

BELIEF AND DOUBT: THE RISE OF ATHEISM AMONG MUSLIM YOUTH IN NORTHERN NIGERIA IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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ABSTRAK

Makalah ini menyelidiki maraknya ateisme di kalangan pemuda Muslim di Nigeria Utara, serta mengeksplorasi implikasi sosio-religiusnya dalam konteks revolusi digital global dan pergeseran identitas keagamaan. Meskipun Nigeria Utara memiliki warisan sejarah keilmuan Islam yang kuat, identitas keagamaan kontemporer saat ini semakin tertantang oleh pengaruh media sosial dan ideologi sekuler yang merasuk luas. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan metode campuran (*mixed-methods*), penelitian ini mengintegrasikan data sekunder tentang pemuda Muslim ateis dengan data survei yang dikumpulkan melalui pengambilan sampel acak berstrata (*stratified random sampling*) dari tiga wilayah geopolitik. Hasil survei menunjukkan bahwa: **63%** partisipan mengakui adanya fenomena ateisme di kalangan pemuda, khususnya di daerah perkotaan; **26%** tidak menyadarinya; **11%** merasa ragu-ragu. Analisis tematik dari 23 wawancara mendalam bersama para pendidik, orang tua, dan tokoh masyarakat mengidentifikasi beberapa faktor pendorong utama, termasuk kesenjangan dalam pendidikan Islam, tekanan sosio-ekonomi, dan strategi dakwah yang tidak efektif. Kekecewaan emosional, materialisme, dan paparan ideologi ateis melalui platform digital ditemukan berkontribusi secara signifikan terhadap ateisme. Studi ini menempatkan keraguan modern tersebut ke dalam kategori teologis klasik, yaitu *ilhād* (penolakan terhadap agama) dan *al-dahr* (skeptisisme), serta membedakan antara pencarian kebenaran yang berprinsip dengan skeptisisme radikal. Makalah ini berargumen bahwa penanganan ateisme memerlukan kerangka kerja pendidikan revolusioner yang mengintegrasikan kearifan budaya dengan ketahanan intelektual yang berbasis pada epistemologi tauhid. Selain itu, penelitian ini mengusulkan revitalisasi kurikulum Islam yang mempromosikan pemikiran kritis, dialog, dan kepercayaan diri terhadap sumber-sumber epistemik Islam, serta menyerukan pendekatan holistik untuk memperkuat identitas Islam yang selaras dengan Tujuan Pembangunan Berkelanjutan (SDGs).

Kata Kunci: Ateisme, Transformasi Digital, Nigeria Utara, Identitas Pemuda, Epistemologi Islam.

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the rise of atheism among Muslim youth in Northern Nigeria, exploring its socio-religious implications within the context of the global digital revolution and shifting religious identities.

*Despite Northern Nigeria's historical legacy of Islamic scholarship, contemporary religious identity is increasingly challenged by the pervasive influence of social media and secular ideologies. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study integrates secondary data on Muslim youth atheists with survey data collected through stratified random sampling from three geopolitical zones. The survey reveals that 63% of participants acknowledge atheism among youth, particularly in urban areas, while 26% are unaware and 11% uncertain. Thematic analysis of 23 in-depth interviews with educators, parents, and community leaders identifies key drivers, including gaps in Islamic education, socio-economic pressures, and ineffective da'wah strategies. Emotional disillusionment, materialism, and exposure to atheistic ideologies via digital platforms were found to significantly contribute to atheism. The study situates modern doubt within classical theological categories of *ilhād* (rejection of religion) and *al-dahr* (skepticism), distinguishing principled inquiry from radical skepticism. It argues that addressing atheism requires a revolutionary educational framework that integrates cultural wisdom with intellectual resilience grounded in tauhidic epistemology. The paper proposes a revitalized Islamic curriculum promoting critical thinking, dialogue, and confidence in Islamic epistemic resources, and calls for a holistic approach to strengthening Islamic identity in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).*

Keywords: *Atheism, Digital Transformation, Northern Nigeria, Youth Identity, Islamic Epistemology.*

INTRODUCTION

The rise of atheism among Muslim youth in Northern Nigeria presents a socio-religious challenge that has significant implications for both local communities and broader religious dynamics in the region. Northern Nigeria, historically recognized for its Islamic scholarship and religious identity, is increasingly witnessing a shift in youth beliefs, especially influenced by the global digital revolution and secular ideologies. This study unravels the factors contributing to atheism among Muslim youth in this context, emphasizing the complex relationship between digital transformation, intellectual disillusionment, and socio-economic factors. Atheism, within the framework of Islamic theology, is conceptualized as *ilhād*, the active rejection or deviation from belief in God and His divine guidance. It is often linked with *al-dahr*, a materialistic worldview that denies divine providence and ultimate accountability, positioning time and the material world as the ultimate determinants of existence. This paper situates contemporary atheism within classical Islamic thought by exploring the Qur'anic

and Prophetic discourses on *īmān* (faith) and *shakk* (doubt). These Islamic sources define faith not merely as a propositional belief but as an integrated spiritual and ethical commitment. In contrast, doubt, while recognized as a human condition, must be disciplined by sound epistemic orientation rather than becoming an unchallenged default posture.

Previous studies have explored the global trend of declining religiosity, particularly among youth, and its association with exposure to secular and atheistic ideologies (Pew Research Centre, 2019). In the context of Northern Nigeria, like other predominantly Muslim societies, research has shown that gaps in religious education and the rise of digital platforms significantly influence religious beliefs (Malik, 2018; Rehman, 2020). However, there is limited literature specifically examining the rise of atheism among Muslim youth in this region, particularly in relation to the pervasive influence of social media and the lack of effective Islamic educational strategies. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on Northern Nigeria, a region with a strong Islamic heritage, and its investigation into how modern atheism manifests in the digital age. This study also contributes to the literature by addressing the gap in understanding the intersection of religious disillusionment, socio-economic pressures, and the rise of atheism among Muslim youth in the region.

The increasing prevalence of atheism among Muslim youth in Northern Nigeria is shaped by a complex mix of sociopolitical, cultural, and intellectual factors. While the global trend of declining religiosity among younger generations has been widely documented (Pew Research Centre, 2019), its specific manifestation in Northern Nigeria is influenced by local conditions, including political instability, religious extremism, and socioeconomic challenges. These factors have contributed to a growing trend where young Muslims are increasingly questioning their faith and inclining towards secular or atheistic ideologies.

Various scholars have examined the philosophical and theological aspects of atheism, particularly in relation to the "New Atheism" movement. This movement, led by figures such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, critiques religious belief through intellectual arguments, which, despite being more prominent in Western contexts, have found resonance among youth worldwide,

including in Northern Nigeria. Atheism, in this context, often serves as a counterpoint to traditional religious orthodoxy (Emilsen, 2012; Rehman, 2020). In the Nigerian context, intellectual doubts, emotional struggles, and sociopolitical factors are often identified as key drivers of atheism. Researchers such as (Rabiu et al., 2025) emphasize the need for a more robust Islamic education system to address these doubts, while (Quick, 2021) and (Sadiq, 2021) highlight the impact of social isolation, negative peer pressure, and personal trauma in exacerbating these struggles.

In response to the rising influence of atheism, several scholars argue that enhancing intellectual engagement with Islamic teachings is essential. (Malik, 2018) advocates for a rational defense of Islam, arguing that scholars should better engage with atheism through well-reasoned theological arguments. Similarly, (Elmasry, 2021) calls for imams to combine theological knowledge with emotional intelligence to help address the doubts of young people. Education plays a critical role in this effort. (Inda, 2022) proposes that integrating critical thinking into Islamic education, especially in teaching *tauhid* can empower students to engage with atheistic arguments in a more meaningful way. (Rehman, 2020) also underscores the importance of moral education, advocating for a comparison between secular and Islamic moral frameworks to strengthen religious identity.

The sociopolitical environment in Northern Nigeria also plays a significant role in shaping youth religious beliefs. (Dunne et al., 2017) highlight how political instability, social unrest, and extremist ideologies contribute to a growing disillusionment with religion. This disillusionment, compounded by the challenges faced by young people in the region, often leads to a shift toward secular ideologies, including atheism. In sum, the literature review reveals that the rise of atheism among Muslim youth in Northern Nigeria is influenced by a combination of intellectual, emotional, and sociopolitical factors. Thus, scholars emphasize the need for a comprehensive approach that includes strengthening Islamic education, fostering community engagement, and encouraging intellectual discourse as critical strategies to mitigate this trend. This study therefore, builds on the existing literature by offering actionable recommendations that are contextually relevant to Northern Nigeria's unique challenges.

Atheism, defined as the rejection of belief in a divine, transcendent deity, has evolved significantly throughout human history. The term "atheism" is derived from the Greek "a" (without) and "theos" (God), originally describing those who lacked belief in the gods of ancient Greece (Alexander, 2020). By the 4th and 5th centuries BCE, atheism came to signify skepticism regarding the existence of gods. During the Reformation, the term specifically referred to the denial of the Christian God (Malik, 2018), while in modern contexts, it broadly rejects all religious beliefs, positioning it as the antithesis of theism (Zarabozo, 2021), which asserts the existence of a creator or deity. However, investigating into the notion of proof uncovers significant inconsistencies within atheism, exposing a fundamental logical flaw; so profound that it threatens the very foundation of knowledge and rationality (Khan, 2020).

Atheism is not merely the absence of belief in a deity; it often involves active skepticism about religious doctrines that lack empirical evidence. This shift highlights atheism's opposition to faith-based beliefs that cannot be substantiated through reason or scientific inquiry. The rise of modern atheism, particularly through figures like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett, marks a revolution from a philosophical stance to a socio-political movement (Dawkins & Ward, 2006). These thinkers, known collectively as the "Four Horsemen," advocate for an evidence-based worldview grounded in empirical inquiry, contrasting with the faith-based epistemology of traditional religions. Their works have significantly influenced global intellectual debates, including in regions like Northern Nigeria, where traditional religious beliefs face increasing challenges from secular ideologies. This manifests more prominently over the cyber space, especially, the social media.

In Islamic tradition, atheism is conceptualized as *ilhād*, derived from the Arabic root "*la-ḥa-da*," meaning "to deviate" or "to incline away" from the orthodoxy of *ʿaqidah* (creed). Atheism, in this context, signifies an ontological departure from faith, specifically the denial of God's existence (Hassan, 2020) or the distortion of His attributes (Q. 7:180). The Qur'an condemns such deviations, warning of punishment for those who reject God's existence (Majid, 2020). The Islamic critique of *al-dahrīyyah* (materialism), which denies divine causality, is

reinforced in Q. 45:24, which refutes the idea that existence is solely the result of time ("*al-dahr*") (Ramli et al., 2022). It could be argued that when Atheists surrender their life and death to *al-dahr*, they are, perhaps unconsciously, surrendering to Allâh (SWT), who refers to Himself as *Al-Dahr* in a *Qudsi hadith* reported by Abu Hurairah: Allâh (SWT) says, "The offspring of Adam abuse the *Dahr* (Time), and I am the *Dahr*; in My Hands are the night and the day" (Sahih Al-Bukhari, vol. 9, book 8: hadith 200). Classical Islamic scholars, such as Al-Ghazali (Ghazālī et al., 2001) and Al-Shahrastani, identified *dahriyyun* (materialists) as those who reject any reality beyond sensory perception, thus denying the divine (Abu al-Fath Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Karim al-, 1992).

A key distinction must be made between atheism and agnosticism. Atheism, from an Islamic perspective, asserts the firm rejection of the Divine, whereas agnosticism represents epistemic doubt or uncertainty about God's existence. In Islamic epistemology, agnosticism is viewed as *ghaflah* (spiritual heedlessness), where the individual fails to recognize the signs of the Creator (Ramadan, 2003). Plainly therefore, atheistic ideology is perceived as a progressive or rather, a retrogressive transition, starting from theism to agnosticism, and ultimately culminating in atheism. It represents a rapid shift from mainstream belief systems, transitioning from monotheism to polytheism, and ultimately embracing atheism. Unlike atheism, which involves a clear negation of faith, agnosticism is seen as a transitional phase that requires wisdom-guided engagement through *da'wah* (dialogue) to address intellectual uncertainty before it solidifies into disbelief. Nonetheless, from the atheistic standpoint, as explained by Dawkins, atheism is characterized by a "lack of belief in gods" rather than an affirmative belief in their non-existence (Dawkins & Ward, 2006).

Atheism's trajectory can be traced through various intellectual epochs. From ancient skepticism, as seen in figures like Epicurus and Lucretius, to modern secularism (Bullivant & Ruse, 2013) and blind materialism heralded by pseudoscience. Likewise, Ibn al-Rawandi (827–911 CE), a Persian scholar once linked to Mu'tazilite thought, is often associated with skepticism because of his criticism of prophecy and divine revelation, though whether he was truly atheist remains debatable (Majid, 2020). During the medieval Islamic period, atheism did not

develop into a broad movement because religious and political structures strongly upheld belief in Allah, although skeptical ideas continued through philosophical inquiry through *'ilm al-kalam*. Another figure often linked to such skepticism is al-Ma'arri (973–1057 CE), whose criticism of religious rituals and dogma contributed to wider discussions on faith and doubt, even if his views did not amount to atheism in the modern sense (Leaman, 1999).

During the Enlightenment, thinkers such as David Hume and Denis Diderot critiqued arguments for God's existence, laying the groundwork for contemporary secular thought (Malik, 2018). Following this, atheism gained further prominence with the rise of scientific rationalism, notably through philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, who declared the "death of God," symbolizing the declining influence of religion (Alexander, 2020). Consequently, the 21st century has witnessed the rise of "new atheism," which advocates for a society grounded in scientific materialism and empirical inquiry (Ahmed, 2013). Atheism's spread in the Islamic world, particularly in Turkey and Iran, has been influenced by Western secularism and colonialism. Figures such as Abdullah Cevdet and Maryam Namazie have been instrumental in promoting secularism and critiquing religious dogma (Nielsen & Otterbeck, 2016).

At the global scene, Muslim-turned Atheists represent a growing group of ex-Muslims who challenge or seek to reform Islam through various means, often echoing the arguments of New Atheists. These individuals gain considerable media attention, portrayed as experts on Islam due to their personal experiences as former Muslims (Malik, 2018). Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a prominent example, advocating for significant reform in Islam by addressing issues such as the infallibility of prophet Muhammad (SAW) and the concept of jihad, despite acknowledging her lack of theological expertise. Ali Rizvi, in contrast, dismisses the possibility of reform entirely, advocating for a secularized world free of religion, critiquing Islamic hermeneutics, and promoting science over faith. Armin Navabi, founder of the Atheist Republic, challenges religious beliefs with simple atheistic arguments and asserts that Islam contains scientific inaccuracies. Ibn Warraq, considered the most academic of ex-Muslim Atheists, critiques Islam from various perspectives, including its origins, textual authenticity, and relationship with science (Malik,

2018). All these ideological make-ups championed by these people have been adequately responded to and misconceptions raised cleared.

In Northern Nigeria, the rise of atheism represents a unique intersection of traditional Islamic values, colonial legacy, and modern secularism (Falola, 1998). While the region has traditionally resisted secular ideas due to its strong Islamic heritage, the influence of global atheism, especially through online communities, challenges this orthodoxy. A key figure in African atheism during this formative period was Tai Solarin. A University of Manchester-educated historian known for his roles as a social critic, educator, and columnist, as well as the founder of Mayflower School in Ikenne, Southwestern Nigeria. Regarded by Richard Carrier as one of the most prominent and controversial atheist and secular humanist figures in African history, Solarin symbolized a broader intellectual shift (Carrier, 1995). In northern Nigeria, some youths who initially embraced agnosticism experienced tension between their innate Islamic disposition (*fitra*) and newly encountered secular ideas, placing them within a wider theological, cultural, and philosophical crossroad. This shift was further intensified by the digital age, as expanded access to online information and social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, and Reddit exposed young people to diverse global ideologies and encouraged interaction between religious and secular worldviews (Ochonu, 2014).

In Northern Nigeria, atheism has slowly emerged despite the region's strong Islamic heritage, with figures like Mubarak Bala, a former Muslim and outspoken atheist, gaining international attention for advocating atheists' rights amid persecution (Humanists International, 2020). Though rare, atheism exists in urban areas like Kano, Kaduna, and Abuja, according to a 2019 Pew Research Centre survey on religious affiliation, an estimated less than 1% of Nigerians identifying as atheists, and even fewer in the predominantly Muslim North (Pew Research Centre, 2019). The stigma and legal repercussions of rejecting Islam in a Shari'ah-governed region make atheism largely underground, though socio-political issues and economic struggles have led some youth to seek solace in atheistic ideologies (Olufemi, 2016). Social media platforms have allowed greater expression of atheistic views, leading to online communities like "Nigerian Atheists" and the formation of secular organizations such as the Atheist Society of Nigeria (Rabiu et

al., 2025). Despite growing interest, public atheism remains controversial and dangerous, with legal and societal pressures inhibiting open expression (Leo, 2022). This makes the atheism movement largely underground, with few evangelical and often extremist figures coming publicly confessing their identity.

In response, Nigerian Atheists have formed three pro-secular organizations: the Atheist Society of Nigeria, the Northern Nigerian Humanist Association, and the Nigerian Secular Society. According to Mubarak Bala, who was instrumental in their establishment, these organizations aim to create a safe environment for individuals to freely express their Atheistic beliefs (Chica, 2018a). Hence, the rise of atheism in Northern Nigeria reflects global secularization trends but remains constrained by the region's religious norms and legal challenges, necessitating careful analysis of its impact on Muslim youth's religious identity and societal values.

In Islam, *īmān* (faith) is a holistic commitment encompassing belief, devotion, and moral striving. As defined in the famous Ḥadīth of Jibrīl (AS), true belief involves “faith in Allah, His Angels, His Books, His Apostles, the Day of Judgment, and *al-Qadr* whether good or bad,” highlighting both epistemic and ethical dimensions. The Qur’an portrays true believers as those whose faith manifests in disciplined action, asserting that they “strive with their wealth and their lives in the cause of Allah” (Q. 49:15). Faith is thus both cognitive and spiritual, providing stability even amid uncertainty. While Islam recognizes doubt as a human condition, the Qur’an frames it as arising from distraction, moral evasion, or epistemic vice. It critiques certain forms of skepticism, suggesting that some individuals are “in doubt, amusing themselves” (Q. 44:7-9), and warns against entrenched uncertainty that hinders spiritual growth (Q. 34:54). The Qur’an addresses doubt not as an unforgivable anomaly but as a condition requiring moral clarity and intellectual engagement.

In his theological and epistemological works, Ibn Taymiyyah views skepticism, especially in the context of atheism, as *safsatah* (radical skepticism), which undermines rational discourse. He critiques the assumption that empirical evidence alone can establish knowledge, asserting that foundational epistemic principles, such as trust in memory, sense perception, and moral reasoning, are self-

evident and do not require proof. His work in *Dar' ta' ārud* positions atheism as a form of skepticism that undermines the very conditions for meaningful discourse, illustrating the contradictions inherent in radical doubt (Khan, 2020). The Qur'an critiques those who demand continuous signs and evidence, echoing the skepticism inherent in atheism: "Even if We opened to them a gate from the heaven and they ascended to it, they would say, 'Our eyes have only been dazzled; we are a people affected by magic'" (Q. 15:14-15). This rejection emphasizes that doubt, when entrenched, is not a pursuit of knowledge but a deliberate avoidance of truth. Ibn Taymiyyah highlights this in the story of Musa and Fir'aun (Q. 26:23-24), where Fir'aun's question "Who is the Lord of the worlds?" is not an inquiry but a rhetorical denial. Musa's response underscores that certainty, grounded in faith, provides the foundation for rational discourse (Nazir, 2021). The Qur'an challenges radical skepticism by demonstrating its inability to engage with reality coherently.

This rejection of radical skepticism aligns with the Islamic epistemological stance that faith, rather than opposing reason, completes and guides it. Unlike atheism, which demands proof for foundational principles, Islam teaches that such principles, causality, moral responsibility, and purpose; are self-evident. Denying these leads to existential paralysis. Thus, the Islamic perspective on faith and doubt emphasizes the integration of belief with reason, asserting that doubt, when managed correctly, can be a tool for spiritual and intellectual growth. Faith in Islam is not a retreat from rationality, but its fulfillment, with doubt acknowledged as part of the human experience yet disciplined by revelation and moral clarity. Consequently, the '*tauhidic* intelligence paradigm' serves as a robust epistemological framework designed to address the challenges of secularism and theological uncertainty.

The purpose of this research is to identify the key drivers of atheism among Muslim youth in Northern Nigeria and to propose solutions that can strengthen Islamic identity through educational reform and effective *da'wah* practices. The study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the socio-cultural and intellectual factors driving atheism among Muslim youth in Northern Nigeria? (2) How do digital platforms amplify atheistic ideologies among youth? (3) What role does Islamic education play in either fostering or combating atheism?

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining survey data collected through stratified random sampling from three geopolitical zones with thematic analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with educators, parents, and community leaders. The data analysis used triangulation to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of the rise of atheism among Muslim youth in the digital era and offer actionable recommendations for strengthening Islamic identity in the region.

METHOD

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to investigate the factors contributing to atheism among Muslim youth in Northern Nigeria. A triangulation strategy integrates survey data, semi-structured interviews, and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of digital content to provide a comprehensive understanding and enhance the validity of the findings. A cross-sectional survey was conducted across three regions of Northern Nigeria: Northwest, Northeast, and North Central, utilizing purposive sampling to target 65 participants engaged in community, religious, or youth-related contexts. The survey, which included questions about the visibility of atheistic tendencies among Muslim youth, found that 63% of respondents (41/65) acknowledged atheistic inclinations within their communities. Although the small sample size limits generalizability, these findings offer valuable insights into the perception of atheism in the region.

To further unravel the factors influencing atheism, 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively selected Muslim scholars, community leaders, and youth experts. Interviews were guided by open-ended questions, such as “What factors contribute to atheism among Muslim youth?” and “How do gaps in religious upbringing influence doubts in faith?” Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, ensuring no new insights emerged. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and ethical guidelines, including informed consent, were rigorously followed. In addition to the survey and interviews, CDA was performed on publicly accessible digital platforms like Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, and Reddit.

Using Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, the analysis examined textual features, discursive practices, and the broader social context of atheistic narratives. This approach allowed for the examination of online debates and the role of social media in shaping youth perceptions of atheism.

Thematic content analysis was applied to the qualitative data from all sources. Initial coding was followed by iterative category development and theme refinement to ensure accuracy and consistency. Data triangulation was employed to cross-check results from the survey, interviews, and digital discourse, ensuring a comprehensive analysis of atheism's social and cultural implications among Muslim youth. Ethical considerations were upheld, with informed consent obtained from all participants. Confidentiality was ensured, and all digital content analyzed was sourced from publicly accessible platforms in line with ethical standards for online research.

DISCUSSION

Northern Nigeria has a storied history, marked by the empires of Kanem-Borno, Songhai, and the Sokoto Caliphate (Bunza, 2013) founded on the premise of Islamic polity and scholarship. These historical legacies have left an indelible mark on the cultural and religious lives of the people in the region. This section presents the key findings from the study on atheism among Muslim youth in Northern Nigeria. The data from surveys, interviews, and digital discourse analysis reveal several factors driving atheism, including gaps in religious education, socio-economic pressures, and the pervasive influence of digital platforms. The lived experiences shared by Muslim atheists in Northern Nigeria provide valuable insights into the intellectual, emotional, and social factors that contribute to this growing trend.

Awareness of Atheism Among Muslim Youth

Survey results showed that 63% (41 out of 65) of participants recognized the presence of atheism among Muslim youth, particularly in urban areas. The data indicates that atheism is gaining visibility, though it remains highly stigmatized, particularly in predominantly religious areas. The fact that 26% of respondents were

unaware of atheism and 11% expressed uncertainty suggests that atheism remains largely covert in these regions, due to social and familial pressures.

This aligns with the lived experiences shared by Muslim atheists, such as those interviewed by Al-Jazeera. These individuals reported suppressing their atheism out of fear of social rejection. One interviewee, Jiddah, described how she was punished for questioning the nature of God, highlighting the suppression of such doubts in religious contexts (Chica, 2018). This reinforces the idea that while atheism is present, it often remains hidden due to fear of familial and social consequences, especially in more conservative communities.

Lack of Adequate Islamic Knowledge

Data has shown that, a significant factor contributing to atheism was the lack of sufficient Islamic education. Both survey respondents and interviewees cited gaps in understanding core Islamic concepts, such as *tauhid* (the oneness of Allah) as viewed by Abdullahi (2024) *ilm al-ghaib* (knowledge of the unseen) and *al-qada wal qadr* (divine decree), as leading to youth vulnerability to atheistic ideologies.

The lived experiences of individuals like Jiddah highlight the failure of religious education systems to engage youth with theological questions (Chica, 2018). She recalled being punished for questioning God's presence, which reflects how the educational system often fails to address youth doubts with intellectual compassion. Similarly, Sadiqat (2024) emphasized that the lack of relevant religious teachings on contemporary issues leads youth to seek answers outside of Islam. When religious teachings fail to resonate with their daily lives, some youth turn to atheism, viewing it as a more rational or comforting alternative. This scenario mirrors an experience shared by Ustadh Al-Asfar, who successfully engaged with a young Muslim grappling with atheism due to misunderstandings about *qadr* (divine decree) and women-related issues in Islam, among other concerns (Kabir, 2024). These insights corroborate the survey findings, which highlight a lack of Islamic knowledge as a significant driver of atheism.

Gaps in Teaching and *Da'wah* Methodology

The study found deficiencies in both Islamic teaching methodologies and *da'wah* (Islamic outreach). Traditional, didactic teaching methods were identified as inadequate, particularly when addressing complex theological issues like divine

justice and suffering. Several interviewees, including Abdullahi (2024), emphasized the need for more dynamic, interactive teaching methods to engage youth meaningfully. The inadequate explanation of the rudiments of *tauhid*, especially the applicability and implications of its three forms to life, expressed by Muhammad (2024) left young Muslims with a fragmented understanding of Islam, leading to confusion and doubt. This is reflected in the experience of Shehu, who, after exposure to scientific reasoning in Malaysia, began questioning his faith (Chica, 2018b). His intellectual dissonance, fueled by a clash between rationalist perspectives and Islamic teachings, illustrates the need for Islamic education to integrate modern intellectual frameworks with religious teachings.

Thus, the dilemma of theodicy, a topic extensively discussed in both classical and contemporary Islamic scholarship, can challenge the faith of Muslim youth, leading them to question their beliefs and, in some cases, explore atheistic perspectives that offer more straightforward explanations devoid of divine intervention (Khalafallah, 2001). This aligns with the findings from both interviews and surveys, which underscore the intellectual gap that contributes to atheism among youth. Clearly, the *da'wah* approach of some religious actors, lacking *hikmah* (wisdom) and beautiful exhortation, often portrays Islam as an inflexible religion, rendering its teachings redundant or irrelevant. When teachings are presented without proper context, it further alienates the youth, stifles intellectual curiosity, and discourages personal exploration of faith (Malik, 2018). This rigidity often lead to a perception of Islam as unyielding, making atheism appear more appealing as a more flexible and questioning worldview.

Parental Influence and Upbringing (*Tarbiyyah*)

Parental influence and *tarbiyyah* (upbringing) were identified as critical factors in shaping religious beliefs. Survey respondents highlighted poor parental engagement in religious education as a significant reason why youth drift toward atheism. Hajju (2024) observed that, “parents who are not actively engaged in their children’s religious education create a vacuum that is often filled by secular ideologies.”

The interview data aligns with this finding. Nasir’s experience, in particular, illustrates the breakdown in family communication (Chica, 2018b). Nasir’s father,

an Islamic scholar, reacted violently when Nasir revealed his atheism. This highlights a critical issue in family dynamics where authoritarianism and fear are used to address differences in belief. Nasir's experience demonstrates how a lack of compassionate dialogue, in accordance with Islamic principles, can lead to alienation and the rejection of faith. This reinforces the need for a more compassionate and intellectual approach to engaging youth, especially within the family.

Socioeconomic Pressures and Materialism

Economic hardship and materialism were identified as significant drivers of atheism. Muhammad (2024) noted, "When youth struggle to meet basic needs, they begin to question why a merciful God would allow such suffering." The economic challenges faced by youth in Northern Nigeria lead many to question the role of religion in alleviating their material struggles, contributing to a crisis of faith.

Materialism, further fueled by social media and globalization, exacerbates this crisis. The rise of secular, materialist ideologies promotes a focus on wealth and ephemeral material success, which often contrasts with the Islamic emphasis on spiritual fulfillment. Usman (2024) explained that youth increasingly prioritize economic success over spiritual growth, further distancing them from religious teachings. This materialistic shift aligns with survey data, which highlights materialism and economic hardship as factors that push youth toward atheism.

Influence of Social Media and Globalization

Social media and globalization play a pivotal role in the rise of atheism, exposing youth to alternative worldviews, including atheism. Abdulmuhsin (2024) noted, "Social media has become a powerful tool for spreading atheistic ideas." These platforms allow young Muslims to engage with secular ideologies, often without the religious education necessary to critically assess these views.

This exposure is reflected in the experiences shared by Jiddah and Freeman during the Al-Jazeera interviews (Chica, 2018b). Jiddah described struggling to reconcile her personal identity with Islamic teachings on gender roles. Her emotional and intellectual exploration of secular ideas eventually led her to atheism. Similarly, Shehu's transition to atheism, influenced by exposure to intellectualism and scientific reasoning, underscores how modern education and secular ideas

foster religious doubt. These experiences highlight the powerful impact of digital platforms in shaping belief systems, particularly when religious teachings are insufficiently engaging or intellectually responsive.

Emotional and Psychological Factors

Emotional trauma and identity struggles were significant factors in the rise of atheism. Musa (2024) noted that personal loss, exposure to violence, and mental health issues lead youth to question the existence of God. Freeman's disillusionment, driven by witnessing religiously motivated violence, echoes this point (Chica, 2018b). The psychological impact of violence, compounded by a lack of intellectual and emotional support, creates fertile ground for doubts about religious teachings. The pressure to conform to societal or familial expectations of religious observance can create internal conflict, leading some to embrace atheism (Ramli, 2024). This struggle is often exacerbated by poor upbringing and a lack of family or community support and specialized Islamic counselling system. Moreover, mental health challenges also play a significant role. Individuals facing mental health issues may experience existential despair or disillusionment with their faith (Tanhan & Francisco, 2019). A notable example is Mubarak Bala, who was admitted to a psychiatric hospital by his family when they discovered his inclination to atheism. He reported while being medicated was told by a psychiatrist that "everyone needs God" (Chica, 2018b).

The experience of Nasir, whose atheism was met with violence by his father, exemplifies the destructive impact of coercion and fear in matters of faith (Chica, 2018b). His father's violent reaction starkly contrasts with Islamic teachings of mercy and dialogue, emphasizing the negative consequences of authoritarian approaches to faith. This highlights how emotional and psychological factors, especially trauma and a lack of support, can significantly influence a youth's religious beliefs.

Religious Extremism and Violence

Religious extremism, particularly violence perpetrated by groups like Boko Haram which promote radical misinterpretations of Islam (Onuoha, 2014), was identified as a major factor in the rise of atheism. These groups have engaged in acts of violence, including bombings, abductions, and mass killings, all under the

guise of religious legitimacy. This is in spite of the fact that Muslims and Islam itself are the major victims of these irreligious activities of the dreaded groups. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) condemned extremism, emphasizing the importance of moderation in religion. In a hadith, he warned, "*Beware of exaggeration in religion, for those who came before you were only destroyed because of their exaggeration in religion*" (Sunan Ibn Majah). In this sense, youth who witness or are affected by violence in the name of Islam often experience a crisis of faith, questioning the validity of religious teachings. The dissonance between Islam's peaceful teachings and the violent actions of extremists prompts many to reject their faith and explore alternative worldviews.

This is further amplified by the global discourse on atheism, as promoted by figures like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, who argue that religion is inherently violent. Freeman and other respondents shared their disillusionment with religious violence, leading them to embrace atheism as a rational and peaceful alternative. As opined by Nuruddeen (2024), the association of Islam with extremism contributes to growing skepticism among youth in Northern Nigeria, who are seeking (dis)belief systems that align with their personal experiences of peace and justice.

CONCLUSION

The rise of atheism among Muslim youth in Northern Nigeria is a multifaceted issue shaped by historical, socio-cultural, intellectual, and digital influences. This study demonstrates that atheism in the region is driven by gaps in Islamic education, socio-economic challenges, exposure to secular ideologies, and the impact of digital platforms. Emotional disillusionment, materialism, and instances of ineffective religious leadership further contribute to the erosion of spiritual confidence, turning doubt into a default stance rather than a developmental phase in *īmān* (faith).

The findings highlight the need for a comprehensive approach to address atheism among youth. Key recommendations include the following:

Revitalization of Islamic Education

To address atheism, Islamic education must bridge the gap between classical teachings and contemporary intellectual challenges. Religious curricula should be modernized and revitalized to address doubts related to *tauhid* (the oneness of Allah) and *al-qada wa al-qadr* (divine decree), integrating critical thinking and contemporary intellectual developments. This will equip youth to engage with both religious texts and modern secular ideologies, fostering intellectual resilience.

Strengthening Parental and Community Engagement

Parental involvement in proper *tarbiyyah* (upbringing) is essential to creating a supportive environment where youth can confidently practice their faith. Community leaders must provide mentorship, fostering a culture of open dialogue that addresses doubts and reinforces Islamic teachings. A collaborative approach between parents, scholars, and educators is crucial for sustaining youth faith and guiding them through intellectual challenges.

Enhancing *Da'wah* Methodologies

Current *da'wah* methods need updating to reflect the intellectual and existential concerns of youth. Religious leaders should adopt strategies that emphasize wisdom (*hikmah*) and relevance, moving beyond rigid approaches and archaic pedagogies. Using modern communication tools, including social media, to engage with emerging doubts and atheistic ideologies will help reinforce the relevance of Islamic teachings and counter secular narratives.

Leveraging Digital Platforms

Given the significant role of social media in shaping beliefs, Islamic scholars must engage proactively with digital platforms. Creating accessible, well-crafted high-quality evidence-based content on platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok will provide Islamically sound responses to atheism and secularism. Additionally, fostering online communities where youth can discuss their faith and struggles will offer support and strengthen connections to their beliefs.

Providing Intellectual and Emotional Support

Addressing both the intellectual and emotional needs of Muslim youth is critical. Many turn to atheism as a coping mechanism for emotional trauma or identity crisis. Integrating mental health support and psycho-spiritual therapy within Islamic frameworks, alongside counseling and mentorship programs, will help youth

navigate personal and intellectual challenges, fostering resilience against secular ideologies without undermining their faith.

6. Addressing Socioeconomic Challenges

Socioeconomic factors, including poverty and unemployment, drive some youth toward atheism. A comprehensive approach is required, focusing on economic support and reducing inequality, particularly in marginalized communities. Hence, strengthening the connection between faith and social responsibility will help youth understand the relevance of Islam in addressing both material and spiritual needs, reducing frustration and existential doubt.

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