

SECULAR Vs. RELIGIOUS

While teaching and talking to our children about Islam, we need to be aware of certain hidden issues. These are secular vs. religious actions, facts vs. behavior and acquiescence vs. critical thinking. These issues affect our thinking and acting although few of us are aware of them.

SECULAR VS. RELIGIOUS

Hina was an attractive fifteen-year-old with a slender, attractive figure. She attended the Islamic weekend classes on a regular basis, wearing very short skirts and skintight sweaters. The teacher mentioned to her mother that she might want to encourage her daughter to dress more Islamically because her way of dress would attract undesired attraction of the boys at school.

"Hina, you have to change the way you are dressing. It's unIslamic. No more short skirts and you have to wear overlarge sweaters to hide your shape!" scolded her mother.

"Who are you to say anything?" responded Hina angrily. "Look at yourself, your dress is up to your knees and I can see everything about your shape!"

Hina's mother has a split personality when it comes to religion. On one hand she prays her prayers and fasts during Ramadan. On the other hand she likes to be 'fashionably' dressed when she interacts with non-Muslims. She reads the Qur'an most evenings, but spends her afternoon gossiping with her friends. What is her daughter learning?

Hassan is no better off with his father, who takes him to the weekend Islamic classes but tells him he can skip Juma because his academic studies are more important. Hassan's father is a leader in the Muslim community, but Hassan overhears him bragging to his friends about how he cheated on his income tax and got away with it.

If we as parents pick and choose which aspect of Islam to apply and which to omit from our own lives, we can hardly expect our children to live purely Islamic lives. If Hina's mother chooses her clothing based on what her non-Muslim associates are wearing, then of course Hina will demand the same right, even though her mother feels like her clothes are too short or too tight. The question is, who is the authority and who has the right to decide? If it is Allah who has the right to decide, then parents have no right to pick and choose which practices they will follow. If it is the individual who decides, then children have as much right as their parents, once they reach puberty. Parents who think differently will have their youth point this out to them (if they are on speaking terms). For sure the youth will be thinking this. If you know you are not following what Allah orders, you can attempt to change your own behavior, admit to your youth that you are also still growing in your faith, and tell them frankly that you are trying to help them on the right path now because it will make their life easier and better. Then you will need to point out the times when your deviation from Islamic values has caused problems for you.

If you choose to ignore this aspect, most likely your children will choose to ignore your advice.

FACTS VS. BEHAVIOR

This aspect has already been alluded to in this paper, but it needs a bit of explanation. We expect the masjid (mosques) classes to teach our children how to read the Qur'an in Arabic, but not to understand what it means. We expect the masjid to teach our children how to pray, how to fast, etc. but NOT HOW TO LIVE, how to behave.

These are facts, not behavior. Many children know how to pray; very few feel the need to pray because they understand its importance. Quite a large number of children know how to read the Qur'an. Only a few read the Qur'an in order to understand what it is saying, or in order to answer their questions.

Islam is a complete way of life. The facts (the 5 pillars, the biography of Prophet Muhammad) are useful when they help the person learn how and why they should do something. The fact that Prophet Muhammad lived 1400 years ago is a fact. By itself, that fact is worthless. The fact, that he lived as a Muslim in a city where Muslims were few and persecuted, is worthless until it helps us realize that if he and the early Muslims could flourish in that setting, then so can we. When we teaching our children about Islam, we need to teach them how to behave, not just to memorize facts. Instead of giving them lists of facts to learn, set them an example and mention the Islamic connection while you are doing it. You visit someone who is sick; mention that this is an Islamic requirement, discuss with your child why it is good to do this act. Make sure you visit with sick people who are not part of your cultural group and non-Muslims as well. One important lesson for your child to learn is that Islamic behavior is good for everyone, even non-Muslims.

Watch TV with your children, especially the pre-teens. Don't preach, but discuss the behavior of the characters in the sitcom (comedy). Make comments like, 'Aren't you glad you're a Muslim so you don't have that problem' (concerning problems with dating, drinking, etc.)

Initiate discussions with your children. Bring up situations like, 'What should you do if a friend in school is out sick for a week?' It is extremely important to really listen to what your children are saying. They know in a second if your mind is preoccupied with something else. When you ask for their opinion, really listen to their answer, and make your next comment reflect theirs.

ACQUIESCENCE VS. CRITICAL THINKING

Many parents grew up in areas where colonizing rulers maintained schools for acquiescence. That is, pupils were taught to repeat exactly what the teacher told them. If the test question asked for 3 reasons why it is good to brush your teeth, the answer had to be the exact three reasons that the teacher had told them in class. The pupil is not supposed to think; he is supposed to accept everything without questioning. This is too often the way we teach our children about Islam. Do this action because Islam says you have to. Do this exactly the way I say because every other way is haram. Our children need to learn that there are two kinds of knowledge, that which is revealed and that which is humanly acquired. Knowledge revealed in the Qur'an and hadiths is unchanging and unarguable. Knowledge that is derived from our five senses and our own thinking is subject to error and can and should be questioned.

North American schools, including good Islamic schools, stress critical thinking. For children who grow up here, it is not sufficient to say you have to do this because I say so. You can expect your children to honor and obey you because Islam requires obedience to parents, but you must also explain and discuss why you are asking for their obedience. Your youth should be required to pray, because Allah says for them to pray, but you must also be open and willing to discuss why Allah would ask us to do that. What are the possible benefits of praying, what should you do if you feel like the prayer is empty of meaning to you, and so on. **These questions don't mean your youth are turning away from Islam; they mean that your youth are thinking seriously about their religion.** One of the most wonderful things about Islam is that because it is the truth, it can stand up to the most critical of questions.

Parents must also learn to acknowledge that they make mistakes, and they are ignorant of certain answers. Your child does not have the right to expect you to be able to explain every Islamic injunction. He/she does have the right to expect you to give an honest and open response to their questions. When you tell your youth, "That's an important question. I don't know the answer. Let's see if we can find out what the Qur'an says about it." then you have created an open, honest exchange of thoughts with your youth.

Discuss Islam with your children from the time they are young, stressing the positive, and encouraging them to speak frankly and freely to you. Be an Islamic role model for them. By the time they have emerged from their troubling, questioning adolescence, you will have children who have actively embraced Islam, and who want to be Muslim because they know that it will make their life better in this world, and in the hereafter, *Inshaa Allah* (Allah willing).

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