

## Muslim Children Challenging the Religion of their Parents

It was 3:00 a.m. I had just returned home from my trip to the United States and was between frustration and exhaustion due to jet lag and my 3-year-old daughter's somewhat miraculous desire to be up and about in the middle of the night. While sitting with her in my living room, watching her play with an astounding level of energy (following a 19-hour flight), she suddenly asked me, "Daddy, can I make *salah*?"

Half asleep, I pulled out the prayer mat and watched as she proceeded to go through the prayer motions. Not that I hadn't seen her do it before. Like most 3-year-olds, she loves to mimic her parents in many of the things we do in our daily lives, including prayer. For some reason, however, watching my daughter on that particular morning prompted me to think deeply about the important role we parents have as role models in the education of our children, and how we can be more effective at it, particularly against the backdrop of a world of changing assumptions about religious attachments and choices.

Research from the field of the psychology of religion tells us that the nature of parents' relationships with their children is a major determinant of children's religious attachments in their future lives. More recent efforts indicate that Islam is no exception to this, though most of the overall research has been conducted with Christian populations. The bottom line is that when children are thrust into this world, the individuals that provide them with their first and most influential indoctrination and orientation to life in this realm of existence are usually the parents or those adults charged with raising them.

**It is the parents who provide the children with the initial and most influential experiences, which will eventually develop into a foundational understanding of life and human relations.** When parents and children have what can be considered strong and healthy relationships, children's attachments to their religion tends to be stronger in their formative years.

### Religious Freedom

The phenomenon of children "opting out" of Islam is virtually unheard of in most Muslim countries, for obvious reasons relating to the societal and cultural norms of those countries. However, for Muslim parents in the West, the threat of children choosing not to follow their religion is real. As one father struggling with this dilemma put it, "In Canada we are free to practice our faith. It's a wonderful place to grow up as a Muslim. However, my 13-year-old son has had problems living in this great country. My son has decided Islam is not for him, that he has discovered too many flaws in the faith." This is just one brave example of the very real challenges Muslim parents are facing in the West in regard to their children growing up with a sense of religious freedom.

Many parents who were born in Muslim lands and who did not grow up with a sense of choice in regard to religion are living in the West and raising children who often find it difficult to strike a balance between the culture of their parents' native lands and that of their own countries. Both parents and children are learning that in the West, the freedom to choose one's faith is somewhat of a cultural assumption: an assumption that people—all people—are free to choose their religious path.

The resulting struggle between the youth and their parents often turns into a trying experience for both and is completely foreign to parents who were raised with completely different assumptions. Thus, many are unsure of how to respond to their children's questioning—and often direct challenging—of what most of us consider to be the self-evident truths of Islam. Often, the parents' reaction is hostile: submit or else! Others, however, choose the lenient/liberal approach and just let their children do as they wish, for perhaps Islam is not that important to them anyway. Most, however, are probably somewhere in between, very confused, and unsure of how to respond.

When youth—whose divine gift to the adults of the world is the “sword of truth”—come to us with questions that target our own beliefs, we had better know what we are talking about. This means not only knowing the core knowledge of Islam, but also knowing what we ourselves believe. When the child asks, for example, “Who is Allah?” or “Why must I pray?” we had better be able to answer them in a way that not only makes sense to them and applies to their world, but is what we truly believe. The “sword of truth” that children bring into this world is one that forces us to inspect and assess ourselves and our deepest beliefs. If we are not honest with our children, they will know it. Perhaps this is Allah’s reason for allowing children to question their faith to begin with—to force their parents to question themselves and ultimately acquire a deeper level of knowledge and greater certainty of Islam.

## **Nurturing Belief**

One of the challenges of growing up in a particular religious tradition is to be able to come to the light of faith on one’s own. **Belief cannot be handed down; it must take root and reside in the heart of each individual.** The seeds of belief can be planted, but the actualization of belief can only come about through nurturance, knowledge, experience, contemplation, guidance, and constant reminding. This is the very reason why, when we teach our children, we must always allow room for questioning—not in a defensive way, but in a proactive way. We must inquire as to their level of understanding, before they admit to us that they do not understand—after it’s too late. We must make room for them to take ownership of their faith and belief, as opposed to it being forced on them. This requires that they develop their own level of understanding in concordance with their lives and their social world.

This is one of the subtle differences between “submission” and “surrender” in the context of Islam. According to Ansari, “The distinction between surrender and submission is simply that the word submission implies involuntary, as in ‘whether you like it or not,’ and surrender implies in the sweetness of Love.” The goal of Islamic education, therefore, should be to foster and encourage surrender, rather than to force our children to submit to something that they may not believe in. Submission causes friction, surrender results in ease and willing participation.

The Qur’an stresses the importance of individual belief. Practices without belief are useless in the eyes of Allah. Insincere practice is a dead-end that gets us nowhere. We cannot believe for our children. Whether they pray, recite and learn Qur’an, fast, pay zakah, and all the other things, does not matter one iota if they do not believe in Allah with all their hearts. Prophet Mohammad said,

“The Almighty Allah judges you neither by your countenance nor your wealth, but by the purity of your hearts and your deeds.”

## **The Power of Love**

Nurturing belief in our children must come from our own hearts: from our hearts to theirs. Belief is manifested in actions and worship. As such, belief is best fostered and nurtured through modeling. According to Abdullah Adhami (1999), the three most important things to teach children are to love Allah, His Messenger, and the Qur’an. Notably, Sheikh Abdullah chose the word “love,” not obey, follow, or heed them, but “love” them. If we can teach our children to truly love Allah, His Messenger, and the Qur’an, then obedience becomes pure joy. And what parents wouldn’t want their children to **love** making *salah*, **love** fasting, **love** reading the Qur’an, **love** working their hardest at school, **love** being kind to their neighbors, **love** helping out around the house, and the like. This love must be taught, not through our words alone, but through our actions.

**For example, when our children wake up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom and see us praying, reading the Qur’an, and conversing with Allah, they will get it. When they see how important it is to spend on and help others, they will get it. When they see how much we love learning about Islam and helping others to learn as well, they will get it. Actions transcend words. More importantly, when they see how much we care about**

**them, they will get it. Then, when they ask why we do it and what motivates us, we can explain it to them. Then our words will have meaning and power to them. We can only teach love to our children if it exists in our own hearts, and if it exists in our own hearts it will manifest in our actions and our worship. This “living” Islam is how young people learn love; how they learn love will inspire them and move them to love as well.**

Teaching love cannot occur unless our children know that we care about them. Caring and loving are expressed in a number of ways. Ideally, we should teach our children according to their needs. If they need support and reassurance, we should provide it. If they need discipline and motivation, we should provide it. If they need a good old-fashioned proverbial “kick in the backside” (not literally) to wake them up and help them focus, we should provide it. Whatever the need, we have to know our children to know their needs. Thus, our ability to teach them in whatever way is necessary is predicated on us having a relationship with them.

### **Civilization in Crisis**

Sadly, I currently live in a country where, generally speaking, fathers do not talk with their children, especially their male children. They talk **to** them, but they do not talk **with** them. Where I live, I rarely see fathers and sons conversing. It is truly unfortunate, especially with the steep rise in social ills among youth and the rapid pace of modernization that requires a great deal of understanding and careful navigation. Children need their parents to help them understand what is going on around them and inside of them. But how can there be understanding when there is a void of real communication? This is a symptom of a civilization in crisis, when parents cannot forge real relationships with their own children. What’s happening as a result is that our children are having their innate need for developmental relationships and intimacy met through anyone other than their parents. That means, in today’s times, peers and pop culture. As a result, all those important questions that our children should be asking us are being directed to their friends, or they are getting answers from magazines and movies.

Once this opportunity to forge real, meaningful relationships with our children is forfeited, we cannot ask why our children do not embrace Islam. We cannot be surprised, nor can we expect them to simply fall in line and be “good Muslims,” for practice without belief is meaningless in the sight of Allah. This is especially the case for those living in the West, where youth assume many more personal freedoms and are encouraged to exercise them. Youth, by their nature, will gravitate towards that which meets their various developmental needs—one of which is the need for caring adults to guide them along the rocky road of life. With the ups and downs of modern living, youth more than ever need adults who can relate to them, talk **with** them, help them understand, answer their questions, and ask more in return, challenge and motivate them, as well as show them that they are there for them, through thick and thin. From this forging of real, caring relationships, the modeling of Islam becomes a teaching tool unlike any other. If the relationship is strong, the words will resonate because the child knows that the words are sincere, are applied, and produce result.

**By Abdul-Lateef Abdullah**