoto caliphate in 1903” (Kukah, 2022: 45) and “what we call Boko Haram today is just a handing over the baton in a long relay race of injustice and incompetence in government” (ibid: 74).

Another indicator of the continued struggle for an Islamization of Nigeria, and of support for this from political as well as religious leaders, is the issue of shari`a law and its place in the Constitution. Under colonial rule, all customary courts in Northern Nigeria were ruled according to shari`a even where there were substantial non-Muslim populations. Before Independence in 1960, a new Penal Code Law for the Northern Region was fashioned, limiting shari`a application to Muslim family law. The sharia issue was regularly raised and

debated over the next forty years, and part of each review of the Constitutions (Kukah 1993: 115-144). Shortly after the transition to civil rule in 1999, after years of military leadership, twelve Northern State Governors, announced the adoption of the Shari`a legal system, expanding its jurisdiction to include criminal law. This was of course unconstitutional and eventually quietened, largely because Muslims challenged the governors to meet the standards of shari`a law in terms of a more egalitarian and just society and in socio and economic development (cf. McGarvey: 2008: 89-142). However, the issue of shari`a and the religious affiliation of candidates for any political position continue to be hugely important in Nigeria.

As a country, although wealthy primarily from oil resources, government at all levels has been continuously corrupt, there has been little socio-economic development, particularly in the North, and illiteracy, unemployment and poverty are widespread. Thus, the incessant ethno-religious conflicts and the emergence of Islamic revivalist groups have roots in deep seated grievances and unmet expectations of the people on issues of equity and justice, lack of reachable economic opportunities and rivalries for resources. Religion is continuously played in politics and there has been no evidence of real political will to deal with those who continue to exploit the system for their personal, political and religious advantage (cf. USCIRF 2013: 7). Prolonged security challenges and poor governance ensure even poorer socio-economic development, growing and widespread impunity, and citizen desperation (cf. NSGFRHS 2013). While many Muslim fundamentalist movements resort to radical militancy, the many expressions of Christian fundamentalism, with a growing number of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, who would fit under some of the umbrella terms proposed by TFP, have not.

In the 1980s, the Izala movement, otherwise known as Jama'atu Izalatul Bid'a wa Ikamatu Sunna (JIBWIS), was born, "inspired by the former Grand Qadi of Northern Nigeria, Shaykh Abubakar Gumi...The Izala movement primarily attacked Sufi Muslim groups, accusing them of innovation and apostasy, ... [including the] denial of women rights to a proper education" (Barkindo et al 2013: 13). The evolution of the Izala movement, from a militant, insurgent and repressed movement to one that today is hugely influential among not only the Muslim elite of Northern Nigeria but also the women and youth groups, and is an ally of the Nigerian central government, is often ignored by analysts in the shadow of Boko Haram and today's other jihadist groups, of which indeed Izala was the matrix. In fact, Izala, which very much supports the current President, is today considered by many Nigerian Muslim "scholars as 'mainstream Salafism' in opposition to jihadism" (Tarhbalouti 2019).

Various Shi'ite groups also emerged in the 1980s, following the Iranian Revolution, most notably the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) led by Sheikh Ibrahim El Zakzaky. Salafist preacher, Muhammad Yusuf, the founder of Boko Haram, "claimed to be part of the Shiites under the leadership of Ibrahim El-Zakzaky originally" (Barkindo et al 2013: 13) and then of the Kano-based Jama'atul Tajdidi Islam (JTI) of Abubakar Mujahid which broke away from the Shiites in the 1990s (cf Barkindo et al 2013:13).

Boko Haram "prefers to be addressed as the *Jama'atu Ahlissunnah Lidda'awati wal Jihad*, meaning a 'People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad'" (Onuoha 2014: 160). It is considered "safe to argue that Boko Haram ideology is the ultra-salafi radicalism"; the call to return to the fundamentals of Islamic religion and rejection of everything deemed un-Islamic" (Barkindo et al 2013:14). The main points around which the new movement based its struggle were "(1) the concept of *taghut* (idolatry), including secularism, democracy, and partisan politics; (2) Western education and Westernisation; (3) working for an un-Islamic government; and (4) repudiation of the charge of Kharijism levelled against them by the local *ulama*" (Mohammed 2014: 15).

The group emerged, largely as a proselytist (*dawah*) movement in 2002 in northeastern Nigeria, led by Muhammad Yusuf. Following the extrajudicial killing of Yusuf by Nigerian state forces in 2009, during which many other members of the group were also killed, his deputy Abubakar Shekau took over the leadership, and since then the group became more radical and violent and gained much more prominence. According to analysts, it was "in response to the state's high-handed and brutal force" (Mohammed 2014:9) that Boko Haram "moved from the *dawah* (proselytisation) phase marked by fiery speeches to the armed struggle phase in July 2009" (*ibid.*). Analysts also say that the 2009 turning point "is reflected in the ideological, structural and operational changes within the group" (Barkindo et al 2013:14), because, since then "the group has tactically transformed itself into a violent sect, driven by a desire for vengeance against the state and western related institutions" (*ibid.*). Thus, "Boko Haram increasingly adopted the tactics of global Salafi Jihadist groups, including targeted assassinations, suicide bombings, and hostage taking" (Mohammed 2014:9).

In 2012, a splinter faction emerged, Ansaru, whose Arabic name is *Jamā'atu Anṣārīl Muslimīna fī Bilādīs Sūdān* ('Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa') (Mohammed 2014:30). Ansaru "was the same group which had earlier called itself 'Al-Qaeda in the Lands Beyond the Sahel'" (Mohammed 2014: 29). In recent times Ansaru has resurged, especially active in Nigeria's North-West and North-Central zones (ISS 2022), as distinct from the main body,

which is mainly in the North-East, the epicentre of Boko Haram insurgency. In 2022, in a statement released online, “Ansaru reconfirmed its allegiance to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) ... and members who trained with AQIM formed Ansaru's militant wing” (ISS: 2022).

“Ansaru's renewed presence in northwestern Nigeria, amid the inability of the Nigerian state to provide security in that region, has ramifications for the growth of al-Qaeda in West Africa because it could lead to al-Qaeda's uniting its Sahelian and Nigerian jihad theatres for the first time” (Zenn and Weiss 2021: 46). It is important to note also the increase in recent years, of attacks and abductions by armed bandit gangs, often comprised of ethnic Fulani, particularly attacks on Christian farming communities in northwest Nigeria. Studies suggest “that Ansaru has often provided weapons or manpower to armed gangs for many of these attacks”, thus blurring the lines between general banditry and jihadism so as to re-establish itself in Nigeria (Zenn & Weiss 2021: 50).

“Boko Haram, led by Abubakar Shekau, pledged allegiance to ISIL in March 2015 and was formally integrated as the *Islamic State West Africa Province* (ISWAP). However, in 2016, ISIL leadership nominated Abu Musab al-Barnawi as the leader of ISWAP following internal dissatisfaction with Shekau's leadership” (Institute for Economics & Peace (GTI) 2020: 101). It is claimed that al-Barnawi's nomination as leader was “supported by ISIL/Da'esh leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi” (EPRS 2021: 5). “Shekau disputed this decision and rejected al-Barnawi as the new leader, resulting in the establishment of two factions. The Shekau faction reverted to using the group name *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad* while the Barnawi faction continued as ISWAP” (Institute for Economics & Peace (GTI) 2020: 101). “In May 2021, al-Barnawi's faction killed Shekau... due to his indiscriminate attacks” (EPRS 2021:5; some reports say Shekau killed himself – Igboin 2022:6). While it is not clear whether attacks are from one group or the other, “owing to data collection restrictions, attacks by both Boko Haram and ISWAP are attributed to Boko Haram in the Global Terrorism Database” (Institute for Economics & Peace (GTI) 2020: 16). Boko Haram is listed as “the second-deadliest terrorist group globally, and the deadliest in sub-Saharan Africa, according to the 2020 Global Terrorism Index” (EPRS 2021:5).

Ideological Differences among the jihadi groups

While Izala presents itself today as a form of peaceful Salafism, and is not in opposition to the secular government per se, the jihadi groups Boko Haram, Ansaru, ISWAP, and the other splinter groups that have evolved over the years, emerged due to differences in religious understandings, especially regards tactics to be used in war. Three differences between Boko Haram and Ansaru

are noted by Mohammed Kyari (2014:30), that Ansaru is committed to not harming innocent Muslims or killing innocent security agents, while Boko Haram does both of these; and Ansaru claims to be “the defender of Islamic interests all over West Africa and indeed Africa as a whole, as distinct from Boko Haram’s localisation in the north of Nigeria” (ibid).

Other very significant differences between the Shekau led group (Boko Haram) and the Barnawi led faction (ISWAP) are noted by the Tony Blair Institute for Social Change (Bryson & Bukarti 2018), differences they claim are “overlooked in analysis” (pg. 3) but which are evident in the statements and video messages of the two groups. Tracking the activities of the two groups throughout 2017, the researchers believe these differences manifest themselves in their attacks (pg. 8). These differences regard women, and civilians. Boko Haram “allows women to engage in violence and be targeted by violence” (pg. 3), and regularly deploys women and girls, while the other condemns such actions: “The former relies heavily on female operatives, while the latter repudiates the entire principle. Each side gives a contrasting theological justification for its position” (ibid.). Regards attacking civilians and other Muslims who are not opposed to the ‘infidels’, who agree with democracy, secular education, secular society, Boko Haram sees its permissibility within Islam while ISWAP does not approve of killing non-combatants, especially women and children (pg. 6). ISWAP believes “women should be wives who have more rights and protection than slaves... kept at home, fed and catered for” (pg. 10) while Boko Haram insists there are situations in which women are allowed to engage in acts of violence (ibid.). As the Report points out with reference to ISIS which has increasingly permitted the use of female combatants in battle and certainly also attacked civilians, “factions do not always follow their own rules to the letter” (pg. 7); but following trends in Nigeria “the two factions largely abide by their ideological parameters” (pg. 9).

Government response to anti-terrorism

As noted above, the increased violence of Boko Haram after 2009 was due to the ferocity of the security agencies which killed their founder as well as over eight hundred of their members. It is also said that the civilian Joint Task Force, set up by the Government in 2012 to support the Nigerian security agencies in the fight against Boko Haram, is in fact more brutal than the jihadi groups themselves, and that as a result, some communities feel more protected under the jihadi groups (Onuoha 2014:175-176; Botha 2021). As well as offering purpose and order to the communities they control, the jihadi groups are reported to be community-based, looking after the needs of the people, caring for widows of those lost in combat, ensuring health care, clothing and food provisions, fertiliser and agricultural products, and basically fulfilling many of the obligations people feel the government is not providing (ISS 2022; Moaveni

2019). Thus, “the idea of 'humanitarian assistance' from any of these groups enables continuous recruitment and loyalty” (ISS 2022), from both men and women.

A disarmament, demobilisation and rehabilitation (DDR) programme launched in 2016 has also been criticised because the demobilised combatants have been given very poor living conditions and thus are deterred from donating their weapons or defecting from the group (EPRS 2021). It is reported that communities of origin often react negatively to the incorporation of returnees, and indeed that the DDR programme as a whole is driven by economics for personal gain through the military and other avenues. There are also queries about the ideological leanings of the clerics who are supposed to be putting those radicalized on the right path.

Thus, overall, instead of defeating the jihadi groups, the government counter-terrorism response is criticised as serving to strengthen the radicalization of people not yet radicalized and to encourage rather than discourage active militancy by those already radicalised (cf GTI 2020).

4. Is it useful to say it is Islamic?

On the 29th May 2015, in his inauguration speech, President Muhammadu Buhari said “Boko Haram is a mindless, godless group who are as far away from Islam as one can think” (available online). Whether jihadi groups such as Boko Haram are or are not Islamic is an area of scholarly contention and debate (Hasan 2015). Reasons for saying it is Islamic is their invocation of Islamic scriptural and legal texts, and the fact that the members of these groups claim to be Muslims and are supported by other Muslims. Reasons for saying it is not Islamic is that the manner in which they interpret the texts is not accepted by most Muslim authorities and Islamic scholars, and the fact that most Muslims around the world condemn their brutal practices (cf. Emon 2015). Also, the fact that many jihadi members are found to have a very poor knowledge of the Quran or of Islamic scholarship (Hasan 2015).

However, the fact is that Boko Haram's terrorism, and that of the other jihadi groups in Nigeria today, is ideologically grounded on religion, and scholars have noted that “While it is true that this radical group's brutal activities do not represent the myriad of Muslim groups in Nigerian society, it would be short-sighted to dismiss Boko Haram as an aberration in Muslim Northern Nigeria” (Igboin 2022:11 – quoting Vaughan 2016:223;). Islamic rhetoric is ingrained in Northern Nigeria's history and Boko Haram presents “a challenge to mainstream Islam in Nigeria. The sect tells the story of dissent and a fight between Muslims” (Pérouse de Montclos 2014: 2), and indeed the splintering factions within the jihadi movement in Nigeria attest to this dissent.

The jihadi groups in Nigeria are also very clear that non-Muslims are considered enemies, and hence, while it is a struggle between Muslims, it is also very much an interreligious struggle. The persecutions and second-class status suffered by Christians, who are the minority tribes in Northern Nigeria, throughout the years since Independence, speak to this as an interreligious struggle. Pérouse de Montclos says that to assume that this is a “war between religions reveal[s] a very poor understanding of the doctrine and the fundamental drivers of Boko Haram” (2014: 2). However, the fact that the government of Nigeria is slow to stem the ongoing flow of Islamic radicalization in Northern Nigeria throughout these years or to acknowledge Christian communities are a primary target, is of great concern and indeed significance.

Certainly, most Muslims in Nigeria condemn the brutal acts committed by these jihadi groups, and in fact Muslims as well as Christians have been targeted and their lives destroyed. It is common to hear Muslims in Nigeria say, as President Buhari said, that they are not Muslims, that they do not represent Islam in any way. This can be understood as a defence of their religion and a refusal to be so stigmatized. However, one must ask if this is sufficient reason to ignore or deny the ideological leaning for the acts of terror these movements commit. It would be wrong to consider all supporters and members of Boko Haram as insincere in their religiosity. This would be to fall into the trap of judging and dismissing (or eradicating) them as 'the repugnant other' (Harding 2004) and a failure to ask the much deeper questions raised by the existence and actions of these jihadi groups and their ability to recruit members.

Undoubtedly, there is need for an integrated holistic approach to address the challenges raised and issues posed by Nigeria's jihadi groups. Securitisation is of course necessary, because some of Nigeria's territories have been overtaken and are being governed by an alternative authority. However, the huge percentage of the Nigerian budget allocated to security since 2012 has been questioned and indeed it was predicted that security would become a resource for many and would result in an increase rather than a decrease in jihadi activities (cf. Kukah 2011).

There is serious need to look at and address the socio-economic, political and historical causes which create conditions favourable to the rise and spread of jihadi movements. There is need to investigate who the sponsors are and who are the real instigators of such movements, as well as “need to interrogate government denial of Boko Haram's Islamic ideology and its counter-insurgency efforts in a bid to underscore the point that a proper, dispassionate definition and assessment of the group is critical to effective counter-insurgency” (Igboin 2022:2).

Considering the ongoing Islamic radicalization in Nigeria since Independence, there is need for a "critical intellectual analysis" (Kukah 2013) of these jihadi movements, "to trace the historical processes that have produced what we have now in the name of Boko Haram" (ibid.), and to see whether or not there is "any connection between Boko Haram and other forms of violent protests that preceded it" (ibid).

5. Conclusion

While secularity, that is non being religious, is increasing in some parts of the global north, it is in fact a marginal view in our global world, and is indeed marginal in Nigeria, as in most parts of Africa where being religious is very much the norm. As Olivier Roy has highlighted, the world's major religions are now transnational and global in nature, and their influence transcends boundaries of nation states through migration as well as social media and international communications networks (Roy, 2005:5). "Islamic fundamentalist terrorism has become the single most influential phenomena of the first years of this new millennium" (Ben-Dor & Pedahzur, 2004:71). This has certainly benefitted the Islamic radicalization seen for so long in Nigeria and has added to the ferocity of the jihadi groups active there today whose "growing audacity and resilience can better be understood within the context of the transnational flow of the global Salafi Jihadist ideology" (Onuoha 2014: 158).

Because Muslims and Christians each comprise approximately 45% of the population in this vastly populated country, Nigeria has been described as "the greatest Islamo-Christian nation in the world" (Onaiyekan 2000). Modern democracy is struggling to be lived in this country since its independence in 1960. Secularism, a key value of modernity, which is supposed to afford religious sectors of society a means to express their views, has and continues to be challenged. The Islamic fundamentalism of today's jihadi groups, deeply rooted in and nourished by the unchecked radicalization that has been a part of Nigeria's history, offer and seek to create, through violent means, a militant revivalist religiously-framed alternative to the values, behaviours and institutions of their local context. This makes the struggle between democracy and secularism most evident. The question that needs to be asked is whether in truth the majority of Northern Nigerian Muslims can accept Democracy and its tenets, can they accept the notion of a secular state and its Constitution? Nigeria is, therefore, a model location, requiring national as well as international scholarship and conversation, to do as Appleby and others suggest, to rethink "the relationship between the secular and the religious" (Appleby 2011: 295).

To respond to violence with violence, as government counterterrorism measures in Nigeria and elsewhere primarily seek to do, has serious consequences and implications, and rarely if ever results in sustainable peace.

The African Institute for Security Studies, noting the limitations of force to counter terrorism, has concluded that “dialogue ... should be more deeply explored” (Olojo: 2019: 10), dialogue in which “the ideological objectives of the terror groups must be understood” (ibid.). Taking the religious belief of all adherents very seriously into the conversation on the role of religion in shaping, not only the past but especially the future, of Nigeria, requires dialogue at many levels, including intra and interreligious dialogue. Dialogue in this context is difficult to contemplate or even to practice, and the interreligious dialogue that does take place in Nigeria, particularly at the level of political and religious leadership, is very often only symbolic, lacking sincerity, and thus disappointing for those who are truly committed to it. Despite this, it is important to remember that peace is a tireless commitment that involves the promotion of “a culture of encounter” (Pope Francis, 2020, n. 30), rather than “a culture clash” (ibid.), where the common good and the human person are “at the centre of all political, social and economic activity” (ibid. n. 232).

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