



**Approaching the Ambivalence of the Sacred
in Conflict Mobilization:**

The Case of Blasphemy Killings in Sokoto

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Abstract

This paper contributes to existing studies analyzing the ambivalence of the sacred in conflict management. While it is an established consensus that religious communities are not intrinsically violent but instead ambivalent as they sometimes contribute to conflict escalation and at other times peacebuilding, the literature has focused more on the bellicist side of religion compared to its pacifist potential. We seek to broaden the discussion by focusing on how different understandings of holy scriptures by religious communities serve as drivers of peaceful or violent mobilization. First, we reviewed the relevant literature to identify specific understanding and readings that are considered crucial for mobilizing support towards the use of force by religious communities in political conflicts. These are further clustered into four dimensions corresponding to how religious communities relate to their scriptures (Scriptures), how they perceive their world (World), how they situate themselves in the world (Community), and how they understand their mission in political conflicts (Conflict). Depending on how religious communities interpret and resolve these existential questions, they are bound to develop exclusive or inclusive understandings and readings which in turn determine their disposition to support violence or promote peacebuilding. On the exclusive pole, these comprise fundamentalist, apocalyptic, chosen people, and cosmic war understandings. In contrast, inclusive understandings require contextual, everyday, common humanity, and just peace understandings. Together, these eight clusters form four continua along which religious readings and understandings can vary. We demonstrate the usefulness of our theoretical framework using the case of blasphemy related extrajudicial killings in the religious community of Sokoto in Northwestern Nigeria. We focus on the case of Deborah Samuel who was lynched in May 2022 in Sokoto on blasphemy allegations. For this, we analyze 38 sermons by 21 anonymized Musim clerics in Nigeria who either defended or criticized the killing. We found that our analytical framework largely pictures the difference between those leaders who justify the stoning as an act of religious devotion and those who consider the killing as incompatible with Islam and its core teachings. While we could not identify all specifications of our eight clusters in our sample, the clusters systematically varied along the line of more exclusive and more inclusive understandings and readings of religious traditions and scriptures.

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Table of Content

Introduction.....	1
Literature Review and Analytical Framework.....	3
Conceptualizing Religious Understandings and Readings	3
Specifying Readings and Understandings.....	7
Blasphemy and Apostasy in Islam	8
Blasphemy Killings in Sokoto	10
Analyzing Sermons	13
Exclusive Understandings and Readings.....	13
Fundamentalist Understandings.....	13
Traces of Apocalyptic Understandings.....	15
Chosen People Understandings.....	16
Cosmic War Understandings	18
Inclusive and Trust-related Understandings.....	20
Contextual Understandings	20
Everyday Understandings	22
Common Humanity Understandings	23
Just Peace Understandings	24
Conclusion	25
References	27

Introduction¹

There is a strong case for the ambivalence of the sacred in conflict management (Appleby, 2000): Sometimes religious communities contribute to conflict escalation, intensity and duration, and sometimes they help to prevent the use of force, support negotiated settlements, and engage in reconciliation. To better understand under which conditions religious communities are more likely to become part of the problem and when they might be a part of the solution, we propose to analyze their religious understandings and readings. Our basic idea is that we can distinguish more exclusive from more inclusive understandings and readings, and depending on which understandings and readings are dominant, religious communities can be more or less easily connected to established practices of political mobilization for armed conflict. Or to put it differently, collective action frames designed to mobilize support for armed conflict do resonate better in religious communities who practice exclusive understandings and readings.

The idea that support of political violence by religious communities is dependent on their religious understandings and readings is not new. Fundamentalism, apocalyptic worldviews, chosen-people perceptions, and cosmic war expectations, are found to be relevant in this regard (Appleby, 2017; Juergensmeyer, 2017; Riesebrodt, 2010). At the same time, however, we are still lacking systematic evidence that opposite understandings based on more inclusive readings of the Bible and the Qur'an have opposite effects. For this purpose, we will look into an instance of blasphemy-killing in Sokoto, namely the stoning of Deborah Samuel in May 2022 after allegations of blasphemy. We will check whether the sermons and statements of those Muslim leaders who support her killing differ systematically along the lines of more exclusive religious understandings and readings from the sermons and statements of those leaders who condemn it.

In a first step, we will use a literature review to identify and specify those understandings and readings that are considered to support the use of force by religious communities in political conflicts. We find that they largely cluster around four dimensions referring to how religious communities relate to their scriptures (Scriptures), how they perceive their world (World), how they situate themselves in the world (Community), and how they understand their mission in political conflicts (Conflict). Building on the relevant literature, we will refer to the first cluster as fundamentalist understandings, the second as apocalyptic understandings, the third as chosen people understandings and the fourth as cosmic war understandings.

As will become clear below, these four clusters and their specifications do overlap to a certain extent. However, we found them helpful in analyzing not only discursive drivers that are considered relevant for conflict escalation, but also for identifying readings and understandings that might support non-violent conflict management and settlement. Consequently, we specify contextual understandings, everyday understandings, common humanity understandings, as well as just peace understandings which largely mirror the first four clusters. Together, these eight clusters form four continua along which religious readings and understandings can vary.

¹ We would like to express our gratitude to Alhassan Tahiru and Halimatu S. Abdulkadir for their English translations of sermons in Hausa as well as to Laura Eckhoff for designing the cover page.

Dimensions	Exclusive Understandings	Inclusive Understandings
Scriptures	Fundamentalist Understandings	Contextual Understandings
World	Apocalyptic Understandings	Everyday Understandings
Community	Chosen People Understandings	Common Humanity Understandings
Interaction	Cosmic War Understandings	Just Peace Understandings

In a second step, we introduce the historical and political backgrounds of the stoning of Deborah Samuel in May 2022, which – once more – has caused public controversies in Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria. Additionally, we provide a brief overview of the issues of blasphemy and apostasy in the Islamic tradition. We believe that the death penalty for such cases is anchored in a specific understanding of shari'a² law that categorizes blasphemy as apostasy, a crime that entails a *hadd* punishment as laid down by the Qur'an and the hadith. At the same time, it seems to have only a weak basis in the Qur'an and the hadith. This holds especially true for insulting the Prophet. Consequently, the appropriateness of the death penalty for apostasy and blasphemy has been highly contested and rejected among Muslim scholars.

In a third step, we apply our analytical framework to the killing of Deborah Samuel in Sokoto. For this purpose, we analyze 38 sermons or statements by 21 Muslim leaders in Nigeria who either defend or criticize the killing. We found that our analytical framework largely pictures the difference between those leaders who justify the stoning as an act of religious devotion and those who consider the killing as incompatible with Islam and its core teachings. While we could not identify all specifications of our eight clusters in our sample, the clusters systematically varied along the line of more exclusive and more inclusive understandings and readings of religious traditions and scriptures. Moreover, we found that those religious leaders who defend the blasphemy killing of Deborah Samuel were mostly located in Sokoto, while the critical voices became louder with increasing distance to Sokoto, indicating that in and around Sokoto a very specific religious climate prevails which seems to be conducive for the sacralization of violence as an act of religious devotion.

In the conclusion, we will outline how we plan to use a refined version of our analytical framework, to study Christian and Muslim communities in Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire to better understand which groups are more susceptible for violent mobilization in political conflicts. As will be briefly sketched out in the conclusion, we will use practice theory and a most different case design to plot the distance between religious understandings and readings and the mobilization for political violence. Our model suggests that those groups who practice more exclusive understandings and readings can be more easily connected to those practices that are considered crucial for conflict escalation.

² In this paper, we generally follow the transliteration guidelines of the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES), including the IJMES word list.

Literature Review and Analytical Framework

Conceptualizing Religious Understandings and Readings

In the literature, the dark side of religion is well researched. While there is still debate about whether religious differences in terms of identities or teachings affect conflict escalation, it seems clear that they tend to increase the intensity and duration of armed struggles and decrease the likelihood of negotiated settlements (Köbrich and Hoffmann, 2023; Maoz and Henderson, 2020; Svensson, 2007; Toft, 2021). To explain the connection between religious differences and violence, four clusters of drivers can be identified in the literature which largely focusses on the functionality of religious differences for conflict mobilization (Klandermans and van Stekelenburg, 2022).

First, fundamentalist understandings are found to be closely related with support for political violence (Beller, 2017; Ciftci et al., 2017; Koopmans et al., 2021; Wolfowicz et al., 2021). The conceptualization of fundamentalism, however, varies among scholars. On the one hand, we find very broad understandings. Scott Appleby (2017, p. 408), for instance, defines fundamentalist movements by eight characteristics: They are reactive towards secularity and modernity, selective in their readings, absolutist in their truth claims, dualist towards social others, millennialist in a rotten world, separatist with regard to their social environment, authoritarian in leadership orientation, and restrictive towards deviations. By contrast, Detlef Pollack and his colleagues (2023, p. 5) understand religious fundamentalism as claims to exclusive, superior, and universal truth and the demand that a glorious past should be restored.

For our paper, we opt for a narrow conceptualization of fundamentalist understandings focusing on scripturalism and literalism (see also Antoun, 2010, p. 519; Koopmans et al., 2021, p. 1501). From this perspective, fundamentalist beliefs are characterized by the search for absolute truth and certainty in God-given scriptures. The scriptures and revelations are perceived as containing sacred instructions that must be taken literally and should be strictly followed in politics and society. To cope with contradictions and tensions within and between sacred traditions, fundamentalist understandings and readings tend to be selective and emphasize some traditions while ignoring others (Appleby, 2015, p. 40; Haynes, 2019, p. 1; Kimball, 2002, p. 56). The responsibility for selecting and interpreting the dominant traditions lies with religious authorities, who must be obeyed. They have access to religious truth and convey the truth in an unambiguous and binding manner. Due to their orientation towards historic scriptures, fundamentalist readings recognize a glorious past in which the original message was revealed to the faithful. With the revelation came the expectation that the sacred information would be preserved and passed unchanged to future generations. Should believers stray from the right path, they must be brought back to the roots of their religion.

To be sure, fundamentalist understandings must not lead believers to support violence in the name of the sacred. Often fundamentalist communities separate from their social environment, adopt quietist lifestyles and follow inward-oriented rules. Or as put by Richard Antoun (2010, p. 534): “Only a tiny minority of fundamentalists resort to violence, not to speak of terrorism. Fundamentalists pursue strategies of flight, radical separation, spatial separation, and institutional separation – none of which are violent – as well as confrontational. The great majority of confrontational acts are nonviolent: contesting elections, staging demonstrations, boycotting products, services and entertainments, propagandizing over radio and television, acting as pressure groups, and pursuing legal action in the courts. The great majority of fundamentalists are law-abiding people, like the general population of all nations.” However, fundamentalist attitudes are clearly found to increase the support for political violence among believers.

A second cluster of mobilization drivers can be summarized as apocalyptic visions of a close end of the world. Lorne Dawson (2006, p. 377f.), for instance, found that apocalyptic beliefs played a major role

in explaining the political violence by new religious movements such diverse as the People Temple, the Solar Temple or Aum Shinriko. Similarly, John Collins (2003, p. 17) argues that violent movements in the Bible are often associated with an apocalyptic understanding of their own times. And according to Heather Gregg (2016, p. 348), “apocalyptic war occurs when adherents believe that current-day events are signs that the end is here, and that their participation in the Final Battle is necessary for both Good to triumph and for their own eternal salvation. For those who participate in apocalyptic war, the promise of salvation and the millennium, a period of peace and harmony, is promised.”

Following John Hall (2003, p. 272) and Michael Tilly (2012, p. 12), we argue that apocalyptic movements anticipate a radical rupture in the course of history. They expect the end of the world as we know it and the dawn of a radically different era. While the old times are perceived as deeply compromised and hopelessly lost, the new times will be characterized by peace, prosperity and justice (Hall, 2013, p. 1). The ultimate author of the new era is God, who makes all things new – with or without the support by true believers. Between the old and the new times comes a day of judgment when God will punish the transgressors and rewards the faithful (O’Leary, 1994, pp. 5–6). It is therefore of utmost importance for the faithful to firmly hold to the true belief and not to deviate from the right path. Compromises with evil forces are anathema (Collins, 2003, p. 17; Connolly, 2005, p. 875). Typically, apocalyptic traditions are revealed to a charismatic messenger or mediator who is authorized to inform the faithful and whose instructions must be closely followed (Collins, 1998, p. 12; Gregg, 2016, p. 349; Velji, 2013, p. 255). Often, a coming apocalypse is identifiable by specific omen and signs of the day as well of an increased activity of supranatural beings such as angels. The faithful are called to remain strong in times of crisis and to trust in their God and his representatives.

As with fundamentalist beliefs, apocalyptic visions do not necessarily translate into supporting violence in the name of the sacred (Collins, 2003, p. 17; Hall et al., 2000, p. 11; Strozier, 2010, p. 31). Often apocalyptic communities retreat from society or adopt a quietist lifestyle while attending the end of the world. Or as observed by Heather Gregg (2016, p. 349), “the transformation of apocalyptic imagining, which is present in all religions, to apocalyptic war, which is unusual, hinges on the role of the charismatic leader. The charismatic leader is the one that identifies real-world events as signs of the end of times and connects those events to apocalyptic expectations and necessary actions—specifically violence—for the true believer. Behind every apocalyptic war is a charismatic leader that not only identifies the problem, but the course of action required of the faithful, which is to rise up and fight for Good to triumph over Evil.” However, when fundamentalist and apocalyptic understandings merge with chosen people and cosmic struggle narratives the use of force by religious movements becomes more likely.

Chosen-people understandings insist on the exceptional status of a religious community as “light to the nations” (Smith, 2003). An identifiable group of people is singled out by God and tasked with representing his will and divine plan on earth and towards humanity. In this context, chosenness is often associated with a promised land which the chosen people conquers and controls. Archetypical in the Western context is the covenant between God and Israel (Collins, 2003, pp. 8–10; Smith, 2003, pp. 52–58). But similar ideas can be found elsewhere. For instance, many Buddhists in Sri Lanka consider their country as promised land and “island of the Dharma” (Weiberg-Salzmann, 2014, p. 289). Status, mission and territory ultimately originate in the will of God and establish the superiority of the chosen people over other groups. Consequently, the community is set apart by divine design. Members are required to uphold their social distinctiveness and maintain clear boundaries toward unbelievers. In case that other groups are not willing to recognize the divine mission of the chosen people or even attack the representatives of God on Earth, members are entitled to use all necessary means to defend themselves and their mission with the support of God. This includes taking the law into their own hands and enforcing the recognition of their special status. With the exceptional status comes the obligation

to strictly abide by divine expectations as partners of God. If individual members fail to do so, punishment and purification are necessary to save the special status of the group (Smith, 2003, pp. 63–64). Consequently, divine chosenness goes hand in hand with inward-control and a hierarchical organization where some are tasked with policing others for the common good. As long as a chosen people will perform as expected, God will protect and bless them with power and prosperity.

Historically, chosen people understandings are considered to be a driving force in such diverse conflicts as the English Puritan Revolution under Oliver Cromwell (Collins, 2003, p. 13; Murphy, 2011, p. 532), the conquest of “New England” and the genocide on Native Americans (Rowley, 2017), or the Great Trek of Dutch-speaking farmers from the British-ruled Cape colony from 1834 to 1838 and the subsequent subjugation of indigenous populations (Du Toit, 1983, p. 927; Smith, 2003, pp. 78–85). In modern times, traces of the chosen people narrative can be found in Israel among the settler communities (Selengut, 2015), but also in India with the emerging Hindu-Nationalism (Jaffrelet, 2017, pp. 156–160). In each case, the narrative was used to legitimize the use of force against an adversary who was considered an enemy of God – the proverbial Amalekites.

Last but not least, Marc Juergensmeyer (2016, p. 1) holds cosmic war imaginations to be a major driver of religion-related violence. Similarly, James Jones (Jones, 2011, p. 295) found that “one of the most common and widespread beliefs of fanatically violent religious movements is their apocalyptic vision of a cosmic struggle of the forces of good against the forces of evil.” More specifically, cosmic war readings represent the world as staging a Manichean drama (Aslan, 2013, p. 263). The forces of good are battling the forces of evil, and the faithful are called to arms to defend their religion and to enact God’s will. Or to put it differently, they are participating in an ultimate and age-old struggle on earth that will be eventually decided by God in heaven who acts as a great warrior and leads the forces of good into battle against evil (Aslan, 2013, p. 262). Consequently, the battle will be waged without mercy against the forces of evil, and because God is on their side, the forces of good will eventually prevail (Juergensmeyer, 2020, p. 10). Moreover, martyrs will be rewarded in the afterlife. Most important, even if the cosmic struggle seems to be lost, the faithful should trust in God and continue the fighting. By contrast, the forces of evil are not to be trusted and any sort of compromise is anathema (Jones, 2011, p. 296). Again, the idea of a cosmic battle presupposes religious authority who can read the signs of the time and translate the will of God into concrete battle scenarios. Or to put it differently, there must be a prior approval by God before a cosmic war begins (Aslan, 2013, p. 263).

While we do have considerable empirical evidence that religious fundamentalism, apocalyptic attitudes, shared imaginations of a chosen people and the perception of a cosmic struggle contribute to conflict escalation, the question whether opposite understandings and readings have opposite effects is still open. To approach this question in our empirical section on blasphemy killings, we once more scanned the relevant literature to identify religious understandings and readings that are juxtaposed with the four exclusive readings and understandings that we have just discussed. More specifically, we identified contextual understandings and readings, everyday understandings and readings, common humanity readings and understandings, as well as just peace understandings and readings.

To begin, contextual understandings are characterized by religious literacy which includes awareness of the complexities and internal tensions of religious scriptures (American Academy of Religion, 2010, pp. 4–6; Appleby and Marty, 2002, p. 17; Moore, 2007, p. 56f). So understood, religious literacy is not about pure knowledge of verses and facts, but about taking the ambiguity, intersectionality and multilayeredness of religious traditions seriously and approaching them with what Catherine Cornille (2013, p. 22) and John Rowley (2017, p. 142) call “epistemological humility” or “epistemic humility”. Or to put it differently, the ambiguity, intersectionality and multilayeredness of religious scriptures make it necessary to interpret them in a reasonable and comprehensible way -- knowing that every interpretation is only provisional and guided by time-bound standards. As Julia Snyder (2021, p. 10) has put it: “there

is no predetermined connection between ancient historical authors and circumstances and *contemporary* application.” Therefore, religious text should not be taken as “instruction manuals” (Snyder, 2021, p. 11) that can be simply blueprinted on contemporary challenges. So understood, contextual readings are closely associated with an understanding of God as mystery which is foundational for monotheistic religions.

Consequently, and as outlined by Paul Tillich with regard to Christianity, “a theological system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs: the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation. Theology moves back and forth between two poles, the eternal truth of its foundation and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received.” (Tillich, 1951, p. 5) Also, contemporary approaches to intersectional or relations theology hold that “all religious traditions are essentially relational” (Takacs, 2022, p. 572). Similar understandings can be identified among Muslim scholars. Asma Afsaruddin (2015, p. 182; see also Akca, 2022, p. 12) for instance asks Muslims to read the Qur’an with “fresh eyes today in the context of our own sociohistorical circumstances, while yet attempting to remain faithful to their actual wording and semantic landscape.” And from a Jewish perspective, Jonathan Sacks (Sacks, 2015, p. 208; see also Gopin, 2002a, p. 59) declares “Biblicism – accepting the authority of the written while rejecting oral tradition, the position of the Sadducees and Karaites – as heresy. The rabbis said: ‘One who translates a verse literally is a liar.’ The point is clear: no text without interpretation; no interpretation without tradition; or as 2 Corinthians puts it, ‘The letter kills, but the spirit gives life’ (NUV, 2 Cor. 3:6).”

Second, everyday understandings put the human condition center place and address the specific needs and experiences of the faithful in pragmatic ways (Ammerman, 2014, p. 196f; Riesebrodt, 2007, pp. 239–258). The focus is not on ruptures and radical new beginnings, but on continuities and practical challenges. The faithful must find ways to navigate the complexities of their everyday struggles. In this context, they must find ways to protect the integrity of their communities while adapting to, or addressing, the dynamics of their social environments. For better or worse, an end of the world as we know is not in sight. Therefore, everyday readings prefer step-to-step strategies to improve individual and collective action, and they articulate the promise of salvation in a profoundly uncertain and ambiguous world. Consequently, they value redemption and forgiveness as attempts for a new beginning in this world. Moreover, everyday readings are characterized by a precarious balance between religious principles and political compromises (Martin, 1997).

Third, humanity-centered understandings emphasize human dignity along with human vulnerabilities (Gopin, 2002b, pp. 27–32; Little, 2007, p. 7). By common descent, all humans are conceived as equal. Their life is precious and must be respected. Or as Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb have confirmed in their “Document on Human Fraternity” in 2019: „Faith leads a believer to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved. Through faith in God, who has created the universe, creatures and all human beings (equal on account of his mercy), believers are called to express this human fraternity by safeguarding creation and the entire universe and supporting all persons, especially the poorest and those most in need.” Similarly, the world largest interfaith NGO “Religions for Peace” declared at its 1970 founding assembly in Kyoto that “we share a conviction of the fundamental unity of the human family, and the equality and dignity of all human beings”. And for the Muslim World League (2022) it is beyond doubt that “humans, regardless of their communities and affiliations, have the same origin. As humans they are all equal. They all possess dignity to spread love, mercy, forgiveness and tolerance, and to extend bridges of dialogue and cooperation for the greater good of all.”

Consequently, humanity-centered understandings focus on compassion, solidarity, and peace. Torture and cruel treatment of individuals are rejected as well as discrimination and oppression of social groups. Moreover, mercy and forgiveness are considered core values of all religions that encourage

repentance and reconciliation. Under conditions of religious plurality, humanity-centered readings insist on respect for political authorities and the rule of law as way to organize everyday peace among faith communities. Transgressions and the violation of rights must be addressed according to accepted principles and due process. Arbitrary rule is rejected as barbaric.

Fourth, just peace understandings emphasize “unity in diversity” (Abu-Nimer et al., 2007). For their protagonists, religions are not mutually exclusive and hostile, but they expect truth in all major faith traditions, elaborate on common grounds, and engage for religious freedom – basically because they believe that there can be no compulsion in religion as stated in the Qur’an (Q2: 256). Therefore, religious plurality is considered not a liability but an asset (Afsaruddin, 2015, p. 174; Hedges, 2017, p. 6; Shafiq and Abu-Nimer, 2011, p. 50). It expresses God’s will to create and sustain an internally diverse world, which should motivate the faithful to engage in interfaith dialogue and learning (Khan et al., 2020, pp. 2–3). This will lead them to a better understanding of others’ traditions as well as their own – or as Perry Schmidt-Leukel (Schmidt-Leukel, 2016, p. 214)(2016: 214) has put it: the faithful should engage in "reciprocal illumination". Moreover, interfaith readings highlight common challenges that religions face in this world and ways to address them by interfaith cooperation (Knitter, 2013). A case in point might be the need for reconciliation after violent conflicts (Abu-Nimer, 2022).

Specifying Readings and Understandings

After the conceptualization of the eight dimensions of our analytical frameworks comes their specification. In the table below, we organized the specification in a way, that the exclusive and inclusive understandings of religion of each dimension are juxtaposed.

<p><u>Fundamentalist understandings</u> use scriptures to identify absolute truth and unequivocal guidance in a hostile world (“Religion is the solution”). They insist on literal understandings, the unquestionable superiority of religion over politics, and submission under an original messenger and subsequent religious authorities who have a privileged access to the revealed truth and can provide the faithful with the necessary guidance. The past is glorified and serve as a role-model for the present.</p>	<p><u>Contextual understandings</u> emphasize the inner tensions of scriptures, elaborate on the time gap between original texts and contemporary life-worlds, insist on the need for their reasonable interpretation, explain the ways how textual tensions and time-gaps can be approached, take notice on the social embeddedness and contingencies of text interpretations that necessitates a time-bound “soteriological bridgebuilding” (Bellah 2005), and practices epistemological humility.</p>
<p><u>Apocalyptic understandings</u> use scriptures to prepare for radical social change and the end of the world as we know it. They anticipate inevitable hardships and chaos as produced by unbelievers, a radical rupture which will lead into a new future, and the day of judgement.</p>	<p><u>Everyday understandings</u> match religious traditions with the social needs of believers in pragmatic ways without expecting the end of world. They promise salvation to the faithful faced with constant challenges and inevitable hardships. Everyday readings emphasize repentance, forgiveness, political accommodation, and respect for secular law.</p>

<p><u>Chosen people understandings</u> use scriptures to defend the exceptional status of a religious community, the corresponding religious obligations, and the claim over a territory. This is considered divine will and justifies their claims to superiority. Additionally, scriptures are used to organize a chosen community internally, to differentiate the community from its social environment (othering), to control the behavior of members, and to purify transgressions.</p>	<p><u>Humanity-centered understandings</u> use scriptures to stress the common humanity of all persons, encourage solidarity with all suffering, inspire collective action to address injustice and oppression where they occur, and insist on the rule of law and due process to organize multi-religious societies and promote peaceful relations.</p>
<p><u>Cosmic war understandings</u> use scriptures to paint the world in black and white (Manichean world view), to identify existential threats to the faithful, to mobilize them for an ongoing struggle, to prepare them for hardship and sacrifices, to dehumanize enemies, to promise rewards in the afterlife, and to prevent any form of compromise with forces of darkness who cannot be trusted.</p>	<p><u>Just peace understandings</u> use scriptures to appreciate other religions, to promote interfaith dialogue, to stress religious freedom, to communicate mutual respect, to promote cooperation and problem-solving, and to practice common learning.</p>

Blasphemy and Apostasy in Islam

Blasphemy, in general, describes “speech that is derogatory to God” (Stewart, 2012, p. 235). More broadly, it refers to “disrespectful or irreverent statements about [...] religious beliefs, doctrines, institutions, and practices” (Campo, 2009, p. 108). It is commonly associated with its Biblical, Judaeo-Christian origins and is derived from the Greek word for “speaking evil”, for which there is no exact Arabic or Islamic equivalent (Campo, 2009, p. 108). Rather, a range of different terms are subsumed under blasphemy, among them *sabb*, *qadhf*, *istihzā’*, *shatm*, *la’n*, *ṭa’n*, *īdhā’* as well as the verbs *nāla min*, *sakhara* and *lamaza* (Erlwein, 2004, p. 175; Mohagheghi, 2019, p. 110f.; Wiederhold, 2004, p. 725). According to the Arabist and Islamic Studies scholar Devin J. Stewart (2012, p. 235), the terms used in the Qur’an that express most closely the concept of blasphemy are *takdhīb*, which means “giving the lie” or “denial” and denotes “the outright rejection of revealed religious truths”, and *iftirā’*, which translates as “invention” and describes “the declaration of a false belief of one’s own contrivance.”

While blasphemy in Islam also encompasses slurs against God, divine signs, and revealed books, as well as against the Prophet Muhammad’s family or companions, it has been mainly associated with insulting the Prophet Muhammad himself over the course of Islamic history (Erlwein, 2004, p. 175; Guth, 2008, p. 68f; Nickel, 2023, p. 122). By the ninth century, this act had come to be perceived as intolerable, and by the tenth century, a consensus had emerged among Muslim legal scholars that those insulting the Prophet must be punished with death, thereby taking a stricter stance on reviling Muhammad than on reviling God (Nickel 2023: p. 122f.).

Classical jurists linked blasphemy to notions of unbelief (*kufr*), polytheism (*shirk*) and, most importantly, apostasy (*irtidād*, *ridda*, *kufr*) and addressed the question of blasphemy in sections on apostasy or, at least, connected the two in their works (Erlwein, 2004, p. 175; Griffel, 2023; Hallaq, 2012; Krämer, 2017; Stewart, 2012). In their understanding, blasphemous acts led to unbelief and the abandoning of Islam (Erlwein 2004: p. 175). Classical legal discourse thereby created a direct link between blasphemy and apostasy.

Apostasy, in general, means “turning away from or rejecting one’s religion” (Hallaq 2012). In an Islamic context, two forms can be distinguished: first, “a declared desertion of Islam in favour of another

religion” and second, “a clandestine rejection of Islam”, often in combination with the secret conversion to another religion (Griffel 2023). While the former case does not appear in the Qur’an, the latter is mentioned, for example, in sura 63, also known as *al-Munāfiqūn*, “The Hypocrites”, referring to a group of people in Medina who were suspected to profess Islam on the outside, but harbor unbelief (Q 63:3: *kafarū*) on the inside (Griffel 2023). According to Wael Hallaq (2012), a scholar of Islamic Legal Studies, the two Qur’anic notions that express apostasy are *kufr*, as used in the aforementioned sura, as well as *irtidād*. Although the concept of *irtidād* is only used in two Qur’anic verses (Q 2:217; 5:54), it became synonymous with apostasy in the legal discourse as of the eighth century (Hallaq, 2012; Mohammad Ali 1920: 99 cited in O’Sullivan, 2001, p. 68).

The question of whether and how blasphemy should be punished consequently became synonymous with the question of how to deal with apostasy under Islamic criminal law (Ademi, 2018, p. 48). Muslim jurists and scholars have been largely divided into two camps on this matter: Most classical jurists argued for the death penalty as a *hadd* punishment for blasphemy and apostasy, but some left the punishment to God in the hereafter (Dziri, 2018, p. 76; Erlwein, 2004, p. 175; Haroon, 1993, p. 31 cited in O’Sullivan, 2001, p. 63, p. 81). Further controversies arose around the specifics of the process and the punishment that follow such acts, for instance the treatment of female apostates. While three Sunni schools of law (*madhāhib*) agree that the death penalty should also be applied to women, the Hanafi school states that they should be imprisoned instead (Safwat, 1982, p. 168 cited in O’Sullivan, 2001, p. 81). Another example is the time given to convicted apostates and blasphemers to repent (*istitāba*) and renounce their blasphemous words, ranging from no time to three days, a month, or a whole life, as “it should be a life-long endeavour to encourage the sinner to realise that they had lost their faith, and regain it” (Erlwein, 2004, p. 175; O’Sullivan, 2001, p. 81f.). Yet, some Muslim jurists argue that this grace period is not necessary but only recommended in the case of insulting the Prophet Muhammad or his mother (Erlwein, 2004, p. 175). Another point of contention is the question if non-Muslims can generally also be sentenced to death for blasphemy and apostasy, as the issue of abandoning Islam is not applicable to them (Erlwein, 2004, p. 175; Mohagheghi, 2019, p. 115). While classical jurists generally agreed that non-Muslims who lived under Muslim rule and protection should also be sentenced to death for blasphemous acts, they disagreed on whether this equally applied to territories that are not under Muslim rule (Erlwein, 2004, p. 175).

Interestingly, proponents and opponents of the death penalty partly used the same Qur’anic verses to defend their positions, coming, however, to contrary conclusions based on divergent translations and interpretations (O’Sullivan, 2001, p. 64). One example is sura 2, verse 217, where apostates are directly addressed with the words “And whoever among you turns away from his religion” (*wa-man yartadid minkum ‘an dīnihi*), referring to the notion of *irtidād*. In this case, it is not so much the translation but rather the interpretation that differs greatly. Some argued that the Qur’an here prescribed the death penalty for apostasy (O’Sullivan, 2001, p. 64). Others, however, derived an understanding of apostasy as an individual right and a self-attribution from this verse, making accusations of apostasy impossible (O’Sullivan, 2001, p. 65). Hallaq (2012) and Schirrmacher (2020, p. 89f.) further highlight that this and comparable verses do not impose any corporeal punishment in this world, but that they rather point out the consequences of apostasy in the hereafter.

In addition, a selective choice of Qur’anic verses has been essential in justifying positions. Those opposing any form of punishment in this world refer to more inclusive verses, whereas supporters of the death penalty use more exclusive ones. The former cite, for example, sura 2, verse 256 “There is no coercion in religion”, from which a general imperative of religious tolerance is derived, or sura 6, verse 108 “And do not insult those they invoke other than God, lest they insult God in enmity without knowledge”, which, according to the Muslim scholar Muhammad Asad, implies the respect for other deities, even if it contradicts the principle of the oneness of God (Ademi, 2018, p. 48; Asad, 2015 cited

in Dziri, 2018, p. 78). In contrast, those in favor of the death penalty cite, among others, sura 33, verse 57 “Surely those who offend God and His Messenger are condemned by God in this world and the hereafter. And He has prepared for them a humiliating punishment” (Dziri, 2018, p. 76f.).

As the Qur’an does not offer clear instructions, supporters of the death penalty also refer to the hadith, the reports of what the Prophet Muhammad said, did, or approved of. According to one hadith on blasphemy, for instance, “whoever reviles God and His Prophet should be killed” (Mohagheghi, 2019, p. 114). It is, however, important to note that this is an isolated hadith (*khbar al-wāḥid*) that lacks a sufficient number of transmitters (Mohagheghi, 2019, p. 114f.). Two other examples on apostasy are “The blood of a fellow Muslim should never be shed except in three cases: That of the adulterer, the murderer and whoever forsakes the religion of Islam” and “Whosoever changes his religion, kill him” (An-Na’im 1986 cited in O’Sullivan, 2001, p. 82). The Muslim scholar and professor of Islamic Law Mohammad Hashim Kamali derives from the latter hadith that apostasy must imply abandoning the Muslim community and challenging the leadership in the sense of high treason for the death penalty to be applicable (Kamali 1997: 96 cited in O’Sullivan, 2001, p. 82).

The view of apostasy as treason emerged during the conflicts following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, when converts to Islam had fallen away again, which threatened the existence of the newly established socio-political entity (Ademi, 2018, p. 48; Rohe, 2011, p. 268f.). These battles later came to be known as “the wars of apostasy” (*ḥurūb al-ridda*) (Hallaq 2012). Contemporary Muslim scholars, in particular, have pointed to this specific historical and political context, highlighting that blasphemy and apostasy do no longer pose comparable threats to the Islamic community (Erlwein, 2004, p. 176; Rohe, 2011, p. 268f.). It is thus questionable whether classical rulings on blasphemy and apostasy still apply today, especially because Muslim scholars have provided alternative readings of the Islamic sources that classical jurists used to justify their legal rulings (Erlwein, 2004, p. 176).

The issue of blasphemy and the consequences of blasphemy allegations thus heavily depend on the respective religious, cultural, social, and political contexts they are embedded in (Wohlrab-Sahr, 2018, p. 88ff.). In 2019, a total of forty percent of the countries and territories worldwide had blasphemy laws or policies (Villa, 2022). In countries that today have such legislations, non-Muslims are, in general, liable to imprisonment or a fine (Mohagheghi, 2019, p. 115). Nigeria is one of the countries where blasphemy violations can, under certain circumstances, lead to the death penalty (Villa, 2022).

Blasphemy Killings in Sokoto

Nigeria has the largest Muslim population in Africa with over 100 million Muslims inhabitants, representing 54% of the religious demographic. Hence, blasphemous acts are perceived as a grave offence to believers and a threat to national cohesion (Brooke-Holland et al., 2023; CIA World Fact Book, 2004). Since its independence in 1960, the country has implemented a dual legal system. While shari’a courts operate under Islamic law to litigate personal law cases involving Muslims, secular courts cater mainly to the country’s southern population (Mustapha and Gamawa, 2018, p. 139).

However, following its return to civilian rule in 1999 and the clamor for full implementation of shari’a law by 12 northern states, the scope of its application expanded beyond personal status and civil law to also cover criminal aspects (Harnischfeger, 2008; Tertsakian, 2004, p. 1; Ostien and Dekker, 2010; Weimann, 2010). Thus, the shari’a penal code has not only been increasingly applied in these states, but it has become the main legal provision for the adjudication of criminal offences, just as shari’a courts have gained prominence among the Muslim-majority population.

Once proven, blasphemy constitutes a criminal offence under the constitutional and shari'a penal code of the northern states. However, notable differences remain in terms of the severity of the offence and the form of punishment across secular and shari'a courts. In article 204 of Nigeria's criminal code, blasphemy is classified as a misdemeanour and punishable by a two-year maximum prison sentence (USCIRF Report, 2022, p. 3). Conversely, the shari'a penal code prescribes capital punishment for the offence of blasphemy including floggings, amputations, and the death penalty (USCIRF Report, 2022, p. 4).

Over the past two decades, there have been several documented cases of blasphemy related offences especially across the shari'a implementing states. The profile of cases ranges from formal court trials to unsubstantiated public allegations of blasphemy, with social media constituting yet another platform escalating the frequency of such allegations and intensity of attacks (Tertsakian, 2004; USCIRF Report, 2022; Weimann, 2010). Similarly, experiences of victims vary. Whilst Christians are likely to attract greater vitriol and harsher treatment compared to Muslims, (Fadare, 2022; USCIRF Report, 2022), women are less likely to be afforded fair hearing or trial under similar circumstances (Eltantawi, 2017; Tertsakian 2004, p. 23).

As we illustrate in this paper, mobilisation for and the support of mob killings after allegations of blasphemy are also linked to the religious understandings and practices of Muslim clerics. While several studies have analysed the spuriousness and limitations of shari'a law convictions in the northern states (Ostien and Dekker, 2010; Weimann, 2010), few studies have systematically examined the link between religious interpretations and blasphemy killings of violent mobs in Nigeria.

Sokoto provides a unique spatial context to observe the links between the two. While blasphemy unrests and killings are common across the 12 shari'a implementing states of northern Nigeria, the relative incidence of extrajudicial killings in recent years makes Sokoto an exception. As one of the states to fully adopt shari'a law in 2002, what sets the religious public sphere in Sokoto apart is its shared heritage with the Sokoto caliphate founded by Usman Dan Fodio (1804-1903). Dan Fodio instituted a stringent application of shari'a law across Hausa land after waging jihad from 1804 against the erstwhile ruling elite who he disavowed for being corrupt and desecrating Islam.

Spanning nearly a century, this polity (*siyāsa*), which predated the British colonial administration, remained the de facto system of governance in northern Nigeria during the colonial period through the system of indirect rule, until Nigeria gained independence in 1960 (Akande, 2023, p. 76). Thus, the primacy of Islam and the precedence of Islamic law remain enshrined in the governing structures of contemporary Sokoto and form the lens through which Muslim clerics and their adherents view law and order today.

Therefore, as Sarah Eltantawi (2017, p. 3) asserts "nineteenth-century Sokoto Caliphate serves as a model of strength and self-determination for today's northern Nigerians". She posits that the popular support for the reimplementation of strict shari'a in 1999 is best understood by analysing the interaction between the social and cultural manifestations of religion and a canon of overdetermined divine religious texts (Eltantawi, 2017, p. 3).

In the context of Sokoto, the cultural and social manifestation of religion is embodied by Muslim religious elites and their adherents drawing on theological canons and associated discourses of the caliphate. Consequently, the religious discursive space in Sokoto has seen the emergence of a radical preaching milieu in which the past glories of the caliphate are used by sympathetic clerics often opportunistically. In fact, many studies allude to the role of the erstwhile caliphate in shaping the religious philosophy and ideology of the Salafi jihadi group Boko Haram in Nigeria (Anonymous, 2012; Kassim, 2015; Pieri and Zenn, 2016).

Against this historical backdrop, Sokoto remains a state modelled on both strong exclusivist Islamic ideals and a pluralist religious secular order. Whilst the authority of the Sultan of Sokoto is still highly revered, competing hierarchies have emerged from both the Christian faith and that of the ruling political class. Hence, the discursive space in Sokoto has been prone to fierce contestation over judicial precedence when the shari'a and constitutional penal codes have been tested. This dialectical tension is starkly felt when issues of extra-judicial blasphemy killings occur and the sacrality of these laws become tools for legitimizing and mobilizing for religious violence.

At this juncture, we introduce the case of Deborah Samuel, also known as Deborah Samuel Yakubu³, a 19-year-old Christian student of the Shehu Shagari college of Education in Sokoto, who was murdered by a violent mob in Sokoto on May 12, 2022 after allegations of blasphemy. In the analytical section, we describe the specific religious explanations which her perpetrators and their supporters gave as justifications for their actions. It is worth noting that other high-profile cases of blasphemy killings in Sokoto exist, such as the stoning of Safiya Hussein in October 2001 (Tertsakian, 2004, p. 34) and the murder of Usman Buda on June 25, 2023 (Abdulsamad, 2023). Yet, what makes the Deborah incident more relevant for our research is the extent to which it resonated with both Muslims and Christians due to her religious affiliation, the uproar it generated globally, and the availability of statements and sermons by clerics reacting to the fatal incident.

While there are different accounts regarding the exact sequence of events leading to her public murder, Deborah was accused of blaspheming the Prophet due to a post she made in a WhatsApp study group created for course assignments. According to most published accounts, Deborah is alleged to have questioned why some course mates chose to share religious posts unrelated to the respective assignment. This is said to have degenerated into an argument on the platform, as some Muslim course mates took offence at her comments and demanded a retraction while threatening action against her (Ewang, 2022; Wakaso, 2022). In response, Deborah is alleged to have sent a voice message in Hausa to the group chat, in which she uttered the blasphemous message. A copy of the purported audio recording was subsequently leaked and shared in external WhatsApp platforms sympathetic to those aggrieved.⁴

On May 12, 2022, Deborah's recording had gone viral, sparking outrage over allegations of blasphemy. An irate mob of Muslim youth stormed the college of Education and managed to confiscate her from the custody of security officials, who were planning a safe exit to hand her over to the police. The mob stoned her to death and burnt her corpse in front of a rousing crowd of violent assailants, who filmed the event and then spread it across social media (Oluwatoye, 2022; Suleiman, 2022; Wakaso, 2022).

Subsequently, the police in Sokoto arrested two suspects, whom they identified from the viral live recording of her murder. This led to an escalation of attacks on churches and threats towards the Roman Catholic Bishop of Sokoto, Matthew Hassan Kukah, whose show of solidarity towards Deborah was considered an endorsement of her alleged blasphemous utterances (Babangida, 2022). Not long after their arrest, the suspects were released following a wave of mass protests and riots by Muslim youth in Sokoto, backed by threats from Muslim clerics who claimed the detentions were unlawful and an attack on Islam (Babangida, 2022; Oluwatoye, 2022; Onyedinefu, 2022).

³ She has also been referred to as Deborah Emmanuel in some news reports. However, from our checks with interlocutors in Nigeria, Samuel is the correct last name and the most widely used by the most reputable media houses in Nigeria. Yakubu is her confirmed extended family name.

⁴ We were able to retrieve the purported viral audio recording from Nigerian online news portals, which we translated into English: "Holy ghost fire! Nothing will happen to us. There are specific things that you are supposed to be sending on this group chat. This group was not created for anyone to be sending nonsense! It is created for sending past questions, to inform us if there are tests or if there is an assignment. It is not meant for you to be sending nonsense! What Messenger of God? Nonsense."

Understandably, the murder of Deborah generated ambivalent reactions from Muslim and Christian clerics, as it deepened both claims of Christian persecution and anti-Islamic narratives. However, some Christian clerics cautioned against retribution and demanded a swift enforcement of justice for the deceased. Similarly, while some Muslim religious elites outrightly condemned both the extra-judicial killing of Deborah and the death penalty, others merely condemned mob violence, advocating for such cases to be tried under shari'a law. In the following sections, we analyze key sermons and statements of clerics in Sokoto, whom we identified through our field interviews, both in support and against the murder of Deborah.

Analyzing Sermons

Exclusive Understandings and Readings

In the following section, we will cluster extracts from our sample of 38 sermons or statements by 21 anonymized⁵ Muslim clerics in Nigeria along the four dimensions of understandings and readings that we derived from the academic literature: scriptures, world, community, and conflict. In our view, these statements do not only provide information about the individual clerics but also about religious communities as a whole, their relationship to scriptures, their perception of the world, their relationship with the world, and their understanding of their mission in political conflicts. In sermons and statements of clerics who support the killing of Deborah Samuel, these four dimensions entail fundamentalist, apocalyptic, chosen people, and cosmic war understandings, which we will now further elaborate.

Fundamentalist Understandings

The justification of blasphemy killings by clerics expressing militant positions centers on the status and dignity of the Prophet, which must be defended by all means. The Prophet is introduced as the most important person in humanity: "In this world and in heaven, there is no one as important as the messenger of God (SAW)" (Cleric 02, 20.05.2022). He is believed as the one, whom God has trusted and who received the Qur'an for the salvation of humanity (Cleric 20, 13.05.2022). The Prophet has implemented God's will on Earth, has lived a sacred life, has guided the Ummah and has done justice to all people. For one preacher, the status of the Prophet "is very close to God" (Cleric 02, 20.05.2022). For another, "God does not answer any worship that did not come from his messenger" (Cleric 17, 04.06.2022). Conversely, "whosoever that does not follow the Prophet Mohammed SAW is going to enter hell fire" (Cleric 20, 13.05.2022). Consequently, the believers must love and obey the Prophet with absolute dedication and without any reservations. He is the messenger of God, and following the Prophet "eyes closed" (Cleric 17, 04.06.2022) means preparing for the day of judgement (Cleric 02, 20.05.2024; Cleric 17, 03.06.2022).

In this context, clerics expressing militant positions often make reference to a hadith as narrated by Anas ibn Malik in the book of Bukhari (15): "None of you will have faith till he loves me more than his father, his children and all mankind" (see Cleric 02, 20.05.2022; Cleric 20, 13.05.2022; Cleric 17, 20.05.2022).⁶ And according to another cleric, it is exactly this love that the faithful feel and that makes insulting the Prophet so unbearable for them: "They see with his sight, they hear with his ears, they

⁵ In order to protect the privacy of these clerics, we have anonymized their identities in numerical order.

⁶ "None of you will have faith till he loves me more than his father, his children and all mankind" (Sahih al-Bukhari 15, book 2, hadith 8).

move with his movements, their entire lives are connected to the Prophet. Every Muslim prefers his head to be chopped off than to split a sliver on the Prophet” (Cleric 03, 15.05.2022).

Since God has singled out the Prophet as messenger and true leader, his instructions must be obeyed (Cleric 02, 20.05.22). This is because “when the Prophet gives instructions, you do not have a choice. You must follow the instructions as long as you are his follower, be you a man or a woman, everyone must obey the Prophet.” (Cleric 17, 04.06.2022) The need to obey the Prophet is by itself considered an instruction from God as founded in the Qur’an: “It is God who gave us the instructions to follow the Prophet (PBUH) eyes closed” (Cleric 17, 04.06.2022).

In this context, the knowledgeable clerics are those who determine the will of the Prophet. They are the specialists in reading his will. Therefore, the faithful should follow their lead and recognize their authority which is founded in a very strict and literal orientation towards the Qur’an and the hadith and results in crystal clear guidance – “I hope you all understand” (Cleric 17, 04.06.2022). Given their crystal-clear guidance, however, the believers are in a position to implement and defend Islam themselves – “people are not ignorant” (Cleric 09, 20.05.2022), they know when the Prophet is insulted and what to do in such a case.

This is because insulting the Prophet is considered a red line, “which MUST NOT be crossed” (Cleric 15, 13.05.2022, see also Cleric 17, 20.05.2022). If the red line is crossed, transgressors must be punished, and according to traditional shari’a law, punishment should be death (Cleric 01, 26.06.2023; Cleric 03, 15.05.2022; Cleric 13, 19.05.2022; Cleric 16, 13.05.2022; Cleric 17, 20.05.2022).

If the government were God-fearing, it would implement shari’a law as determined by clerics and take the responsibility for punishing and killing those persons who have been found guilty of insulting the Prophet. But since politicians are corrupt and the secular constitution of Nigeria manmade and subverted by Christians, blasphemy is not punished as it should. Therefore, and under clerical guidance, the faithful must take the law in their own hands: “If anyone insults the Prophet, kill him. Don’t go and report to the authorities or the police just kill” (Cleric 17, 09.07.2021).

Consequently, the killing of Deborah Samuel is praised by clerics expressing militant positions as appropriate behavior and fully in line with Islamic teachings for which they take full responsibility: “If you want to punish someone, they [the young people] are not the ones to be punished, you are supposed to punish us. (...) We are the ones that gave them the go ahead that anyone who insults the messenger of God, kill the person (the audience shouts, ‘Allahu akbar’ [God is great/greatest])” (Cleric 02, 20.05.2022). Similarly, another cleric made clear “We have instructed that anyone who insults the Prophet should be killed” (Cleric 02, 20.05.22). And another preacher concludes, “the youth deserve commendation. May Allah reward them, may Allah guide them on to the righteous path. This decision – that they meted out on this girl, it is Allah that guided them, and their actions is exactly in line with the boundaries set in the Quran” (Cleric 06, 13.05.2022). Again, the uncompromising stance of the clerics expressing militant positions is framed as instruction from God: “[I]t’s a command from Allah, and we’re not going contrary to the command of Allah” (Cleric 17, 27.05.2022). Which means that according to clerics expressing militant positions whoever insults the Prophet has forfeited his life: “You will hear people saying that this is disrespectful to human life. And we will tell them they have disrespected the one that is dignified and most respected” (Cleric 02, 20.05.2022).

It is for these reasons that clerics expressing militant positions urged the state government and the police to release two suspects for the murder of Deborah Samuel. In their eyes, the young people did nothing wrong: “We called on the governor to release the youth involved in the killing, we believed they had not committed any wrong” (Cleric 17, 20.05.2022). Although the lynching of Deborah Samuel clearly violated state law, the militant view that God’s law is above state law ultimately prevailed in

Sokoto. Or as one cleric explained: “the leader of the Muslims is supposed to have more rights than the Governor of the State, because the governor is a politician and he is democratically elected, but the leader of the Muslims has the position due to the name of the Islamic religion” (Cleric 02, 20.05.2022). If the government nevertheless attempt to persecute those responsible for the killing of Deborah Samuel, this would be by itself an “act of apostasy” (Cleric 02, 20.05.2022). In the end, no one was held accountable for the death of Deborah Samuel. And even every act of public sympathy was condemned by clerics expressing militant positions (Cleric 02, 20.05.2022).

As outlined above, according to traditional shari’a law blasphemy should be punished by death. This ruling, however, has no direct foundation in the Qur’an and only very weak support in the hadith. But this did not prevent clerics expressing militant positions in our sample to pretend that their radical position is justified by both the Qur’an and the hadith (Cleric 02, 20.05.2022; Cleric 17, 20.05.2022). With regard to the Qur’an, however, they only could make reference to verses that praise the Prophet, document his paramount status, and ask the faithful to obey him and follow his instructions. Among the hadith, clerics expressing militant positions cited one very tradition that is considered of minor authenticity among legal scholars. Consequently, clerics expressing militant positions used an indirect argument to make their case which is rooted in the local culture of honor.

It basically says that important persons should not be insulted, and if they are insulted their followers will punish the transgression. The punishment, however, should be proportional to the status of the insulted person and the number of followers. Since there is no one more important than the Prophet and no one has more devoted followers who feel deeply offended by the mistreatment of his person, the punishment must be death – what else? Or as outlined by one cleric expressing militant positions:

“Mohammed Buhari is the leader of APC, but how many people are the entire members of the APC? Are they up to a hundred million? They are not up to that. Is it feasible to enter an APC gathering and insult Buhari without expecting significant repercussions? The moment you do that, you know very well that you are provoking violence. (...) Comparing Buhari and Prophet Mohammed (Peace be upon him), the latter has nearly two billion followers worldwide. Insulting someone with such a vast following doesn’t call for peace.” (Cleric 17, 05.06.2022)

“If you think that president Buhari deserves all forms of protection from his faithful, what do you think of the Prophet and his followers? If anyone who insults president Buhari does not deserve to live in peace, what do you expect of one who defames our Prophet before our eyes?” (Cleric 17, 27.05.2022)

As far as we understood the clerics expressing militant positions, therefore, it is not so much the Qur’an that prescribes the death penalty when the Prophet is insulted, but the status of the Prophet who is considered the messenger of God and the most important human who can be approached only with low voice and full of respect: “You cannot enter our community, right before our very eyes, and insult our Prophet, if we don’t kill you, what is our essence?” (Cleric 17, 20.05.2022) As we will outline later, critics hold that the clerics expressing militant positions should not only care for the dignity and integrity of the Prophet as supreme leader but also for the teachings of the Qur’an: “If you love the Prophet, you rather protect and guard his message. Have you protected his message? You didn’t, but you are saying you love the Prophet” (Cleric 07, 16.05.2022).

Traces of Apocalyptic Understandings

While apocalyptic understandings and readings are evident in statements by Boko Haram, ISIS and Al Qaeda (Bronislav 2021; Cook 2020), there are only traces of apocalyptic ideas in our sample. First of

all, clerics expressing militant positions complain that Muslims in Nigeria are under threat. They do not live in an Islamic state but in a hostile environment which does “not care about the honor of the Prophet (Cleric 17, 20.05.2022). By contrast, the secular constitution of Nigeria does not provide for the death penalty in cases of blasphemy, which clearly violates shari‘a law and demonstrates the ruling elite’s profound disregard for Islam (Cleric 04, 18.05.2022). Furthermore, the living conditions for believers are characterized as difficult and constantly deteriorating: “Things are really becoming bad. Things are really becoming bad” as outlined by one cleric expressing militant positions (Cleric 02, 25.05.2022). Politicians and Christians from the South are perceived as exploiting the hospitality of Muslims in Northern states as weakness. At the same time, they try to convert Muslims by mocking Islam and insulting the Prophet (Cleric 02, 25.05.2024; Cleric 13, 19.05.2022; Cleric 17, 04.06.2022). Even worse, Muslims are persecuted and killed in many Southern states while the police and the courts do nothing to protect their lives and property. On the contrary, “the police will allow culprits to get away with the crime for an exchange of favours.” (Cleric 01, 18.06.2022, see also 13.05.2022; Cleric 02, 20.05.2022, 25.05.2022; Cleric 03, 15.05.2022; Cleric 13, 17.05.2022). And even in the Northern States who are the poorest in Nigeria, violence, criminality and jungle justice are on the rise (Cleric 02, 25.05.2022). The root causes are considered twofold.

On the one hand the operation of state institutions is found to be deeply compromised by corrupt politicians who do not care for the needs of the people and the integrity of the Prophet but only enrich themselves (Cleric 02, 25.05.2022). They go so far as to make common cause with Christians in order to bolster their power positions (Cleric 02, 22.05.2022; Cleric 06, 13.05.2022; Cleric 13, 19.05.2022). Consequently, clerics expressing militant positions call them “hypocrites” and “apostates” (Cleric 02, 20.05.2022; Cleric 17, 03.06.2022), and advise the believers that “we Muslims, the defenders of the Prophet, must take justice into our hands and do the needful.” (Cleric 17, 04.06.2022). On the other hand, journalists and social media bloggers are found to manipulate public opinion and misguide the people. By circulating fake news, they are turning the believers against each other and preventing collective action. Consequently, one cleric expressing militant positions advised his followers to not trust the media: “Do not depend on information from social media or from the news. (...) Journalists and social media handlers are all liars.” (Cleric 17, 04.06.2022)

Against this background, clerics expressing militant positions repeatedly make references to the day of judgement that awaits evildoers. Journalists and social media bloggers, for instance, should fear Allah. Otherwise, they will end up “in a pool of blood, struggling to reach the bank, but stones are thrown in their mouths, forcing them back in the blood” (Cleric 17, 20.05.2022). Similarly, corrupt politicians “will not enter paradise” (Cleric 02, 25.05.2022) but will “burn in hell” together with all the others who have disobeyed the Prophet and failed to respect basic obligations for a righteous life (Cleric 17, 27.05.2022). In exceptional cases, God will send even today an “angel of death” to punish blatant transgressions by corrupt politicians (Cleric 06, 13.05.2022). Conversely, those who followed the Prophet, loved him with all their heart, and obeyed his instructions, will be rewarded in the afterlife (Cleric 17, 27.05.2022) – and this holds especially true for those who were killed in the defence of the Prophet (Cleric 02, without date).

Chosen People Understandings

For the clerics expressing militant positions in our sample, the superiority of Islam is beyond doubt (Cleric 06, 13.05.2022; Cleric 12, 19.06.2022; Cleric 17, 04.06.2022). Islam is believed as the religion that God has sent to earth through the Prophet and by the Noble Qur’an for the salvation of humanity, and it is the sacred duty of all Muslims to bear witness to the mercifulness and compassion of God, to praise the Prophet as his messenger, and to honor the Noble Qur’an. It is this practice that constitutes

the believers as Umma and separates them from Jews and Christians as well as from hypocrites and unbelievers. Together, they form one universal “covenant community” (Danny, 2012, p. 11). In different places and for each time, however, “there are multiple instances of the *umma* being established, empowered and enjoyed as an enduring religio-moral community” (Danny, 2012, p. 17).

For the clerics expressing militant positions, it is unquestionable that Sokoto is such a privileged place, where the Umma materializes under the guidance of God – for instance by killing persons who dared to insult His messenger. Consequently, one preacher calls Sokoto a “reference point” for “whole Nigeria” where transgressions are punished without hesitations to fulfill the will of the Almighty (Cleric 02, 20.05.2022). For another preacher Sokoto is a city where “99% are Muslims” and “where the Prophet’s integrity is preserved” (Cleric 02, 20.05.2022). In this context, reference is often made to Usman Dan Fodio and his successful Jihad in West Africa in the 19. Century, which led to the founding of the Sokoto Caliphate in 1804 (Cleric 06, 13.05.2022; Cleric 17, 03.06.2022, 05.06.2022). It is this glorious heritage that true believers must value and preserve. While Kano is considered a city for trading, Sokoto is a place of devotion and rightfulness - “here, we kill. By Allah, between us and the one who insults the Prophet is killing!” (Cleric 17, 08.07.2021) If the Muslims in Sokoto would behave otherwise, they would be of “no use” (Cleric 10, 13.05.2022; see also Cleric 17, 04.06.2022). But the people of Sokoto did what must have been done, they “have shown that they are the real Sokoto people” (Cleric 02, 20.05.2022) and they are considered the “embodiment of Dan Fodio’s training. Because of this, may Allah bless you all.” (Cleric 17, 09.07.2021).

True faith and righteous behavior set the umma apart from other faith communities, and clerics expressing militant positions in our sample felt it extremely important to protect the purity and integrity of the umma under the guidance of knowledgeable Muslim authorities. For this reason, contact with Christians must be minimized and one preacher explicitly warns his audience to “not get too close to them [the Christians]” and to “not allow unbelievers to be in your midst” (Cleric 02, 20.05.2022). By contrast, Muslims should take Surah Al-Ma’idah verse 57 literally: “Do not take for your allies those who make a mockery and sport of your faith, be they those given the Book before you or other unbelievers”. Otherwise, they would risk losing their faith and becoming “part of them” (Cleric 02, 20.05.2022). And it is exactly this that false religious authorities, “who like money more than God” are trying to promote (Cleric 02, 20.05.2022; see also Cleric 09, 20.05.2022).

At the same time, clerics expressing militant positions in Sokoto ask the faithful “to cleanse the country from people who insult the Prophet (SAW)”. If this is not done, “this country is not a Muslim country” (Cleric 09, 20.05.2022). And this would mean that its people would turn into unbelievers: “If this insult on the Prophet occurs here in Sokoto and we did not take any action, then we need someone to come and introduce Islam to us again” (Cleric 06, 13.05.2022).

Consequently, Christians are perceived as dangerous strangers and close contacts with them are forbidden: “Having relationship or friendship with unbelievers, or showing them love either in a relationship or friendship, or even helping them is not allowed” (Cleric 02, 20.05.2022; see also Cleric 17, 20.05.2022). Christians are only tolerated to do business in Sokoto, if they abide by the rules of their Muslim environment. If they are not willing to do so, they should leave. For Sokoto this would be no loss: “All the political positions in Sokoto do not have one Christian amongst them. Even Christian dominated areas do not have one councilor that is an unbeliever [Christian]. They are all Muslims. All these show that the Christians do not have anything to stand on in the state. With or without them, we can run the affairs of Sokoto State.” (Cleric 02, 20.05.2022)

It was exactly for this very reason, that clerics expressing militant positions were upset, when they learnt, that the Muslim Governor of Sokoto was cooperating with Bishop Hasan Kukah and Christian communities after the murder of Deborah Samson (Cleric 02, 25.05.2022). The behavior of the

governor was considered high treason, if not apostasy (Cleric 02, 20.05.2022). For clerics expressing militant positions, it was even taboo to go on a condolence visit to the parents of Deborah Samuel: “Do we condole with them? (the audience shouted, no!)” (Cleric 02, 20.05.2022).

At the same time, internal discipline must be defended. Children must be raised in the true faith: “We should inform our young ones, our children, little children, pull their ears and tell them firmly that if anyone insults the Prophet, do not wait for security personnel or justice, just kill the person” (Cleric 02, 20.05.2022). And blasphemy must be rooted out by all means, even if Muslims are found guilty. Whoever insults a Prophet must be killed. Repentance cannot avert this fate (Cleric 06, 13.05.2022), mental insanity is no excuse (Cleric 17, 08.07.2022), and as outlined by one cleric expressing militant positions: “Even if [I] insult[...] the Prophet, [I] should be killed” (Cleric 17, 20.05.2022).

Cosmic War Understandings

Last but not least, clerics expressing militant positions portray the blasphemy killings in Nigeria as part of a cosmic struggle against the enemies of God. In their view, Islam is advancing worldwide. As one core preacher has put it:

“Which religion do you find most people convert to? Everyone will answer Islam. Go to England, there is no religion that receives converts as Islam; go to America, go to Germany, there is no other religion that most people trust and accept than Islam. This is what is making those dogs in the churches angry. That’s why they will mostly send their followers to go and insult the Prophet.” (Cleric 17, 04.06.2022)

And as indicated in the quote, it is expected that the enemies of Islam will react by insulting the Prophet. But Muslims in all places of the world are perceived as resisting and standing-up against the attempts to humiliate their religion.

“Even world leaders such as the president of America had to face consequences on attacking Islam, George Bush Junior was nearly hit at show in one of his lectures for his hatred towards Islam. (...) Next is the president of France, he received a hot slap from a Muslim due to his oppression of Muslims (audience with glee, shouted, "Allahu akbar"), a whole president has been spanked in the face due to his hostility against Muslim. (...) . All these superpowers have been humiliated because of Islam, now what else? Salman Rushdi worded despicable things against the Prophet in America, yet till date he's not able to come out publicly, even in America which is not a Muslim country one cannot insult the Prophet and live in peace how much more Sokoto, the land of Dan Fodio!” (Cleric 17, 03.06.2022; see also Cleric 06, 13.05.2022)

It is exactly this pattern that is also observed by clerics expressing militant positions in Nigeria. In their view, the enemies of God are attempting to publicly weaken and marginalize Islam as far as possible. They are doing so by preaching hate against Muslims, insulting the Prophet, disrespecting the Qur’an and physically attacking believers (Cleric 01,18.05.2022; Cleric 02, 20.05.2022; Cleric 06, 13.05.2022; Cleric 13, 19.05.2022).

With this deliberate strategy they are provoking the believers to react. And when Muslim are taking the law into their own hand and kill the blasphemers, they are stereotyped as “rioters, animals, terrorist” (Cleric 17, 20.05.2022). This strategy works, because Christians know that “Muslims do not take Islam lightly hence they easily get provoked. We don't joke with our religion; we don't joke with our Prophet” (Cleric 17, 04.06.2022).

From this perspective, therefore, the root cause of the recent violence in Nigeria is seen to be intentional provocation of Muslims by Christians. Or as one preacher has put it: “The real disease is provocation. Violence and terrorism are mere smoke. Provocation is the fire, and we all know that there is no smoke without fire” (Cleric 01, 13.05.2022). Similarly, another preacher argues that “in all the blasphemy problems that have occurred in Nigeria in the last thirty years, it is Christians who deliberately provoke Muslims by insulting our President Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him) without any reason or insulted the Holy Qur’an which causes a reaction which often turns into a religious conflict” (Cleric 13, 19.05.2022). Therefore, if Christians had a serious interest in peace, “they should stop insulting our Prophet. They know very well that when they do this, we have no qualms with them” (Cleric 17, 05.06.2022).

In Sokoto, it is Bishop Hassan Matthew Kukah, who is identified by clerics expressing militant positions as truly responsible for the death of Deborah Samuel and the subsequent riots, which basically means, that Christians are not victims of the violence, but its perpetrators: “We are cautioning Kukah, as we accuse him of being behind this unrest. We believe that he is the one who sent her to insult the Prophet, with the intention to cause unrest and conflict among the students.” (Cleric 06, 13.05.2022). Bishop Kukah is doing so, because he is only interested in strengthening his own religion: “He is not a brother; he doesn’t share the same religion or the same dialect. Kukah only works to protect the Christians and Christianity” (Cleric 06, 13.05.2022). Therefore, any cooperation of the State Governor, or even Muslims authorities, with Bishop Kukah is so outrageous.

Consequently, what happened in Sokoto is framed as a “a fight between us and our haters” (Cleric 17, 04.05.2022). In this fight, “it is either we kill them, or they kill us” (Cleric 17, 04.06.2022). Similarly, “if they won’t stop, we won’t stop too.” (Cleric 17, 05.06.2022), because “we are the fathers of violence. If it is for this religion, then we are even searching for violence” (Cleric 06, 13.05.2022).

From this perspective, Muslims in Northern Nigeria, who are engaging in mob lynching, are fighting a just war. They are addressed as Mujaheddins retaliating against Christians who have attacked Islam in the first place (Cleric 17, 09.07.2022): “Islam accepts retaliation against those who commit acts of terror against you. Allah says, ‘If anyone transgress against you, you should also retaliate against them equally’” (Cleric 06, 13.05.2022). And as outlined by another preacher, insulting the Prophet clearly “is a form of terrorism” (Cleric 17, 27.05.2022). Defaming the Prophet is even found to be “the peak of terrorism” (Cleric 17, 27.05.2022). Consequently, believers are called to join or support Jihad and execute the just punishment on those who are found guilty of blasphemy.

They should and will do so without respect for their own lives – which are not really at risk in mob killings. As one preacher has put it: “Do not fear for us that we’ll be killed, don’t worry, we don’t fear death, we prefer to be martyred than to watch our religion been ridiculed” (Cleric 17, 03.06.2022). And another preacher calls out to his congregation: “We are ready for our blood to finish by protecting the Prophet and his companions. This is not a joke!” (Cleric 10, 13.05.2022).

Last but not least, Christians are not only found guilty of terrorising the believers and therefore deserving punishment, but they are also dehumanized as targets of mob violence: “Then who’s Deborah? She’s a useless thing who has been killed, a dog has been killed” (Cleric 17, 03.06.2022). And the same preacher also refers to Christian clerics as liars who are provoking violence. They are “dogs” who are angry about the success of Islam and who are sending “their followers to go and insult the Prophet.” (Cleric 17, 04.06.2022). These people should not be allowed to humiliate Islam: “Why allow the others, who are like dogs and pigs, to insult the Prophet? Even the real dogs and pigs are much more important than them” (Cleric 17, 04.06.2022).

In the final analysis, for clerics expressing militant positions in Sokoto it is beyond doubt that the believers will prevail and defend their religion. They are strong, they know what must be done, and they

are willing to sacrifice their lives, or as one preacher has put it: “We are prepared to sacrifice our lives for the sake of the Prophet” (Cleric 10, 13.05.2022; Cleric 17, 20.05.2022).

Inclusive and Trust-related Understandings and Readings

In addition, we have been able to identify inclusive and trust-related understandings and readings in sermons and statements of clerics who condemn the killing of Deborah Samuel. They, too, can be clustered along the four dimensions of scriptures, world, community, and conflict, and mirror the exclusive understandings and readings laid out above. They include contextual, everyday, humanity-centered, and just peace understandings, which we will exemplify in the following.

Contextual Understandings

Blasphemy hurts the religious feelings of Muslims. This holds particularly true for insulting the Prophet, who is considered the messenger of God. He should be respected and obeyed by all humans, and his dignity should not be questioned even by unbelievers. At the same time, clerics expressing moderate positions leave no doubt that mob killings are not allowed in Islam. For them, any attempt to justify mob killings by referring to the Qur’an or the hadith is clear evidence of religious illiteracy. As outlined by one cleric expressing moderate positions:

“Any literate person should know that anyone that can do this is not well read. As an individual that person is not educated in the scriptures. This is not said in the hadith, it is not said in any verse in the Qur’an, or other Islamic books. It was not said by any disciples of the Prophet that anyone that insulted the Prophet should be killed. If there is any hadith or Qur’anic verse that said this, show us, let us see.” (Cleric 05, 13.05.2022, Pos. 11)

First of all, any justification of blasphemy killings does not do justice to the content and complexity of Muslim scriptures and traditions. According to clerics expressing moderate positions, they require more sophisticated readings than only citing one or two hadith in order to support militant positions. As one cleric has put it: “Hadith must be interpreted according to the moral, legal, theological, and methodological principles of Islam. They cannot be acted upon at face-value according to one’s own personal understanding. (Cleric 08, 13.05.2022, Pos. 24-28). Another cleric says with regard to militant readings that “this kind of rigidity (...) is not found in the laws of Islam.” (Cleric 07, 14.05.2022, Pos. 9) Every person who claims the opposite is a “loose talker” (Cleric 07, 14.05.2022, Pos. 10). And for another cleric it is simply beyond doubt, that “blasphemy by itself is not punishable with death” (Cleric 08, 13.05.2022, Pos. 82).

Also, the call for the death penalty after blasphemy or apostasy does not correspond to the practice of the Prophet as reported in the Qur’an. On the one hand, clerics expressing moderate positions remind their audience that it is part of the job description of Prophets that people mock them and their messages: “Didn’t you know that Allah has informed us that the Prophet will be insulted?” (Cleric 07, 14.05.2022, Pos. 21). On the other hand, in most instances the Prophet showed patience and forgiveness, even though this was often hard for him and his close followers to accept. And in those few cases where the Qur’an reports that the Prophet has punished a person who have insulted him, it was in connection with other crimes that seriously threatened public order or even the existence of the umma:

“The only exception to this rule is derived from the specific cases in which the Prophet punished some people for treason in addition to their harmful utterances. We must not expand

this specific rule to all cases, thereby negating the general teachings of mercy, patience, and tolerance.” (Cleric 21, 13.05.2022, Pos. 128; see also Cleric 07, 16.05.2022, Pos. 20).

Similarly, when it comes to the hadith, clerics expressing moderate positions argue that any religious tradition must be interpreted in the context of the whole Islam (Cleric 21, 13.05.2022, Pos. 12-13). Literal readings of individual hadith do not help but must confuse the faithful. As outlined by one cleric expressing moderate positions:

“It should be clearly understood that not every hadith is authentic, and even hadith that do come through a sound chain are not always actionable. They might be context-dependent, specific to a certain situation, or legally abrogated. Ibn Wahb, may Allah have mercy on him, said: ‘Were it not for Imams Malik and Al-Laith, I would have been ruined. I used to believe that everything narrated about the Prophet (Peace be upon him) should be acted upon.’ And Ibn Abi Lailah said: ‘A man does not understand the Prophetic traditions unless he knows what to take from them and what to leave.’” (Cleric 08, 13.05.2022, Pos. 55-56)

Therefore, it is necessary to contextualize individual traditions. Meaning that the chain of its narration must be sound, they must form a “consistent whole” with the Qur’an and the sunna (Cleric 08, 13.05.2022, Pos. 83) and they must be compatible with “stronger sources” (Cleric 21, 13.05.2022, Pos. 90). If this reading practice is respected, those few hadith that are cited by clerics expressing militant positions to justify their positions turned out to be of minor authenticity and unsuited to guide contemporary Muslim communities in such grave cases as the death penalty. By contrast, clerics expressing moderate positions find it of utmost importance to stress the general principles of Islam which according to them contradict blasphemy killings: “The general answer to blasphemy (Sabbullah wa Rasulihi) [sic] as commanded in the Qur’an is to respond with patience, beautiful preaching, and graceful avoidance.” (Cleric 08, 13.05.2022, Pos. 84)

Clerics expressing moderate positions also challenge classical shari’a law that traditionally foresees the death penalty in cases of apostasy and blasphemy. On the one hand, this ruling “is derived from handful of instances in which the Prophet (Peace be upon him) executed some people for treason, not for merely insulting Islam.” (Cleric 08, 13.05.2022, Pos. 121-122). This entails that the death penalty after blasphemy is adequate only when insulting the Prophet goes along with significant security risks for the Muslim community in a situation of war or internal unrest (see Cleric 08, 13.05.2022-05-13, Pos. 52-53, 56, 59-60). Under such conditions, it is clearly allowed to kill the enemy: “No one needs permission from authorities to fight or kill someone who is waging war against them.” (Cleric 08, 13.05.2022, Pos. 56). Similarly, another cleric claims that the classic shari’a rulings on apostasy and blasphemy have a time index. They developed under specific conditions which are no longer given: “This was the general social and political context within which the classical ruling against blasphemy had developed.” (Cleric 21, 13.05.2022, Pos. 79; see also Cleric 07, 14.05.2022, Pos. 22). Moreover, we should not forget that this specific ruling was often used by community leaders to suppress critical voices and political opposition: “Numerous Muslim scholars were imprisoned and persecuted because their views were considered ‘blasphemy’ by the ruling regime. (...) An uncompromising and loosely interpreted blasphemy statute increases the possibility of it being misused by a corrupt regime to victimize callers to truth.” (Cleric 08, 13.05.2022, Pos. 144)

Last but not least, clerics expressing moderate positions remind their audience that even according to classic shari’a law mob killings are strictly forbidden. They absolutely contradict the straight path and the basic ideas of a rule-governed society as outlined in the Qur’an and the sunna. Similar to the declaration of war, the imposition and execution of death penalties remain reserved for the competent authorities. Or as outlined by one cleric expressing moderate positions:

“It is not permissible for a Muslim without judicial authority to implement Islamic legal punishments on his own initiative. Vigilante or jungle justice, or ‘taking the law into your own hands,’ is unlawful in Islam because it will lead to chaos and possibly greater harm than the crimes themselves. Likewise, it is not permissible for a Muslim to declare war or to commit an act of war without lawful authority.” (Cleric 21, 13.05.2022, Pos. 116)

And for another cleric it is beyond doubt that “the concept of ‘honor killings,’ or extrajudicial acts of murder motivated by a sense of tribal honor, have absolutely no basis in Islam. The unanimously established rule in Islam is that legal punishments may only be ordered by properly authorized judges, who must follow due process in the interest of fairness and apply mitigating factors to protect innocent people and prevent judicial abuse.” (Cleric 08, 13.05.2022, Pos. 17-18; see also Cleric 01, 13.05. 2022, Pos. 13; Cleric 11, 14.05.2022, Pos. 11).

Moreover, clerics expressing moderate positions hold that any religiously literate person knows, that shari‘a law can only be applied without restriction in Islamic societies. Nigeria, however, is a religiously pluralistic country, and this will not change in the foreseeable future: “Nigeria is not an Islamic country, and it is not a shari‘a land, and because of that this rule should not be used here in Nigeria” (Cleric 16, 13.05. 2022, Pos. 26) Therefore, classic shari‘a law cannot be implemented unconditionally, and the effects of specific rulings on the standing of Islam in the larger society must always be taken into account:

“It is well known in shari‘a circles in Nigeria that a Christian cannot be taken to a shari‘a court unless he or she expressly opts for it. Christians can only be charged to the conventional court (common law court). That is why Muslims of Borno State must allow the police to handle the case of Naomi Goni. She is a Christian and the security agencies are there to handle her if it is true that she has committed blasphemy. Muslims must stop issuing death threats concerning this case because that creates the impression that we are living in a lawless society and that we have no respect for the rule of law.” (Cleric 01, 15.05.2022, Pos. 18-19)

Everyday Understandings

As just outlined, clerics expressing moderate positions have no doubt that Nigeria is a multi-religious state, and that Muslims must find ways to co-exist and partner with Christians for the sake of the country, which is perceived to be in a bad shape. Or as one cleric has put it: “There are all the issues we need to work on in this our country, be you Christian or Muslim.” (Cleric 05, 13.05.2022, Pos. 12) Under such condition, any attempt of one faith community to impose its views on the rest of the society, would spell disaster for all. Such unilateral moves will produce exactly those outcomes which the faithful wanted to avoid in the first place. Or as one cleric expressing moderate positions explains:

“We will, with all our love for Allah and the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) end up creating a society that is the exact opposite of what we hoped our faith would lead us towards. We will instead, if we are not careful, have more blasphemy - the very thing that has aggrieved us! We will probably have more imprisonments and more extra-judicial deaths by more mobs. We will have more angry congregations, more social disorder and some mosques and churches closed down. Definitely more security challenges. We will endanger the freedom to practice our faith, which we currently have, if we do not choose to handle cases of blasphemy, in a manner that is consistent with Islamic law.” (Cleric 11, 14.05.2022, Pos. 8)

Another cleric agrees: “In so many cases, we see that the prosecution of blasphemy can cause greater harm to the community and the image of Islam than the blasphemy itself. We have a precedent in the

practice of the Prophet (Peace be upon him) to withhold such punishments when they might cause greater harm. "(Cleric 08, 13.05.2022, Pos. 138)

As a rule, believers should follow the "no-harm principle" (Cleric 08, 13.05.2022, Pos. 55-56) and not try to enforce the impossible: "Do what you can in this religion, you are not asked to do everything, just do what you can. Every act of good you are asked to do, just do what you can, Allah will only judge us on what we can. So, we should stop taking on what we cannot do for it could cause us to perish." (Cleric 07, 14.05.2022, Pos. 32). Rather, the faithful should go for step-by-step improvements, and for the larger future of Nigeria they should trust in God: "Can you protect this religion? Do you know how far this religion has traveled? and Allah has protected it all this while?" (Cleric 07, 14.05.2022, Pos. 24) Consequently, it is necessary – and even a religious obligation – to adapt one's goals to one's capacities: "The Prophet said, whoever undertakes things in this religion that are beyond him, the religion will defeat him, and he will denounce it, and that is the Kharijites." (Cleric 07, 14.05.2022, Pos. 32)

Against this background, it is not surprising, that patience, benevolence and mercifulness are recommended as major Muslim virtues by clerics expressing moderate positions in times of crisis. According to them, there will be no radical change to the better, but only a constant struggle for small improvements. And in the final analysis, it will be the "beauty of Islam" (Cleric 07, 14.05.2022, Pos. 9), which eventually convince unbelievers that this religion can offer something important to the development of Nigeria. Consequently, Muslim communities should not antagonize Christians by punishing or even killing those who are insulting the Prophet. Rather like the Prophet himself, they should respond "with patience, beautiful preaching, and graceful avoidance" (Cleric 08, 13.05.2022, Pos. 84). Which means that in everyday life, people transgress and go wrong. In such cases, however, they should be given the opportunity to repent. And for encouraging repentance they should know about the benevolence and mercifulness of their God. Or as another cleric outlined: "Everything about the Prophet is centered around mercy." (Cleric 07, 14.05.2022, Pos. 21).

In the end, such a long-term approach will pay. Muslim communities will prevent an already tense situation from deteriorating: "Since the Deborah was killed, do you know the number of insults meted out against Muslims, against the Prophet? The insults have increased and did not reduce, or has it reduced? And the insults will continue but Allah said you should be patient about it, he did not say you should kill. (Cleric 07, 14.05.2022, Pos. 16) At the same time, they can reach out to Christians and convince them to join forces for the common good of Nigeria – and perhaps even to make some of them converting to Islam:

"We have those who are not Muslims, and we are striving to convert them into Islam, even today Friday didn't you hear that a woman has converted to Islam, and exactly after a week she passed away? You see how lucky she was? Just a week after converting to Islam, she is lucky. [But] when you are killing people, it would be said that you have learnt that from your Prophet – their religion is a religion of bloodshed. At the time we are striving to convince people to see the beauty of Islam, we are rather driving them away." (Cleric 07, 14.05.2022, Pos. 8-9).

Common Humanity Understandings

For clerics expressing moderate positions, the protection of human life and respect for human dignity are core principles of Islam. As one cleric has put it: "Whether the life of a man or a woman, rich or poor, a king or his servants, a Muslim or non-Muslim, it is still a life, a life is a life. Killing someone is forbidden (haram)." (Cleric 16, 13.05.2022, Pos. 15) And the same cleric repeats a few paragraphs later: "A soul is a soul, Allah never makes any distinction between the soul of a believer and an unbeliever. This means that taking any soul in Islam unjustly is forbidden (haram)." (Cleric 16, 02.06.2022, Pos. 18).

According to another cleric, this understanding of shared humanity is firmly anchored in the Qur'an: "The Glorious Qur'an compares the killing of a single person to the killing of the whole of humanity just as it compares the saving of a life to the rescue of all *homo sapiens* (Qur'an 5:32) In like manner, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) himself condemned all acts of violence and advocated peaceful conduct at all times." (Cleric 01, 13.05.2022, Pos. 14).

For clerics expressing moderate positions, the value of life in Islam implies a strict primacy of patience and mercy over punishment and violence. Consequently, the use of force must be strictly regulated by the rule of law. Only public authorities do have the right to decide dead and life questions. Mob violence is strictly forbidden, and burning a person to death is taboo: "The country we are in is a country that has laws. Islam does not give anyone the right to singlehandedly revenge, especially when that revenge takes a life away. For such a situation, we need to take such offenders to the security agencies." (Cleric 16, 13.05.2022, Pos. 19). And another cleric adds: "If just any individual or group is permitted to judge and execute punishments as they deem fit, there will be nothing but jungle justice, cycles of vendetta and the *fitna* of pre-Islamic *jāhiliyya*." (Cleric 11, 13.05.2022, Pos. 12).

Consequently, respecting the rule of law holds a society together and is of prime importance to all clerics expressing moderate positions in the sample: "Muslims must stop issuing death threats concerning this case because that creates the impression that we are living in a lawless society and that we have no respect for the rule of law." (Cleric 01, 15.05.2022, Pos. 19). At the same time, the rule of law should be exercised in a way that it benefits the whole country. Or as one cleric has put it: "The legal maxim of no-harm requires that one can only harm others if it is necessary to avoid a greater harm" (Cleric 08, 13.05.2022, Pos. 55). This implies that a legal punishment should be suspended if it puts the collective good at risk. According to clerics expressing moderate positions, this at least has been the practice of the Prophet as reported in the Qur'an:

"We have a precedent in the practice of the Prophet (Peace be upon him) to withhold such punishments when they might cause greater harm.(...) The Prophet (Peace be upon him) refused to punish a dangerous man, a hypocrite who was pretending to be a Muslim in order to attack the community from within, on the grounds that it would have harmed the image of Islam in the eyes of the people." (Cleric 08, 13.05.2022, Pos. 138-142).

Another corollary of common humanity is compassion, or as outlined by one cleric expressing moderate positions: "Killing of someone is of concern to everyone because we are all human beings. I am also a human being. We do not play with death or killing. We do not threaten another with death." (Cleric 16, 13.05.2022, Pos. 9). Given our common mortality, we all know what it means to lose a loved one. Consequently, we should follow the practice of the Prophet, who is reported to have mourned the death of a Jew, and show compassion beyond religions: "It is the same life that is in him that is also in us. This is what we have alike. It was not the corpse of a Muslim, but the corpse of an ordinary unbeliever. The Prophet uses this to show us that it is very important, when someone dies for us to share in the sadness because we are human beings, and we have the same life, and we will all die one day." (Cleric 16, 13.05.2022, Pos. 10-11).

Just Peace Understandings

As Muslims know that they "are not the only ones in this country" (Cleric 07, 14.05.2022, Pos. 41-42), and as they also know that they cannot impose their religion upon others, they must find ways for "peaceful coexistence" with other faith communities (Cleric 07, 14.05.2022, Pos. 18). Acting otherwise, would result in "anarchy and fitna", which is clearly against all teachings of Islam (Cleric 11, 14.05.2022, Pos. 6; see also Cleric 11, 13.05.2022, Pos. 9-11). The Nigerian state would disintegrate, and Muslims

would slide “into a future that is far worse than the bad situation we are already in.” (Cleric 11, 14.05.2022, Pos. 7). Only “shaytan and opportunists” would benefit from this development (Cleric 11, 14.05.2022, Pos. 9).

To prevent such an outcome, faith communities should stop antagonizing and start respecting each other. As argued by one cleric expressing moderate positions:

“We appeal to Nigerians to desist from insulting, deriding or abusing the Prophets of other religions. Muslims should continue to respect Jesus (peace be upon him) whom the Christians hold very dear. In the same vein, Christians should avoid casting aspersion on the person of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). We have experienced enough religious crisis in the land.” (Cleric 01, 13.05.2022, Pos. 20).

That is why we need “dialogue, not violence” (Cleric 01, 13.05.2022, Pos. 2). And dialogue is considered possible, because not all Christians are alike and disrespect Islam. But there are those as the president of the Christian Association of Nigeria who ask their fellow Christians to “respect other people’s religion” and to stop making “derogatory remarks about Islam and its Prophets” (Cleric 01, 18.05.2022, Pos. 15). Conversely, Muslims are also called to respect the Christian faith or as one cleric expressing moderate positions has put it: “Oh, you Muslims you must tolerate others in your religion. You must overlook things and show love in your religion no matter where you are in any country. (Cleric 05, 13.05.2022, Pos. 9).

This is necessary because in the final analysis it is considered beyond human control whether a person is born a Christian or a Muslim family: “Even me, as an Islamic scholar, if I was born in a Christian pastor’s home, I will believe that Christianity is the best religion.” (Cleric 05, 13.05.2022, Pos. 12). Consequently, Christians and Muslims share an obligation to “live in love with one another” and to cooperate for a better future for Nigeria. More specifically, this would mean in times of elections to support the same candidates: “There will be elections and we are carefully discussing with them [Christians] to vote for us so that we will have political power, and then you come out and commit this disaster?” (Cleric 07, 16.05.2022, Pos. 11)

At the same time, clerics expressing moderate positions are well aware that both Islam and Christianity are in constant competition for members (Cleric 07, 14.05.2022, Pos. 8). Which means that they want to convert to Islam as many people as possible. But this competition must be waged in a peaceful and respectful manner. Or as one cleric expressing moderate positions has put it: “We must do what we can, by preaching and enlightening people.” (Cleric 07, 14.05.2022, Pos. 18).

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to contribute to a better understanding of the ambivalence of the sacred in conflict management (Appleby, 2000) by proposing an analytical framework that takes religious understandings and readings into account. The basic idea presented here is that we can distinguish between more exclusive and inclusive understandings that, in turn, influence a religious community’s susceptibility to established practices of political mobilization for armed conflict. While several scholars have pointed to the relevance of more exclusive readings and understandings in the support of political violence by religious communities (Appleby, 2017; Juergensmeyer, 2017; Riesebrodt, 2010), systematic evidence demonstrating opposite effects of more inclusive understandings based on more inclusive readings of the Bible and the Qur’an has hitherto been lacking. The analytical framework presented in this paper, which we developed from academic literature and applied to the case of Deborah Samuel as an incident of blasphemy killing, is a first attempt to fill this gap.

Based on an extensive literature review, we first identified and specified certain readings and understandings that are considered to support the use of force by religious communities in political conflicts. We clustered them into four dimensions: scriptures, world, community, and conflict. To be precise, they describe how religious communities relate to their scriptures, how they perceive their world, how they situate themselves in the world, and how they understand their mission in political conflicts. On the more exclusive end, they include fundamentalist, apocalyptic, chosen people, and cosmic war understandings. On the more inclusive end, they entail contextual, everyday, common humanity, and just peace understandings which largely mirror the first four clusters. Together, these eight clusters form four continua that, in turn, build the overarching continuum of more exclusive and more inclusive religious readings and understandings.

In a second step, we outlined the historical and political contexts of the killing of Deborah Samuel, which occurred in the northern Nigerian state of Sokoto in May 2022 after allegations of blasphemy, and provided a brief overview of the issues of blasphemy and apostasy in the Islamic tradition. We believe that the death penalty for such cases is anchored in a specific understanding of shari'a law that categorizes blasphemy as apostasy, a crime that entails a *hadd* punishment as laid down by the Qur'an and the hadith. At the same time, this seems to have only a weak basis in the Qur'an and the hadith which is especially true for insulting the Prophet. This is why Muslim scholars have contested and rejected the appropriateness of the death penalty for apostasy and blasphemy.

In a third step, we applied the analytical framework built from academic literature to the case of the blasphemy killing of Deborah Samuel. For this, we analyzed 38 sermons or statements by 21 Muslim clerics who either supported or condemned her killing. We found that our analytical framework largely corresponded with the difference between clerics in favor of the killing as an act of religious devotion and others who consider the killing as incompatible with Islam and its core teachings. While we could not identify all specifications of our eight clusters in our sample, the clusters systematically varied along the line of more exclusive and more inclusive understandings that are, in turn, based on specific readings of religious traditions and scriptures. A first interesting finding is that those religious leaders who defend the blasphemy killing of Deborah Samuel were mostly located in Sokoto, while the critical voices became louder with increasing distance to Sokoto. This indicates that in and around Sokoto a very specific religious climate is prevalent that seems to be conducive for the sacralization of violence as an act of religious devotion.

This also shows that our proposed analytical framework might shed light on dynamics of religious readings and understandings that have hitherto been hard to grasp. We are, however, fully aware of its current limitations. A major point of revision must be the reevaluation and balancing of the overarching categories of more exclusive and more inclusive religious understandings. So far, we have not integrated any cross-cutting categories and clusters into our framework, although inclusive understandings can also be found in statements and sermons that we labeled as exclusive and vice-versa. One possibility to address this issue would be to conceive of "exclusive" and "inclusive" as relative instead of absolute categories, which is why we introduced them as part of a continuum. Findings from our analysis of sermons and statements relating to the blasphemy killing of Deborah Samuel suggest that our framework would withstand such a proportional approach, meaning that we suppose to find significantly more exclusive than inclusive understandings in statements and sermons we categorized as exclusive, while being able to identify significantly more inclusive than exclusive understandings in statements and sermons we labeled as inclusive.

Another step would be to apply the proposed framework to other contexts to back it with sufficient empirical data and rework it accordingly. In line with our research interest, this would imply the study of Christian groups in Nigeria as well as of Côte d'Ivoire as another country case to ensure both within-case and across-case variance. This would also prevent false impressions that link Muslim groups with

violence, since both peacebuilding and violent efforts can be found among Muslim and Christian groups. First findings from our field research in Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire suggest, however, that their concrete forms heavily depend on the respective contexts and that our understanding of violence, for instance, needs to be expanded to state actors to grasp religiously framed violence.

Last but not least, research that takes adherents of specific religious communities into account could complement our focus on religious leaders. In our view, the clerics' statements and sermons do not only provide information about themselves but also about specific religious communities. In the West African context, in particular, clerics hold an exceptional position within society and heavily influence public debate. Future research could, for example, address the missing link between the clerics' statements and sermons and acts of adherents of a religious community.

Despite these limitations, we believe that our analysis of sermons and statements dealing with the blasphemy killing of Deborah Samuel has proven its preliminary validity, opening up promising avenues for future research on the ambivalent role of religious communities to better understand their engagement either for peace or for political violence.

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