

will soon cease to be one of the principal discourses through which politics in Sudan is practised. Rather, politics will continue to be dominated by questions of what it means to be Sudanese and Muslim even as the Sudanese continue to craft new political orders. Together, the three books demonstrate that conventional narratives about the global rise of political Islam during the 1970s will not suffice. Throughout the twentieth century, Sudanese politics was thoroughly Islamic. The development of political and intellectual thought in the country was not marked by contestation between poles of Islamist and secular politicians and intellectuals, but rather was shaped by various interpretations of Islam and its place in public life. The fact that the main drama in Islamic revivalist movements has centred around attempts to create a state, to organize politics and to instil piety in societies of believers begs the question of whether the phrase ‘political Islam’ provides the nuance necessary to study the wide variety of intellectual projects the term is often used to encapsulate. In place of ‘political Islam’, one wonders whether scholars should instead be attempting to use the variety of terms that Muslim thinkers themselves have used to categorize their thoughts.

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doi:10.1017/S0001972019000147

## Islam and the Nigeria quandary: history, politics and reform

Brandon Kendhammer, *Muslims Talking Politics: framing Islam, democracy, and law in northern Nigeria*. Chicago IL: Chicago University Press (hb US\$95 – 978 0226 36898 6; pb US\$32.50 – 978 0 226 36903 7). 2016, 312 pp.

Alexander Thurston, *Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, preaching, and politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (hb £67.99 – 978 1 107 15743 9; pb £25.99 – 978 1 316 61019 0). 2016, 300 pp.

Olufemi Vaughan, *Religion and the Making of Nigeria*. Durham NC: Duke University Press (hb US\$99.95 – 978 0 8223 6206 7; pb US\$25.95 – 978 0 8223 6227 2). 2016, 336 pp.

Roman Loimeier, *Islamic Reform in Twentieth-century Africa*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (pb £29.99 – 978 1 4744 3219 1). 2016, 540 pp.

Despite immense oil wealth and astounding human potential, the Nigerian project has stalled. There are Nigerians – probably many more than one may suppose – who passionately want to *achieve* their country, to create a patriotic home and a stable political settlement that would allow them to use their wealth to fructify their potential, but regional division has so far been insuperable. Nigeria’s own founding fathers were grimly ironic about this struggle. Nigerian unity, quipped Tafawa Balewa, the country’s first premier, was ‘only a British intention’; another grandee of the time, Obafemi Awolowo, said the name ‘Nigeria’ was ‘merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not’; while the contemporaneous paramount northern leader, Ahmadu Bello, dismissed the Nigerian project as ‘the mistake of 1914’, in reference to the half-baked British ‘amalgamation’ of northern and

southern Nigeria of that year. At critical junctures in Nigerian history, one key factor after another has emerged to confirm these dismal prophesies. It was ethnic 'sub-nationalism' in the 1960s; oil boom and bust in the 1970s; and it appears that it is religion today, as devotional ideologies are springing from Islam and Christianity, the two faiths that overlay almost exactly Nigeria's north-south divide,<sup>1</sup> to anchor regional antagonism into the absolutism of religious dogmas.

The four books reviewed here have very different ambitions – and scholarly merits – but their focused exploration of religion, or the politics of religion, in Nigeria speaks to this moment in Nigerian history. In the case of Thurston's and Loimeier's remarkable books, it also speaks to this fraught moment in the global history of Islam. What do we glean from them?

Olufemi Vaughan's argument in *Religion and the Making of Nigeria* speaks most directly to the Nigerian quandary. Vaughan's first objective is to demonstrate how Nigeria was constituted by religion – by which one must understand, despite a few token references to 'indigenous religions', the two imported monotheisms: Christianity and Islam. Paradoxically, Vaughan's thesis on the development of the monotheisms in Nigeria is reminiscent of the 'modernization theory' used by political scientists and others in the 1960s to predict, among other things, the demise of religion as a social-political force. Drawing on a similarly teleological literature on 'world religions', Vaughan explains that the indigenous religions of Nigeria could not cope with the 'complicated social, political and economic conditions' that started to prevail in the area in the nineteenth century. They inevitably gave way to the 'world religions', which went on to produce the 'doctrines, practices, and ideologies' that transformed (and created) Nigeria. Vaughan's second objective is to analyse 'the political struggles between Hausa-Fulani Muslim society and other regions in the country'. These other regions are the middle belt – in Nigerian geopolitics, the region where north and south meet, and a major site of recurring communal violence – and the Yoruba-dominated south-west. Vaughan oddly leaves out of his study the south-east, the region where the Nigerian project came closest to an end during the Biafran war, a clash that included the hostility of upholders of Catholicism and local belief systems towards a perceived Muslim threat from the north.

As a result, the book is the story of the concurrent development of the 'world religions' at the expense of 'indigenous religions' in the north and the south-west, followed by confrontations between the two 'world religions', especially in the middle belt. The faith-based modernization theory framework of analysis subsides after the historical sections, which cover familiar ground. Vaughan retells these well-known episodes of Nigerian history, in many cases without providing a clear understanding of how the overly detailed information contributes to supporting his theses. Christianity comes out looking much better than Islam from his interpretation of these events. Yoruba Christianization appears as the teleological endpoint of a process based on dialogue, things such as establishing a connection between 'the realms of heaven and earth', and a conciliation of local traditions to Western modernity through pacific missionary work, whereas Islamization is presented as an aggressive Arabic-speaking imposition that destroyed 'pagan' cultures in the name of sharia. Although Vaughan cossets this point of view with detailed narrations – and details always beget nuance – it remains the core of his perspective and gave this reviewer the strong suspicion that he is not always

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<sup>1</sup>With notable exceptions including J. D. Y. Peel's and Marloes Janson's work on 'Yoruba Islam'.

an unbiased analyst of the Nigerian quandary. In the case of the Muslim north, Vaughan is an unreliable scholar. There is a curious pattern of accepting at face value judgements from colonial officials on the region, for instance. This acceptance is surely not innocent, as Vaughan commits the same perspectival error as many of these officials did, considering 'Muslims' as a one-willed bloc with a threatening agenda, especially as they seek to 'reform' their religion (Pentecostal revivalism, in contrast, appears as a civilized and humanist endeavour, 'well integrated with global popular culture, media, institutions, and technology' and remarkable for promoting women to leadership positions). Everything northern seems shaped by that agenda. Thus, even though it is notorious that the film industry in Kano – 'Kannywood' – is persecuted and reviled by 'reformist' Muslims across the north, Vaughan imagines that it is a tool that they use 'to counteract the expansion of the Pentecostal movement' in the region. Apparently his research did not extend to watching Kannywood movies. In sum, if this book increases our understanding of the Nigerian quandary, it is not exactly in the way the author intended. It shows just how profound the Nigerian division is, and how it can taint scholarship.

Brandon Kendhammer's *Muslims Talking Politics* starts with an original and promising premise. Wouldn't we better understand what the politics of Islam in northern Nigeria are all about if we simply listened to ordinary Muslims living there? This would have been even more promising had Kendhammer thought of including all long-time residents of the region, not just Muslims, but even in this form, the project remains of substantial interest, especially since it has no precedent in northern Nigeria. This is not, however, a version of Richard Fenno's 'soak and poke' method of empirical observation unencumbered with theoretical assumptions. Kendhammer posits a population of 'Muslims' – and, as such, theological or doctrinal differences vanish, as do ways of defining oneself politically as Nigerian rather than as Muslim – and differentiates them in terms of 'elite' and 'ordinary' Muslims. The views of ordinary Muslims are then collected during conversation sessions Kendhammer organized with them – these are mostly residents of the city of Sokoto, including students in a university class Kendhammer taught when researching his topic – about sharia, a codified version of which was adopted by northern states in the early 2000s. Subsequently, recorded views are entered into discursive 'frames' that, according to theories worked out from Western situations, typically develop through media discourse. Kendhammer constructs his frames on the basis of the journalism of one single news outlet, the *New Nigerian* – something which he justifies by the assumption that 'framing' is best established from media that reflect communication between 'elite and popular opinions', which was the case of this particular newspaper in northern Nigeria. In a region where – as Kendhammer himself points out – radio and other non-print media are by far the dominant forms of media communication, this choice remains unconvincing. But ultimately, this is the least of this book's problems.

As mentioned before, the premise of *Muslims Talking Politics* is promising, but it is put to work in just one chapter of the book, the penultimate – all of thirty-three pages out of 233 pages of text. There is not much of value that we learn from the chapter, especially since the author chose to devote parts of this reduced space to telling us how the conversations unfolded. Incidentally, Kendhammer's account about his relative failure in organizing meaningful conversations begs the question why – especially since he resided in Sokoto for a long stretch of time – he did not simply 'soak and poke' instead of spending time and energy on these artificial setups.

The other chapters of the book can best be described as extended commentaries on the history of Nigeria, sharia and the compatibility of Islam and liberal

democracy. It is not clear what Kendhammer hoped to achieve with these, but they will be bewildering for readers unfamiliar with Nigeria, and redundant – and at times questionable – for those more conversant.

Alexander Thurston's *Salafism in Nigeria* is not as directly focused on the Nigerian quandary as the two previous works. The book ends with a study of Boko Haram, but this is mainly in relation to its overall argument. Thurston's preoccupation is to understand Salafism in general, and to define the nature of its presence in Nigeria. His approach to the two matters leads to a convincing demonstration – although with a number of limitations, some well understood by Thurston and taken into account by him.

Salafism, on Thurston's reading, is the outcome of the historical development of a 'canon'. That concept includes, as we might expect, the catalogue of texts that embody Salafi ideas and principles. But it also relates to the procedures through which those texts (and their authors) were and still are being integrated into the canon, and it defines the true understanding of and adherence to Islam that results from the canonical process. This is all very recent, in contrast to general impressions that Salafism has a centuries-old pedigree. We learn that the Salafi canon – Salafism as such – arose through a convergence of a number of factors around the second half of the last century. Key among those factors was, on the one hand, the work of 'canonizers' such as the Albanian/Syrian *hadith* expert Muhammad al-Albani and the Saudi scholar Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz, and, on the other hand, the oil wealth of Saudi Arabia, the state that became the epicentre of Salafism in the 1960s. The role of Saudi Arabia is especially important for understanding the emergence of Salafi culture in northern Nigeria through the transmission of the Salafi canon to Nigerian students at the University of Medina. This happened very gradually – for reasons underlined in the book – and it was only in the late 1990s that Salafism gained a solid foothold in the region.

Thurston's historicizing approach and the concept of the canon help us to differentiate Salafism from closely related doctrinal and theological attitudes, such as Wahhabism and the Nigerian Izala movement, both of which I personally had thus far categorized as variants of Salafism. More importantly, they give us a concrete sense of what Salafism is – beyond the vague impression of grim fundamentalism that the word generally evokes. The approach certainly runs the risk of 'presentism': all those doctrines that were mistakenly considered Salafism thus appear as mere steps leading to the true Salafism, which emerged only in our own day and age. However, it also has an evident heuristic value, and other scholars can use it to problematize Thurston's conclusions – a true measure of a good contribution to knowledge.

While I have discussed at some length Thurston's definition of Salafism, I should point out that most of the book is an analysis of the 'localization' of Salafism in the Nigerian context, including the ways it is taught, the channels through which the canon spreads across the wider society (there is here an emphasis on religious debates and electronic media), its contacts with the world of politics, and the Boko Haram crisis, which Thurston presents as a perversion of Salafism by jihadism. In general, Thurston is successful in a difficult undertaking: to adequately present the action of a global force (Salafism) while preserving throughout a sense of place – i.e. the sense that this is happening *in Nigeria*. His wide-ranging command of the Salafi canon (from what I gathered, all in Arabic), mastery of the northern Nigerian Islamic preaching scene (which uses Hausa as its main language) and familiarity with modern Nigerian history are wonderfully at play here.

However, Thurston is perhaps too ready to downplay the radical and subversive character of the Salafi message for a secular government and a complex modern society. Indeed, his focus on intellectual history, and his legitimate efforts to de-demonize Nigeria's prominent Salafi figures – especially the murdered Jafar Adam – lead him to overlook the implications of the harsh world of pervasive religious scrutiny and control that the Salafis want to bring about. Does the fact that they hope to do so through persuasion and not through violence really distinguish them from Boko Haram? In the final analysis, Thurston's reading of Boko Haram's actions is determined to a fault by the concept of the canon. Since 2009, Thurston tells us, when Boko Haram became an insurgent movement at war with the Nigerian state, its leaders have turned away from the canon and have therefore ceased being proper Salafis, turning instead into jihadists à la ISIS. But this is to forget the effects of war. The case is arguably that Boko Haram's leaders shed the canon simply as a luxury impossible to maintain in the savagery of war, not as something that they have rejected due to some doctrinal divergence. After all, many of the more outrageous pronouncements of ISIS and Boko Haram on what the 'Islamic way' should be are still voiced by respected Salafi preachers in lengthy sermons that are integral to urban soundscapes across West Africa.

Thurston's book is highly readable. The language is precise and elegant, the parts and chapters follow each other in a logical manner, and each chapter is closed by a short conclusion that recapitulates its main points and marks the progress of the author's arguments.

The Nigerian quandary is also better understood within a broader perspective within which we are able to distinguish both its peculiarities and its connections to trends that exist elsewhere. Relative to Islam, Roman Loimeier's *Islamic Reform in Twentieth-century Africa* commendably serves that purpose. Loimeier has the historian's awareness that things change over time without assigning, however, a specific direction to that change. He has the fieldworker's taste for on-the-ground observation, but with keenness in the detection of differences and diversity. He has the semantic tact of the philologist – working on Arabic and local locutions – but with a perception of the instabilities of meaning. In all these attitudes, he thus brings a corrective to some of the conclusions reached in the three other books reviewed here. However, a direct comparison between this work and the others is not fully warranted, since Loimeier's project is very different from theirs. His volume is an offering from a life's experience of studying Islam in Africa – drawing both on past fieldwork and on copious fingertip knowledge of the literature – and it is centred on the theme or concept of reform in Islam as examined in thirteen sub-Saharan settings, including Nigeria, over a hundred or so years.

This means conveying a great deal of complex information while endeavouring not to confuse the reader. To achieve this, Loimeier offers, in an introductory essay, a wide-ranging definition of reform, which is understood to imply, first, a normative discourse, a programme, a will and intention; and second, a programmatic action that is successful in gaining local and contextual relevance and traction. If this is what reform in general entails, Islamic reform in Africa has specific meanings that are drawn from the Sufi and the more recent – not farther back in time than the 1930s – Salafi traditions, and that are divided in orientation towards either *siyasa* (politics) or *tarbiyya* (education). Loimeier then applies this understanding of reform to the country case studies, some of which are paired with each other – for example, Nigeria is compared with neighbouring Niger.

The Nigerian Islamic stage, in Loimeier's reading, thus appears as a place where Muslims grapple with an ever-evolving process of modernity by engaging in ever-

evolving processes of reform, both ‘Sufi-oriented’ and ‘Salafi-oriented’, and with either a *siyasa* or a *tarbiyya* orientation. The concepts of the modern and of the nation state, which are at work in Vaughan’s book, also play a key role here, but with different implications. The modern is an object of criticism, a source of inspiration, and an arena in which diverse opportunities – some of which are threatening to previous reformers – unceasingly emerge. The nation state, in contrast, appears as the stable political frame that provides context to reformist messages, even as they connect with the international forces of Islam that spring from places such as Iran, Saudi Arabia or Libya. In Loimeier’s account, the Nigerian story is thus that of a succession of Islamic reform movements, the earliest of which are all Sufi – with a genealogical origin that goes back to the years of the Sokoto Caliphate, in the pre-modern nineteenth century. The reform movement of yesterday becomes the established doctrine of today, which is assailed by new reform movements. Moreover, with the expansive technologies of modernity – from the radio to the CD to the internet – the reach and contents of the reform messages change and adapt, and new agents of reformism arise and often (though not always) displace former leaders. Loimeier does not contend this, but it emerges from his descriptions that older reformism – including the important ‘Salafi-minded’ Yan Izala – was more *tarbiyya*-oriented while the more recent type, culminating with Boko Haram, has tended to be more *siyasa*-oriented. This is the least convincing aspect of a chapter that manages to cover immense ground – sometimes dizzyingly – in a short space, and it is a consequence of Loimeier’s attempt to provide a simple reading grid for a complex reality. Niger is treated as a coda to the Nigerian study, but Loimeier – who never conducted fieldwork there – is on surer footing in the case of Nigeria.

Readers primarily interested in making sense of the Nigerian quandary may skip the other chapters in Loimeier’s book – although they might provide a wider empirical perspective for the issues discussed and analysed in the Nigerian chapter – but they must read the introductory and concluding essays. Taken together, these essays and the chapter on Nigeria provide a solid theoretical and empirical grounding from which to evaluate the claims made by Vaughan, Kendhammer and Thurston.

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doi:10.1017/S0001972019000159

## Amid Boko Haram’s persistence, an increasingly specialized literature emerges

Hilary Matfess, *Women and the War on Boko Haram: wives, weapons, witnesses*. London: Zed Books (pb £14.99 – 978 1 78699 145 4). 2017, 270 pp.

Scott MacEachern, *Searching for Boko Haram: a history of violence in Central Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (hb £21.99 – 978 0 19 049252 6). 2018, 248 pp.

Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa (eds), *The Boko Haram Reader: from Nigerian preachers to the Islamic State*. London: Hurst (pb £25 – 978 1 84904 884 2). 2018, 384 pp.