The Discourse of the ʿUlamā' on the Boko Haram Phenomenon in Northern Nigeria: An Appraisal of the Debate between ʿIsa ʿAli Pantami and Muhammad Yusuf, the leader of Boko Haram

ISMAIL HASHIM ABUBAKAR

Ismaʿil Hashim Abubakar obtained his doctoral degree from Mohammed V University, Rabat in 2023, specializing in Contemporary Islamic Thought. He obtained both his B.A and M.A degrees in Islamic Studies (in 2014 and 2019 respectively) as well as Postgraduate Diploma in Translation (2017) from Bayero University Kano, Nigeria. As a certified translator by the Nigerian Institute of Translators and Interpreters (NITI), he has rendered several works and titles into Hausa, English and Arabic for both local and international clients, including Advancing Education and Research Center (AERC), Rabat, Institute of Philosophical Studies Europe (IPSE), Brussels, International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), among others. Ismail is currently a member of the academic staff in the Department of Islamic Studies of Federal University, Gusau Nigeria. His academic articles have appeared in a number of journals both within and outside Nigeria, and he is currently working to publish a magnum opus on the biography, career, ideas and thoughts of the late Shaykh Jaʿfar Mahmud Adam (d.2007).

Abubakar, Ismail Hashim. 2025. "The Discourse of the 'Ulamā' on the Boko Haram Phenomenon in Northern Nigeria: An Appraisal of the Debate between 'Isa 'Ali Pantami and Muhammad Yusuf, the leader of Boko Haram" *American Journal of Islam and Society* 42, nos. 1-2: 156–177 • doi: 10.35632/ajis.v42i1-2.3075

Abstract

Prior to the nominal suppression of the Boko Haram group and the subsequent killing of its founder, Muhammad Yusuf, in 2009, many Nigerians (including the majority of Muslims) knew very little about the extremist organization. Likewise, it was not widely known that some Muslim scholars, especially mainstream Sunnis, had engaged the spiritual leaders of the group in an ideological dialogue a few years after its emergence. Yet, interested parties had sought to link Boko Haram's militancy to the increasingly prominent, Salafi style of religious propagation. Fortunately, those attempts were nullified by the emergence of well-documented debates and dialogues advanced by Sunni scholars. This article presents the discourse of Nigerian scholars about Boko Haram's ideology. In particular, it analyses a debate that took place between ʿIsa ʿAli Pantami and Muhammad Yusuf. Using a video recording of the debate and key academic literature, this essay finds that a weak and misguided perception of the objectives of the Islamic Sharīʾah and the desire of undue fame, among other factors, are the main issues that led to the emergence, growth and militancy of the organization.

Keywords: Boko Haram, extremism, Muhammad Yusuf, ʿIsa ʿAli Pantami, Nigeria

Introduction

Though endless wrangling and goalless disputations are strongly discouraged in Islam, meaningful, purposeful and value-laden debates are not only permitted, but encouraged. Purposeful debate is that conducted in order to deliberate over almost all the issues of spiritual, political, moral, intellectual or social significance. It seeks to correct misperceptions and wrong views, and arrive at positive and sound judgments of differing opinions. Importantly, debate is not meant to force participants to withdraw their positions, surrender to the supposed appropriate conclusions or repudiate

their proofs. Rather, it is a means of making a distinction between truth and falsehood, right and wrong and strong and weak or baseless standpoints, at least for the benefit of a shrewd audience. Yet, in some instances there are sincere and truth-seeking debaters, who submit to their co-debaters when they discover that they have been holding a flawed and deficient opinion. In Nigeria's religious arena, debates among Islamic sects, groups and movements on both minor and major issues, which at times on take polemical dimensions, are a common feature of intra-Muslim relations in the country. This is exemplified by the debates between Sunni scholars and the pioneers of the militant group known as Boko Haram.

Founded in the early 2000s by Muhammad Yusuf,[1] a charismatic young preacher based in Maiduguri in north-eastern Nigeria, Boko Haram is an extremist movement that declared that seeking a Western education was forbidden. It also condemned working under Nigeria's bureaucratic system, and did not recognize Nigeria as a country that is governed according to a non-Islamic system and man-made laws. After the extrajudicial killing of Yusuf in 2009 following a deadly riot that the group launched, disciples of Yusuf then took over and regrouped. Since then, Boko Haram has unleashed waves of violence against the Nigerian state and its citizens. Since the emergence of Boko Haram, before it was fully organized and spread to other parts of Nigeria, some Sunni scholars, including Salafis seriously engaged its leader in debate.

Some of these scholars, like Shaykh Jaʿfar Mahmud Adam (d. 2007),[2] had not only preached against the group's motives, but also predicted the threat it would pose both to Muslims and Nigerians more broadly. For a long time, Nigerian *'ulamā'* have criticized Boko Haram's extremism in debates and teaching sessions, which have been extensively transmitted within Muslim spaces. Even as many Nigerians were seeking to avoid becoming targets of the group, Muslim scholars' were condemning its atrocities. However, efforts to tackle Boko Haram's ideology were often poorly represented and rarely amplified in Nigeria's mainstream media. Other scholars that also criticized the group included Dr. Ahmad Gumi, Dr. Ibrahim Jalo, Dr. Sani Umar Rijiyar Lemo, Shaykh Alhasan Said, Shaykh Mansur Ibrahim Sokoto, Shaykh Muhammad Auwal Albani,[3] Dr. Idris ʿAbdulʿAziz Bauchi, and Shaykh Nazifi Yunus to name only a few.

However, despite these efforts to disassociate Boko Haram from Islam, there were interest parties that, due to doctrinal grudges, that sought to link its militant approach to Salafism, which has been enjoying increasingly success in Nigeria. For example, authors like Dr. Yinka Olomojobi tried (unsuccessfully) to link the teachings of Muslim scholars like Ibn Taimiyyah with Boko Haram. Olomojobi appears to have based his conclusion on the fact Yusuf's mosque was named after Ibn Taimyyah.[4] It is in this context that this article presents an appraisal of the debate that took place between the Sunni scholar Shaykh ʿIsa ʿAli Pantami[5] and Muhammad Yusuf the founder of Boko Haram. The paper begins by presenting a general overview of the role of debate in Islam. This is then followed by a short discussion of Boko Haram group and its emergence. Then, the article provides an overview and analysis of this important debate between Pantami and Yusuf.

Religious Debate and Dialogue in Islam: An Overview

As a religion that is built upon proofs and always encourages scrutiny, rationalization, investigation and searching for the truth, Islam has always been open to peaceful dialogue, not only at the doctrinal and sectarian levels, but also at the level of schools of jurisprudence. Doctrinal debates often occur between adherents of different faiths. The main points discussed concern creeds, dogmas and other highly important matters that represent the edifice of the faith. The Qur'ān has, in numerous places, narrated how different messengers of Allah engaged their people in rigorous religious discourses. For example, the Prophet Nuh used every opportunity to discuss faith-related matters with his people.[6] Though he was the son of an idol-worshipping father, the Prophet Ibrahim did not feel reluctant to debate his father and his polytheistic people, who were also the passionate custodians of idols. The trend can also be seen with other prophets like Salih,[7] Hud[8] and Shu'ayb.[9] In the course of their prophetic missions, they also used dialogue as a means to convey Allah's message and guidance.

In this same vein, the Prophet Muhammad also debated some of the powerful Meccans, who were regarded as masters of oratory at the

time. It can be inferred from the history of the Companion's migration to Abyssinia that one of the influential factors in the Abyssinian King's conversion to Islam was a debate that took place in his palace between the Muslims' spokesman, Jaʿfar b. Abi Talib and the Quraysh emissary, ʿAmr ibn al-ʿAs.

Sectarian discourses emerge between people who profess the same faith and are bound by its central creeds. It is, in other words, an intra-faith dialogue. The history of Islam shows that there have been many of these kinds of intra-faith debates, especially between mainstream Sunni Muslims and the followers of sects like the Jahamīyah, the Muʿtazilites, the Rāfiḍah, the Khawārij, etc. A cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, ʿAbdallah b. ʿAbbas, was reported to have engaged the militant Khawārij in a serious debate, which at its conclusion markedly reduced the number of the sect's followers.[10] Abu al-Hassan al-Ashʿari, a famous debater who left the Muʿtazilite camp and joined the mainstream Sunnis, engaged his step-father (a Muʿtazilite), Abu ʿAli al-Jubba'i, in a heated sectarian debate that ultimately silenced the latter.[11] Likewise, Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal's conflict with the authorities and his persecution were also a result of his unwillingness to compromise on his position that the Qur'ān was the uncreated, eternal word of Allah.[12] The same thing can be said with some other later scholars like Ibn Taimiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim who were both imprisoned.

Debate at the level of the legal school is mainly confined to *fiqh*-related matters. It is mostly a good-natured discussion and an attempt to generate ideas and come to a sound judgment within the available textual proofs. Varying jurisprudential understandings as a result of *ijtihād* are what gave rise to the different Sunni Schools of *fiqh*. More ideological debates are those that occur with a movement that looks more political, albeit dressed in religious, which is what the debate between Pantami and Yusuf resembles.

Here, it is worth reiterating that religious debates are not necessarily the main reason that one changes their position and accepts the truth. Rather, debate can also serve as a means of discharging the duty of admonition within the framework of enjoining good and forbidding evil (*al-amr bi-al-maʿrūf wa-al-nahy ʿan al-munkar*). This is evident in the story the Qur'ān provides about a group of believers among the

Jews who admonished their countrymen, who, despite being warned against fishing on a certain day, went ahead anyway and fulfilled their desires. When the group of believers who admonished their fellows was dissuaded by another group that considered itself liberal by maintaining a neutral position, the former reasoned that their goal was to be able to have an excuse before Allah.[13] While the main substance of any serious and meaningful debate is the availability of strong resources of proofs and the skill to use them as the Qur'ān indicates, those factors alone enough cannot guarantee their acceptance.

Boko Haram at a Glance

In Nigeria, the first two decades of the 21st-century have witnessed the emergence of an unusual religious group that differs markedly from mainstream Muslims and other sects. Popularly known as Boko Haram, the organization, would later prefer to be called the *Jamāʿat Ahl al-Sunnah Li-al-Daʿwat wa-al-Jihād.* This roughly translates as "the society of followers of the Sunnah for ("Islamic") propagation and *jihād.*" The term "Boko Haram" is a combination of a Hausa word and an Arabic one. The word "boko" refers to the "Western form of education," while "haram" in Arabic means forbidden. Boko Haram therefore entails that "the acquisition of knowledge or pursuing a system of education said to have been brought by the West is prohibited." Founded by Muhammad Yusuf, a charismatic youth, the group is said to have emerged in 2001, while others maintain that it emerged in 2002.[14] However, from the group's activities since its emergence, and upon examining its leaders' speeches, Boko Haram's ideologies are not restricted to merely seeing the pursuit of west-modelled knowledge as forbidden, but also that western education itself is an evil undertaking that amounts to an act of *kufr*, or unbelief.

The Boko Haram movement passed through three distinct phases of development: the propaganda phase, the militancy phase, and the phase of stalemate. The propaganda phase, which ran for almost the whole first decade of the group's emergence, concentrated on preaching, propagation, dialoguing, debating and recruiting members. This phase

was characterized by the gradual spread of the group's ideology. It was during this phase that a number of youths in the North-eastern part of the country (especially from its stronghold in the, Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states) were persuaded by Yusuf's preaching against Western education, which was transmitted via a range of modern media. Many of these youths answered Yusuf's call by abandoning everything they considered to be related to Western education. For example, those who were attending schools immediately left. In their efforts to integrate with the group, others who had already graduated and obtained diplomas in various disciplines publicly tore up their certificates. Even those who were working at public and private establishments cursed their jobs and withdrew themselves from employment. Instead, they resorted to selling dates, perfumes, chewing sticks (*siwāk*), shining shoes, nail-cutting and other low-income trades.

It is important to mention that the leader of Boko Haram, Muhammad Yusuf, had also passed through different stages in his career, which shaped his ideological formation before he founded Boko Haram. Yusuf's earliest stage of ideological development and activism began with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) led by Ibrahim El-Zakzaky that emerged in the 1980s, which Yusuf joined in 1987. The movement was famous for its opposition to non-Islamic political systems, and its goal was to capture political power and turn the state into a theocracy. The leader of the movement, El-Zakzaky, was popular for his rejection of Nigeria's constitution and political system. El-Zakzaky called on Nigerian youths to leave the school system, and many graduates tore up their certificates in compliance with his urgings. As a member of the MB, Yusuf had held important positions as El-Zakzaky's mouthpiece in Maiduguri, serving as an imam. He was also active preaching lecturing as early as 1992.[15]

After breaking away El-Zakzaky's network (like many other activists), when it became public that El-Zakzaky had embraced Shiʿism, Yusuf joined the *Jamāʿat Tajdīd al-Islamī* (JTI), a splinter group the had been formed between 1994 and 1995 by members of the Muslim Students Society of Nigeria and the MB. In late 1998, Yusuf was dismissed from the JTI due to some of his views. Afterwards, he maintained close ties with another group called the *Jamāʿat Izālat al-Bidʿah Wa-Iqāmat al-Sunnah*

(JIBWIS but also known simply as Izāla). This group formed with a sole purpose of eradicating religious innovations in the light of the Prophet's teachings. However, Yusuf also had disputes with members of JIBWIS on a range of issues, and he later denounced them as infidels and government stooges.[16]

Some accounts reveal that the main cause of the split between Yusuf and the JIBWIS was Yusuf's radical ideas that attempted to introduce into some Izala affiliated mosques, especially after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre, which left an indelible mark on his psyche.[17] This led to the disengagement of Yusuf from the Izala. Yusuf eventually became more authoritative, commanding the respect of his followers and virtually running a mini-state within Borno. Yusuf then began to travel across the North-eastern states to lecture and debate. Yusuf's views, which form the core of Boko Haram's ideology, have been outlined by Sani Umar[18] and can be summarized as follows:

1 Modern (secular) education is forbidden.

2 Democracy and contemporary politics in general are *kufr*.

3 Working in institutions and establishments manned or guided by the government is a form of apostasy.

These ideas characterized the group's beliefs and activities during the first phase of its emergence. From 2003 up to mid-2009, Yusuf's movement was chiefly committed to proselytization and was largely peaceful, albeit Yusuf employed fiery language in his preaching and accused Muslims who did not share his ideology of unbelief. Yusuf was also arrested and interrogated several time by the security forces. Surprisingly, in almost all of these arrests, including that which led to his trial and being charged with terrorism in a federal high court in Abuja, Yusuf was bailed out by influential Nigerian Christians.[19] Abdullahi Hamisu Shehu has narrated that the former minister of information, and one of the top Christian elites in Nigeria, Jerry Gana "had repeatedly paid for the bail of Boko Haram founder and first leader Mohammed Yusuf after his several arrests during the 2000s, and that Yusuf's last phone call, shortly before being killed while in police custody in July 2009, was to Jerry Gana's number."[20]

Though the first phase of Boko Haram's development had some sporadic instances of violence, the group had been relatively peace until its bloody fight with the security agencies in 2009, which led to the extrajudicial killing of Muhammad Yusuf and hundreds of his followers. This battle marked the end of the peaceful phase of the group's movement, and opened a new phase in its history. The second phase can be termed its militancy phase. This phase, which can be said to have started after the killing of Yusuf, was dominated by wanton attacks and disregard for human life. Yusuf's remaining followers retreated to peripheral zones in North-eastern Nigeria. In 2010, the group's second-in-command, Abubakar Shekau appeared in a recording to announce Boko Haram's resurgence. Armed with an AK-47, Shekau declared war on Nigeria. Shekau said the group's targets were the security forces (i.e., the army and the police), Christians and whoever supported the group's enemies (i.e., the government and security forces). However, the events that later unfolded showed that the group had declared war, not only on Nigerian state, but also on Nigerian society. In particular, the North-eastern region became a warzone with people trapped between Boko Haram insurgents on the one hand, and Nigerian soldiers on the other. By 2014, Boko Haram had overrun a sizable rural population and captured at least 17 local government areas in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states. It declared the captured territories, which equaled the size of Belgium, to be a caliphate where it applied its stringent version of penal law in the name of Islam.[21]

The insurgent activities of Boko Haram then spilled over to border countries like Niger, Chad and Cameroon. Between 2014 and 2015, the group launched raids in Nigerien towns like Bosso and Diffa, while in Chad it launched attacks and bombings in N'Djamena, the country's capital. This eventually led to a multinational counterinsurgency commitment where Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Niger formed a joint military front to fight the group. Although this initiative was to some extent effective, it did not bring to an end the incessant attacks, especially in Nigeria.

Many Nigerians were dismayed by the attitude of the Jonathan administration, which governed from 2010 to 2015, and which they

considered to be disinterested in the crisis, which helped in turn to bring the Buhari administration to power. Initially, the Buhari administration attempted to fight the insurgency and was to some extent successful. Meanwhile, the third and hopefully final stage of Boko Haram's trajectory seems to been the schisms that have broken Boko Haram fighters into different factions. In 2012, senior commanders from rebelled against Shekau's leadership and formed the *Ansār al-Muslimīn fī Bilād al-Sudān*, known as the Ansāru. In 2015, Shekau's faction declared loyalty to Islamic State, which led to the renaming of Boko Haram to *Wilāyat Gharb Ifrīqiyah* "Islamic State in West Africa Province" (ISWAP),[22] and Shekau was confirmed as the leader. A year later, Shekau was removed and replaced with Yusuf's eldest son, Habib Muhammad Yusuf, known popularly as Abu Musʿab al-Barnawi who continued to lead the group. Shekau protested this removal and continued to operate independently.[23] In May 2021, news emerged that Shekau had been killed in a clash with the ISWAP faction. Media reports confirmed that he had committed suicide by blowing himself up with explosives. A few months after Shekau's suicide, the leader of ISWAP was then also reported dead as a result of wounds he sustained in a clash with Shekau's fighters.

The Boko Haram crisis has seriously impeded Nigeria's progress and caused a humanitarian disaster. Since the eruption of the fighting in 2009, about 350,000 Nigerians have been killed and more than 310,000 have been made refugees, with an additional estimated number of 3 million people displaced in area of the Lake Chad Basin.[24] The recent factional conflicts have led some to hope that the Boko Haram insurgency will soon end. Indeed, it has been reported that since Shekau's death, over 8000 Boko Haram members have surrendered to the authorities.[25] This development has given the authorities the opportunity to apply different de-radicalization strategies to deal with the remaining Boko Haram members, either those still hiding in rural enclaves or those in prison. Apart from the more typical vocational rehabilitations, which usually end in parole or even recruitment into Nigeria's security establishment, there also seems to have been some highly effective initiatives aimed at the de-radicalization of Boko Haram prisoners through rigorous ideological engagement. Meanwhile, the role of the *'ulamā'* in the fight against

Boko Haram cannot be ignored. As a strategy to counter the Boko Haram ideology, in 2009 the military began to distribute pamphlets and CDs containing lectures of scholars like Shaykh Jaʿfar who opposed Boko Haram. Now that the insurgency is hopefully coming to an end, it is important for authorities to continue supporting these counter-ideological efforts.[26]

The *'Ulamā'* and Boko Haram

Although Boko Haram has been fought by the Nigerian military since 2009, attacks on the group's ideology began much earlier. Scholarly works (especially those in the West) have emphasized the link between Boko Haram and Salafism by branding the former as

"Salafi-Jihadist." However, in the Nigerian context, it was the Salafi scholars that successfully engaged the founders of the sect in sophisticated debate. During his lifetime, before the Boko Haram sect did not yet pose any serious threats, the prominent Sunni scholar Jaʿfar Mahmud Adam consistently criticized the group and dissected its ideology. Idris ʿAbdulʿAziz Bauchi[27] and ʿIsa ʿAli Pantami,[28] are two other prominent Salafi scholars who also challenged Muhammad Yusuf to debate, while Auwal Albani Zaria delivered a series of lectures against the Boko Haram ideology and gave a series of seminars in the north-eastern region aimed de-radicalizing Nigerian youths. Shaykh Mansur Ibrahim Sokoto also facilitated a workshop organized by JIBWIS in Bauchi where he engaged Boko Haram's discourse on western education.[29]

In April 2009, Shaykh Sani ʿUmar Rijiyar Lemo arrived at Maiduguri and presented a two-day public lecture at the Indimi Mosque,[30] in which he surveyed key figures and trends in contemporary jihadi movements, and the religious and socio-political factors that informed their rise. Even though Rijiyar Lemo did not portray jihad as an abrogated injunction, and indeed identified a few instances where contemporary Muslims were (or are) pushed by circumstances to wage a legitimate jihad in the form of self-defence, Rijiyar Lemo's central thesis was that radical activism would always fizzle out as it lacked religious legitimacy.[31] During their debates with Muhammad Yusuf, Sunni scholars demonstrated Yusuf's

lack of an intellectual command of Islamic texts. Similarly, on many occasions they stressed the link between Yusuf's ideas and the *khawārij*, an extremist militant sect that emerged in early Islamic history. This phenomenon is acknowledged in a few academic works that argue that some of Boko Haram's views "mirror *khārijī* inclinations."[32] Another article argus that there is a correlation between Boko Haram and the *khawārij* in terms of their theological conception of *īmān* (faith).[33] In the case of Boko Haram, one can say that the group has theorized what makes one a true Muslim according to its own exclusive interpretation and Boko Haram has operationalized this theory according to the socio-religious and political context of today. On this basis, then, like the *khawārij*, Boko Haram fought and killed their fellow Muslims. However, the academic works on Boko Haram typically overlook or evade contextualizing Boko Haram in relation to the *khawārij* partly because that would endorse the Salafi claim to be a moderate form of Islam, which is indeed the fastest growing stream of Islamic thought and practice in contemporary Africa.[34]

Indeed, to argue that Boko Haram drew much or some of its militancy from "Sunni" literature is too narrow a framework to give us an adequate understanding of its nature. After all, Islam is the central unifying factor among all the different and diverse movements, groups and denominations, including the orthodox, the traditional, the mainstream on the one hand, and on the other hand, the fringe, the peripheral, the extremist and the unorthodox. Thus, there must be something in common that binds them together and which every group considers a basic aspect in its doctrinal composition. To justify their violence, Egyptian armed Islamist movements (just like other groups including Boko Haram), utilized Ibn Taimiyya's fatwa endorsing armed resistance against the the Mongols to validate their militant struggles against Muslim leaders. Ironically, when in later years these groups revised their positions and recanted violence, they used the same fatwa but re-interpreted it to mean that militant resistance was permitted only against foreign invaders and not Muslim leaders.[35] This point highlights that the views of the Damascene theologian, just like other theologians and, by extension, Islamic texts, could be interpreted differently and exploited to serve particular purposes. It is in this context that one can understand the weakness in limiting our

analysis of the theoretical motivations of Boko Haram to some valid interpretations of texts and authorities since these views are oftentimes acceptable not only by the Salafis but also other groups within the Sunni Islam more broadly.

One common feature that does link Boko Haram with the *khawārij* is the unconventional interpretation of Islamic sources to suit their ideological interests. The popular motto of the *khawārij* "*lā ḥukma illā li-Allāh*" (there is no judgment except Allah's) is a valid expression to which no Muslim would object. Yet, in the words of Ousman Murzik Kobo, "Boko Haram leaders distinguished themselves from mainstream Salafi by their selective appropriation and manipulation of the canon to justify violence against the Nigerian states and fellow Muslims who refused to subscribe to their brand of Salafism."[36] Likewise, Andrea Brigaglia also notes that Boko Haram insurgents were fond of manipulating Islamic scripture as evidenced in their "contorted reading of Qur. 9:12."[37] The conceptual correlation between the khārijites and Boko Haram is easily discernible in the definition of each of the group. As Alexander Thurston notes, the term "khawārij came to be associated with several stances: declaring people unbelievers on the basis of their sins (rather than through a more conservative definition that focuses on whether a person has actually declared something unlawful to be lawful), assassinating Muslims, rejecting legitimate Muslim authority, and causing chaos."[38] Boko Haram, especially under Shekau, had consistently stated "that any Muslim who did not join Boko Haram's fight against the Nigerian state was a *de facto* unbeliever."[39] Considering the acquisition of western education to be haram is perhaps a major different between Boko Haram and the *khawārij*, which is clearly tied to the specificity of its socio-religious context. Now, let us consider the debate between ʿIsa ʿAli Pantami and Muhammad Yusuf, the founder of Boko Haram

The Pantami-Yusuf Debate

The debate took place on the 29th of Jimādā ʿUlā, 1427 (2005) in the Bauchi State of North-eastern Nigeria at the invitation of ʿIsa ʿAli Pantami. The debate, which lasted for about three hours, was videotaped by the media

team of the Dārul Islam Foundation based in Bauchi. The main points of discussion of the debate are the issues of Western education and working under the Nigerian government, which includes joining the civil service and holding political appointments.

On Western Education

Responding to a question about his position on Western education, Yusuf gave an interesting background discussion in which he classified knowledge into three categories. According to Yusuf, all forms of knowledge fall into one of these categories:

1. Knowledge that conforms to what has been established by the Glorious Qur'ān and Sunnah. In other words, this refers to knowledge that is either found in the Qur'ān or Sunnah or supported by them.
2. Knowledge that contradicts what which has been established by the Qur'ān and the Sunnah.
3. Knowledge that neither contradicts the Qur'ān and Sunnah nor affirms any fact that is found in them.

Here, Yusuf was trying to provide a theoretical framework upon which the group's ideology was based. A closer look at Yusuf's classification above suggests that Muslims in Nigeria would have had little reason to be concerned with Boko Haram had the group actually relied upon this postulation. After all, there are two different Prophetic traditions that give credence to this view. One of the prophetic traditions asks Muslims not to wholeheartedly affirm whatever comes from the People of the Book, i.e., Jews and Christians, nor should they wholly dismiss it.[40] This means that they should rather subject anything that comes from these sources (and by extension all the categories of people who propose anything that has to do with knowledge and scholarship) to careful examination and scrutiny. The other hadith is more explicit when it says that there is no harm that Muslims could report from the Jews.[41] Yusuf, then, appeared to agree that modern sciences like medicine,

chemistry, physics, engineering, agriculture and many other forms of knowledge may not in themselves be forbidden provided that they do not contradict the Qur'ān and Sunnah. However, Yusuf then elaborated on his views. He said that his concern with modern sciences was that they were based on the Western model. In other words, what made them prohibited was the fact that they were fashioned according to a Western system. He then added that there are subjects that are built on conjectures that categorically contradict the Qur'ān. In particular, he argued that geography was linked to the theories of Darwinism and evolution (which he, somewhat confused, called the "theory of revolution"). Yusuf also mentioned the theory of the big-bang, the geographical time scale etc. It was on bases such as these that Yusuf said that the entire Western education in Nigerian context was prohibited.

When responding, Pantami argued whether the existence of some conjectures that contradict Islamic viewpoints would render a system completely haram in its entirety, even though Muslims are well aware of them and do not in any way accept them as facts. Moreover, it is a well known fact that Islam prohibits people to talk about issues about which they have little or no knowledge,[42] which is why Yusuf almost became an object of ridicule when he answered negatively the question of whether or not he had even attended even a primary school. Nevertheless, proofs are a major ingredient of debates, and both Pantami and Yusuf presented some proofs to support their positions. The first proof advanced by Pantami was a fatwa issued by *al-Islām al-Yaumī*, which is a scholarly body made up of 290 highly acclaimed Muslim scholars drawn from various Muslim countries around the world. The fatwa addressed the question of acquiring modern education on the premise of the Western system, and actually argued for the necessity of active societal investment in and commitment to it for the collective interest of the Muslim community. Meanwhile, in an effort to respond, Yusuf read out a fatwa issued by the Permanent Committee on Research and Fatwa based in Saudi Arabia, which resolved that the acquisition of knowledge brought by the *ajnabī* (foreigner) was haram.

Taken at face-value, one may think that this fatwa was delegitimizing the acquisition of knowledge developed by foreigners i.e., the West

etc. However, as Yusuf read the ensuing notes, it could be discerned that the fatwa was only emphasizing that which was entirely incompatible with Islam. Moreover, the fatwa was referring to the types of schools and colleges that were purposely established in order to enhance missionary activities and woo Muslims to deviate from their religious path. Indeed, this same committee had issued a fatwa encouraging Muslims to go to non-Muslim environments like America to study. Nevertheless, it became clear Yusuf considered institutions like Bayero University, Kano and the University of Maiduguri (dominated by Muslims) as deviant and faith-damaging despite the fact that no could say they were established to rob Muslims of their religious identity. In fact, Yusuf even condemned institutions like Islamic schools that had been modernized and modelled in accordance with the Western system.

On the Nigerian Government and its Institutions

The other key part of this debate was with regard to working in the Nigerian civil service. Yusuf had argued that since Western education is largely the gateway to joining the civil service, it must be haram also. He then added that the Nigerian system of government was not established on any Islamic principles. As a result, according to Yusuf, working for the Nigerian government was not only a mere "sin" but also "unbelief," since "registering" loyalty to any system other than the Sharia is tantamount to worshipping a *ṭāghūt* (idol). In response, Pantami took a long time point to Qur'ānic references to the permissibility of playing a role in a government established by systems other than that of the Sharia. Notable among that was the Qur'ānic account that the Prophet Yusuf had accepted a ministerial appointment to work in a government of idolaters. Had Muhammad Yusuf wanted to reject this powerful proof, he might have reminded Pantami that the Prophet Yusuf's case could be different since the Qur'ān says that for Prophets, "for every one of you We have ordained [a different] law and an open road."[43] Yet, Yusuf was also likely aware differences and specificities in the messages of earlier revealed religions and prophets were confined to minor and subsidiary issues of life and not concerning supreme matters like registering loyalty to a

system founded completely by people that used to commit *shirk*. As the Qur'ān affirms in other instances, Allah's Messengers all share a belief system.[44] In other words, Yusuf was trapped between two positions. He could either regard the Prophet Yusuf's role in a non-Islamic government as a matter of secondary importance in Islamic jurisprudence and over which divergences of opinions are legitimately entertained, but this then would render his group's excommunication of Muslims who participated in Nigeria's bureaucracy as baseless. Or, he could suggest that a prophet had committed an act of unbelief.

Ignoring the precedent of the Prophet Yusuf's ministerial position, Muhammad Yusuf continued to dogmatically make clear his stance that loyalty to any system not based on the Sharia was synonymous to *shirk* by relying on Q.26:151-152. His conclusion was that working under the Nigerian bureaucratic system amounted to *kufr*. However, if mere loyalty to the system was equal to disbelief, then Boko Haram itself could be accused of *kufr*. This was because, as Pantami aptly stated, Boko Haram never abandoned the use of Nigerian currency, whose coins and notes are symbols of the state. There was no time when Yusuf ever called on his followers to disavow the Naira (which carries the images of Nigerian heroes) and attempt to produce an alternative currency compatible with the group's ideology. Moreover, Yusuf was also known to have undertaken frequent travels abroad, while of course obeying all the regulations of the Nigerian Immigration Service. He denounced the use of passport for travel, nor was there any record of his non-compliance with the airport authority or security officers. In his criticism of Yusuf's beliefs, Ja'far ridiculed his selectivity and compared him with a man who refuses to "enter the government through the door but gets in through the window."[45]

Pantami might also have highlighted a number of contradictions in Yusuf's approach, as Jaʿfar did. However, Pantami chose to maintain a sense of decorum and tried to avoid subjecting Yusuf to public shame. Right from the very beginning of the debate, Pantami had established a safe space for Yusuf and behave in a respectful manner. Pantami even gave Yusuf the honour of prefixing his name with the scholarly title of *Ustaz* and suffixing it with the heartfelt prayer of well-wishes "*hafiẓahu*

Allah" (may Allah protect him). Yusuf, however, did not care to reciprocate the gesture. Indeed, throughout the debate, Pantami continued to use the affectionate term "brotherhood" in order to dissuade Yusuf from viewing the occasion as a cause for enmity. Not knowing that the movement founded by Yusuf would years later become extremely militant, Pantami did not highlight any textual emphases on peace and the religious imperative to good relations between Muslims and non-Muslims with special reference to Nigeria.

Conclusion

To provide some initial background, this article began by highlighting the importance of debate in Islam. The paper established that debates took place during the time of the Prophet Muhammad, the era of his Companions and the subsequent generations. The article also traced the emergence and activities of Boko Haram, and divided the group's history into three distinct phases: the phase of its emergence and propagation of ideology, the phase of militancy, and the last phase of stalemate, which is still in progress. The article also discussed the more general discourse of Sunni scholar in northern Nigeria vis-à-vis the Boko Haram phenomenon. It then reviewed the debate that ensued between ʿIsa ʿAli Pantami, a prominent Nigerian Sunni scholar, and the founder of the Boko Haram movement, Muhammad Yusuf. The major points in the debate were the permissibility of modern (secular) education in Islam, and the permissibility or otherwise of working in institutions and establishments manned or guided by infidel governments. While Yusuf vehemently rejected any loyalty to the Nigerian state and anything that was associated with it, nevertheless he continued to use a range of services provided by Nigeria as a state. It could be argued that what might have led him to his positions was a misguided perception of the objectives of the Islamic Sharia, short sighted-ness of sight and a desire for fame. Meanwhile, scholars like Pantami should not only be encouraged to continue their debates and offers of dialogue, but also supported.

Though one writer dismissed them as "useless debates,"[46] Nigerian Salafis intellectual engagement with Boko Haram has had a significant

impact in the ideological war against the extremist sect. As pointed out by Audu Bulama Bukarti, "winning the war of ideas and working to immunise populations from radicalisation is more important today than it has ever been."[47] Yusuf obviously did not renounce his views, even though these scholarly debates and polemical exchanges appeared to go against him. This was because conceding defeat would probably have marked the end of his rising popularity. Had he lived longer, Yusuf might have recanted his ideologies. Be that as it may, the fact that Boko Haram withdrew from intellectual engagement, which initially it participated in enthusiastically, speaks volumes to the magnitude of the defeats it suffered in the realm of public debate. Indeed, there were no popular debates recorded between Boko Haram and mainstream Muslim scholars since the group resorted to arms after Yusuf's murder. This might suggest that the Nigerian authorities made a mistake in their overreliance on military force. It can be observed that, during its first phase, Boko Haram was relatively peaceful while it was being fought ideologically by scholars. Nigerians now all too well what occurred once this avenue was closed and Boko Haram was fought by the Nigerian military.

An insistance on attributing Boko Haram's radical tendencies to the fatwas of Ibn Taimiyya will, in all likelihood, cloud the issue further. Unlike in Middle Eastern and other predominantly Muslim countries where leaders are typically Muslims, the Nigerian case is quite different in that power rotates between Muslims and Christians. This makes any arguments that a leadership can be fought in the light of Ibn Taimiyya's fatwas regarding aggressions against Muslims somewhat irrelevant. Boko Haram regarded all leaders who ruled Nigeria (Muslims and non-Muslims alike) since its uprising in 2009 as being *kuffār*. Moreover, the failure to juxtapose Boko Haram ideas and views against the thoughts of the *khawārij* explains why many attempts to find an angle to locate Boko Haram's ideological violence within Sunni Islam end up in very murky conceptual waters.

Endnotes

1 Muhammad Yusuf was born in 1970 in Yobe State in North-eastern Nigeria. He was the founder of the Boko Haram group and was killed in the year 2009 following a clash with security forces. He was captured alive by the military and handed over to the police, who killed him without trial.

2 Shaykh Ja'far Mahmud Adam was a popular Muslim scholar known in Hausa-speaking Africa. He was a powerful preacher and eloquent interpreter of the Qur'an. Shaykh Ja'far was assassinated on April 13, 2007. His criticism of Boko Haram's ideology became more widely known, especially after the armed group's clash with authorities three years after his murder.

3 Shaykh Auwal Albani was an ardent critic of Boko Haram. His condemnation of the sect cost him his life and that of his wife and a son on February 1, 2014. Boko Haram insurgents claimed responsibility for his murder.

4 Yinka Olomojobi, *Islam and Conflict in Northern Nigeria* (Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited, 2013): 222.

5 Born in Pantami town in Gombe State, Shaykh 'Isa 'Ali Ibrahim Pantami is a renowned Muslim cleric. He had been living in Bauchi for some years where he taught computer software at Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University, and he had also taught at the Islamic University of Madina. He served as the Director General of National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) from 2015 to 2019 and he is currently the Minister of Communication and Digital Economy in the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

6 Q.11:25-49.

7 Q.11:61-68.

8 Q.11:50-60.

9 Q.11:84-95.

10 Uthman al-Khamis, *Hiqbatun min al-Tarikh* (Egypt: Maktabat al-Imam al-Bukhari, 2006): 195-197.

11 Abu al-Hassan al-Ash'ari, *al-Ibanah 'an Usul al-Diyanah* (Cairo: al-Nahar for Printing, Publishing and Distribution, 2003): 9.

12 Al-Imam al-Maqdisi, *Kitabu Mihnat al-Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal* (Egypt: Maktabat al-Hady al-Muhammadi, 2007): 47-48.

13 Q.7:163-165.

14 Habu Galadima and Aluaigba M. (eds.), *Insurgency and Human Rights in Northern Nigeria* (Kano: Centre for Information Technology and Development, 2013): 1.

15 Abdullahi Abubakar Lamido, "Book Review: Boko Haram: The History of a West African Jihadist Movement, by Alexander Thurston," *The CCI Occasional Papers: Debating Boko Haram*, No. 2 (March 2019): 6, 4-9.

16 Ahmad Murtala, "Jamāʿat Boko Haram: Nash'atuhā wa Mabādi'uhā wa Aʿmāluha fī Naijīriyā," in *Qirā'at Siyāsīyah,* No. 12 (April-June 2012): 14.

17 Ibnai-al-Shaykh Abi Yusuf al-Barnawi, *Khadh' al-Waram bi Bai'at Ahl al-Karam* (Daulat al-Khilāfat al-Islāmīyah, 2018): 11.

18 Sani Umar, *Salafi Narratives against Violent Extremism in Nigeria* (Zaria: Centre for Democracy and Development, 2015): 6-7.

19 International Crisis Group, "Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II)": 13.

20 Abdullahi Hamisu Shehu, "Chibok Girls Abduction: Too Many Unanswered Questions," *Annual Review of Islam in Africa*, Issue No. 12/1 (2013-2104): 29; 23-30.

21 Audu Bulama Bukarti, *Violent Extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa: Lessons from the Rise of Boko Haram* (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2021):. 35. Accessed via https://institute.global/sites/default/files/2021-07/Tony%20Blair%20Institute%2C%20Violent%20Extremism%20in%20Sub-Saharan%20Africa%2C%20July%202021.pdf, October 25, 2021.

22 Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018): 17-18.

23 Abdulbasit Kassim & Jacob Zenn, "Justifying War: The Salafi-Jihadi Appropriation of Sufi Jihad in the Sahel-Sahara," in *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology,* Volume 2 (March 2017): 91, 86-114.

24 Council on Foreign Relations, "Global Conflict Tracker," Last updated October 25, 2021. https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/boko-haram-nigeria, accessed October 26, 2021.

25 Bulama Bukarti, "This Looks Like The Beginning Of The End Of Boko Haram — We Should Accelerate It," *Daily Trust,* October 20, 2021, https://dailytrust.com/this-looks-like-the-beginning-of-the-end-of-boko-haram-we-should-accelerate-it. Last accessed October 24, 2021.

26 Montgomery Watt, *Muslim Intellectual: A Study of al-Gazali* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1963): 102.

27 Part of the debate titled, "MUQABALA Stsakanin Iman Dr idris Abdul'aziz Bauchi' Muhammad yusuf" is available on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g0hqxXg-MAMs. Another part is titled "Imam Dr Idris Abdul'azeez vs Muh'd Yusuf Shugaban boko Haram" available on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46CYh-DTn3U. Last accessed November 13, 2021.

28 The largest part of the debate is titled "Muqabalar Dr Isa Ali Pantami da Shugaban Kungiyar Boko Haram Muhammad Yusuf" and is available on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QuGXdE-09eg. Last accessed November 13, 2021.

29 Muhammad Mansur Ibrahim, "Matsayin Karatun Boko da Aikin Gwamnati a Musulunci," a paper presented during a workshop organized by Jamaʿatu Izalatil

Bidʿah Wa Iqamatus Sunnah and held between May 08-10, 2009. See also Thurston, *Boko Haram*, 100.

30 See Thurston, *Salafism in Nigeria*, 15-17, 171-172, 230-231.

31 The first lecture is titled "Waiwaye Adon Tafiya part 1- Dr. Muhammad Sani Umar Rijiyan Lemo.wmv," and is available on *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GvrCZ1jHGg*. The second is titled "Waiwaye Adon Tafiya part 2 Dr Muhammad Sani Umar Rijiyan Lemo" and available on is https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sL7hyS9WyG8. Last accessed October 26, 2021.

32 Kyari Mohammed, "The Message and Methods of Boko Haram," *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria*, edited by Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (Leiden: African Studies Centre): 18, 9-32.

33 Rasheed Abdulganiy & Aliyu Rabiu Alhaji, "The Nexus between the Khawārij Theological Misconception of Īmān (Faith) and Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria," *Journal of Usuluddin 48* (1) 2020: 113-145. Available on https://ejournal.um.edu.my/index.php/JUD/article/download/24662/11764/54314. Retrieved on October 26, 2021.

34 Kassim & Zenn, "Justifying War," 106.

35 Jérôme Drevon, "Assessing Islamist Armed Groups' De-Radicalization," 300.

36 Ousmane Murzik Kobo, "Alex Thurston: *Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, Preaching and Politics*" Book Review, *Journal for Islamic Studies*, Vol. 36 (2017): 276-285.

37 Andrea Brigaglia, "Abubakar Shekau: The Boko Haram Leader Who Never Came "Back from the Dead" *Annual Review of Islam in Africa*, No. 12, (2013-2014): 43-48.

38 Alex Thurston, "Abū Muṣʿab al-Barnāwī's Interview with the Islamic State's Al-Naba' Magazine," *Journal for Islamic Studies: Special Issue on Islam and the Politics of Religious Dissent in the History of Northern Nigeria*, Vol. 36 (2017): 257-275.

39 Thurston, "Abū Muṣʿab al-Barnāwī's Interview," 259.

40 Ṣaḥiḥ al-Bukhārī, Ḥadīth number 4485.

41 Ṣaḥiḥ Bukhārī, Ḥadīth number 3461.

42 See Q.17:36.

43 Q.5:58.

44 Q.42:13.

45 Anonymous, "The Popular Discourses of Salafi Radicalism," 138.

46 Andrea Brigaglia, ""Slicing off the Tumour": The History of Global Jihad in Nigeria, as Narrated by the Islamic State," *The CCI Occasional Papers: Debating Boko Haram*, No. 1 (2018): 1-17.

47 Bukarti, *Violent Extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 10.