



# Will My Children Be Muslim? The Development of Religious Identity in Young People

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## Religious identity development: A review of the research

One of the primary concerns of Muslim parents in the West is the religious identity of their children. Many parents wonder what the secret is to raising a child with *imān* (faith) in a society in which being Muslim can be challenging. Approximately 70% of people in the U.S. identify as Christian, nearly 23% identify as having no religion, and less than 1% identify as Muslim.<sup>1</sup> Although Muslim families transmit their religious affiliation to their children at higher rates than Christians in America, approximately 20% of those raised as Muslims do not identify as Muslim in adulthood.<sup>2</sup> In this cultural context, where Christianity is the majority religion and the philosophies of secularism, liberalism, feminism, capitalism, and atheism are pervasive and influential, Muslims who desire to transmit Islam to their children need to understand how to socialize their children to develop a healthy Islamic identity. Exactly what should parents do to inculcate Islamic beliefs, values, and behaviors in their children? What type of schools should they send their children to? What effects do friends have on their children's religious identity? What types of parent-child relationships and parenting practices facilitate the development of faith? These are the types of questions that parents ask and need answers to, yet relatively little is known about the process of religious identity development in Muslim youth in America. This paper provides an overview of theories about the mechanisms by which religion is conveyed and passed down to children in America. Although the overwhelming majority of research has been conducted with adherents of other faiths in the United States, the insights from existing research are invaluable in constructing theoretical models and a roadmap to better understand Islamic identity development of Muslim American youth.

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<sup>1</sup> "Religious Landscape Study," Pew Research Center, 2014, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Religious Switching and Inter marriage," chap. 2 in "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/chapter-2-religious-switching-and-intermarriage/#net-gains-and-losses-by-religious-tradition-unaffiliated-make-big-gains-catholics-suffer-major-losses>.



## The meaning of identity

Identity development often involves asking, “Who am I? What do I value? What do I want to do with my life?” Identity formation is considered the most important developmental task of adolescence as adolescents are driven to answer these types of questions.<sup>3, 4, 5</sup> It is also the developmental period often characterized by religious instability, a time when adolescents may engage in exploration of various beliefs and behaviors before ultimately committing to a particular religious identity.<sup>6, 7, 8</sup> The transcendent meaning found in religion can play an important role in adolescents’ identity formation and well-being, as religious beliefs and values enable youth to make sense of the world and understand their place in it.<sup>9, 10</sup> Additionally, religiosity has been associated with substantial mental health benefits, including lower rates of depression, anxiety, suicide, and substance abuse.<sup>11</sup> Although religious identity can be described as merely ascribing to a particular religious group without any behavioral ramifications, we focus on religious identity as something deeper that influences how a person lives their life. We believe the scope of religious identity is best captured by the three dimensions of religious beliefs and values, religious practices, and participation in a religious community.<sup>12</sup>

These three dimensions capture the sacred things people believe in and value, how they practice what they believe, and how they interact with those with similar

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<sup>3</sup> Jacquelynne Eccles, “Who Am I and What Am I Going to Do with My Life? Personal and Collective Identities as Motivators of Action,” *Educational Psychologist* 44, no. 2 (2009): 78–89.

<sup>4</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1968).

<sup>5</sup> James E. Marcia, “Identity and Psychosocial Development in Adulthood,” *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research* 2, no. 1 (2002): 7–28.

<sup>6</sup> Carol Markstrom-Adams, Greta Hofstra, and Kirk Dougher, “The Ego-Virtue of Fidelity: A Case for the Study of Religion and Identity Formation in Adolescence,” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 23, no. 4 (1994): 453–69.

<sup>7</sup> Richard J. Petts, “Trajectories of Religious Participation from Adolescence to Young Adulthood,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 3 (2009): 552–71.

<sup>8</sup> Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Erikson, *Identity*.

<sup>10</sup> Pamela Ebsteyne King, “Religion and Identity: The Role of Ideological, Social, and Spiritual Contexts,” *Applied Developmental Science* 7, no. 3 (2003): 197–204.

<sup>11</sup> Harold G. Koenig, “Research on Religion, Spirituality, and Mental Health: A Review,” *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 54, no. 5 (2009): 283–91.

<sup>12</sup> Loren D. Marks and David C. Dollahite, *Religion and Families: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

beliefs and practices. Thus, the optimal Islamic identity includes self-identifying as Muslim, internalizing Islamic values and beliefs, and living a life in accordance with the guidance of Islam within a community. Identity is thus composed of self-perceptions, specific competencies, and personal values and goals, and can manifest itself both individually and collectively.<sup>13</sup> For a Muslim, this refers to both personally identifying as a Muslim and having a sense of belonging to the Muslim *ummah*. Engaging in particular behaviors is the mechanism through which individuals enact their personal and collective identities, thus validating their proclaimed Islamic identity. This notion of identity is represented in the verse, “And who is better in speech than one who invites to Allah, engages in righteous behavior, and proclaims, ‘Indeed, I am of the Muslims.’”<sup>14</sup> These behaviors may include devotional acts, such as individual and congregational prayer, reading the Qur’an, fasting, and interpersonal relations, such as respecting parents, honoring neighbors and guests, and engaging in appropriate behavior with the opposite gender.

Although identity is often solidified in later stages of adolescence and early adulthood, an individual’s religious identity develops over the lifespan and is influenced by many factors. These factors include social and psychological experiences from childhood to adulthood, personal agency in creating social roles and experiences that reinforce (or undermine) one’s religious identity, and the co-construction of the content, meaning, and salience of their religious identity by the individual and those with whom they interact.<sup>15</sup> Since the construction of identity both shapes and is shaped by an individual’s worldview and sense of life’s purpose, identity serves as a fundamental motivator of religious behavior. Whether an individual chooses to engage with Islam in a meaningful way heavily depends on the salience of their Islamic identity, which includes their conviction in Islam, the existence or absence of religious doubts, and the religious behaviors they engage in.

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<sup>13</sup> Eccles, “Who Am I,” 78–89.

<sup>14</sup> Qur’an 41:33.

<sup>15</sup> Eccles, “Who Am I,” 78–89.

In order to broadly consider the influences on an individual's religious identity, we find it helpful to think about the nested environments<sup>16</sup> that a child resides in, in light of the three dimensions of religious identity (beliefs, practices, community). By nested environments, we refer to environments that do not exist completely independent of one another; rather, they are layered one inside another like Russian dolls. The child's most proximal environment is the family, which is nested in the neighborhood and community environment, which is nested within a broader societal and cultural environment. All of these environments exist within a historical context that changes over time. This conceptual model hypothesizes that each of these environments has both direct or indirect effects on each component of religious identity. Considering each of the three dimensions of beliefs, practices, and community helps organize how environmental factors relate to specific dimensions of religiosity. For example, if we believe the *masjid* influences a child's religious identity, we can investigate whether beliefs or practices are most influenced by the *masjid*. The three dimensions are also hypothesized to influence one another. For example, engaging in communal worship may influence conviction in religious beliefs and vice versa. We investigate each layer of this model in the subsequent sections based on the body of existing literature on religious identity in America.

## Conceptual model of nested environments: Religious socialization and identity development

Youth are embedded in complex circles of influence that include various socializers.<sup>17</sup> By socialization, we refer to the interactions in which individuals acquire specific values, beliefs, and behaviors. Socialization entails social learning that derives from continuing interactions between individuals and those who influence them.<sup>18</sup> Primary agents of religious socialization include parents, peers,

<sup>16</sup> Urie Bronfenbrenner and Pamela A. Morris, "The Bioecological Model of Human Development," in *Handbook of Child Psychology*, edited by William Damon and Richard L. Lerner (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> David C. Dollahite and Jennifer Y. Thatcher, "Talking about Religion: How Highly Religious Youth and Parents Discuss Their Faith," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 23, no. 5 (2008): 611–41.

<sup>18</sup> John A. Clausen, ed., *Socialization and Society* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968).

and community institutions (e.g., places of worship and schools).<sup>19</sup> In the following sections, we review what is known about the role of each of these agents.

## Parental socialization

In a famous hadith on parents and religion, the Prophet ﷺ said, “No child is born but that he is upon the natural disposition [to believe in Allah]. Thereafter, it is one’s parents that make the child a Jew, or a Christian, or Magian.”<sup>20</sup> There is overwhelming empirical evidence that the most important source of religious socialization is the family. Youth raised in religious families are more likely to be religious than youth raised in nonreligious families.<sup>21, 22, 23</sup> Parents influence their children’s beliefs and behaviors through several mechanisms, including modeling, encouragement and reinforcement, parent-child coactivity, and provision of religious materials and experiences.<sup>24</sup> After interviewing over 200 families from various religious backgrounds, Smith and colleagues concluded that “parents have only one good and hopefully effective way to raise children to understand and carry on their family’s religion. That is for parents simply to practice their own personal faith, naturally, for its own sake and as role models for their children.”<sup>25</sup> Additionally, based on their longitudinal study of 350 families over 35 years, Bengtson and colleagues concluded, “If the parents are not themselves involved in religious activities, if their actions are not consistent with what they preach, children are rarely motivated to follow in their parents’ religious footsteps.”<sup>26</sup> Children often imitate the behavior of their parents, and observing a parent engaged in prayer or reading scripture serves as a spiritual model for a child to emulate. Central to spiritual modeling is observational spiritual learning, that is, the

<sup>19</sup> Alan C. Acock and Vern L. Bengtson, “On the Relative Influence of Mothers and Fathers: A Covariance Analysis of Political and Religious Socialization,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 40, no. 3 (1978): 519–30.

<sup>20</sup> *Saheeh al-Bukhari: kitaab al-janaaiz*.

<sup>21</sup> Vern L. Bengtson, Susan Harris, and Norella M. Putney, *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down Across Generations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*.

<sup>23</sup> Marks and Dollahite, *Religion and Families*.

<sup>24</sup> Jacquelynne S. Eccles, Amy Arberton, Christy Miller Buchanan, Jacobs Janis, Constance Flanagan, and Rena Harold, “School and Family Effects on the Ontogeny of Children’s Interests, Self-Perceptions, and Activity Choices,” *Developmental Perspectives on Motivation* 40 (1993): 145–208.

<sup>25</sup> Christian Smith, Bridget Ritz, and Michael Rotolo. *Religious Parenting: Transmitting Faith and Values in Contemporary America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 179.

<sup>26</sup> Bengtson, Harris, and Putney, *Families and Faith*, 65.

learning of spiritually relevant skills or behaviors through observing other persons.<sup>27</sup> Parents are often the first sources of spiritual modeling. Although children can acquire the abstract principles of religion, they will remain in a quandary about how to implement them if they have not had the benefit of illustrative exemplars.<sup>28</sup> Parent-child coactivity may include behaviors such as reading religious books or praying together. For example, parents can engage in coactivity with their children by reading Qur'an together, telling religious stories, and performing congregational prayers in the home. Parents may also encourage their children to participate in religious practices by providing access to religious materials and taking their children to religious programs and experiences in the community.

Another major consideration in studying the influence of parental socialization is understanding the quality of the parent-child relationship.<sup>29</sup> Prior research suggests that how emotionally close a child feels to his mother or father (i.e., affective solidarity) is a strong predictor of religious continuity across generations.<sup>30</sup> When a child feels close to a parent, he or she may be more likely to imitate or model that parent's religiosity. However, other research has found that the strength of the parent-child relationship only matters if parents and youth actually discuss religion together. In the absence of this close bond between parent and child, the transmission of religious values may be diminished as youth may not desire to be like their parents and may not engage in the types of conversations where they can discuss their religious identity or concerns. Although mothers typically spend more time with their children, some prior research has found that, for religious transmission, having a close bond with one's father may matter even more than a close relationship with the mother.<sup>31</sup> However, this finding is not consistent in the literature. Furthermore, within the American context, existing research generally supports the idea that parents who are both high in warmth and hold their children to high standards (i.e., authoritative parenting) transmit their religion to their

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<sup>27</sup> Doug Oman and Carl E. Thoresen, "Invited Essay: Spiritual Modeling: A Key to Spiritual and Religious Growth?," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 13, no. 3 (2003): 149–65.

<sup>28</sup> Albert Bandura, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986).

<sup>29</sup> Vern L. Bengtson, Timothy J. Biblarz, and Robert E. L. Roberts, *How Families Still Matter: A Longitudinal Study of Youth in Two Generations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Bengtson, Harris, and Putney, *Families and Faith*.



children better than other types of harsh, permissive, or disinterested parenting styles. Explaining why this method of parenting was successful, Gunnoe and colleagues found that “authoritative parents demand age-appropriate mature behavior from their children and foster children’s autonomy in a warm and supportive environment. Although authoritative parents have the final say, they encourage their children to participate actively in discussions of decisions that affect them.”<sup>32</sup>

When parents speak to their adolescents about religion, there is potential for either strengthening or weakening the parent-child relationship, depending on the quantity and quality of conversations. In a national study of youth and religion in America, one-third (34%) of adolescents reported speaking to their parents about religion multiple times a week, 28% reported speaking to their parents about religion only a few times a month (28%), and 38% reported either never conversing about religion or only a few times a year with their parents. Adolescents have been found to place more importance on religion and practice their faith more when they have bidirectional discussions on religious topics with their parents.<sup>33</sup> These bidirectional discussions are characterized by the child asking questions, voicing his or her opinion, and initiating and ending the discussion.<sup>34</sup> In a qualitative study of religious conversations, both parents and children rated religious conversations as the most meaningful religious activity, above church/synagogue/*masjid* attendance and prayer with children.<sup>35</sup> Through their interviews with families, Dollahite and Thatcher found that “parents and adolescents reported that when religious conversation was focused on the adolescent child’s needs and interests, the adolescents were engaged, interested, and enjoyed discussing religion. In contrast, when the conversations were tailored more to the parents’ desires and needs, the adolescents were more likely to be disengaged and uninterested.”<sup>36</sup> For example, religious conversations that involve a

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<sup>32</sup> Marjorie Lindner Gunnoe, E. Mavis Hetherington, and David Reiss, “Parental Religiosity, Parenting Style, and Adolescent Social Responsibility,” *The Journal of Early Adolescence* 19, no. 2 (1999): 199–225, 200.

<sup>33</sup> Douglas L. Flor and Nancy Flanagan Knapp, “Transmission and Transaction: Predicting Adolescents’ Internalization of Parental Religious Values,” *Journal of Family Psychology* 15, no. 4 (2001): 627.

<sup>34</sup> Chris J. Boyatzis and Denise L. Janicki, “Parent-Child Communication about Religion: Survey and Diary Data on Unilateral Transmission and Bi-Directional Reciprocity Styles,” *Review of Religious Research* (2003): 252–70.

<sup>35</sup> Dollahite and Thatcher, “Talking about Religion,” 611–641.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

parent lecturing their child about religion are not as effective as when the child is involved as an active participant. This may be especially important as children grow older and enter developmental periods marked by a desire to demonstrate competence and explore their identity. The conversation that Ibrahim had with his son, Ismail, is an example of the bidirectional discussions that involve a parent soliciting their child's opinion. "And when he [Ismail] reached maturity, Ibrahim said to him, 'O my son, indeed I have seen in a dream that I should sacrifice you. So, what do you think?' He responded, 'O my father, do as you are commanded. You will find me, if Allah wills, of the steadfast.'"<sup>37</sup>

Family structure has also been linked to the religious identity of children. Youth raised by married biological parents who share the same faith are more likely to be religious and share the faith of their parents than children of single parents, divorced parents, interfaith marriages, and other non-traditional family structures. In a study based on the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), the relation between parental religiosity and their children's religious attendance and religious salience in daily life was significantly stronger for children of married biological parents than for children from non-traditional households. In a longitudinal study of over 300 families, divorce significantly reduced the likelihood of parents transmitting their religious identity to their children, especially for Protestants and Catholics. Interesting, there was no differences in religious transmission for children of divorced Jewish parents, and it was hypothesized that this was due to Jewish identity coming from matrilineality (e.g., from the mother). Additionally, it may be that, for many families, being Jewish is considered an ethnic identity as much as a religious identity. Prior research has also found that divorce increases the likelihood of abandoning religion altogether rather than simply changing religions.<sup>38</sup>

Many reasons have been suggested for the general decrease in the religious identity of children of divorced parents. Trauma from a difficult divorce is likely to be a major factor, including the numerous psychological stressors associated with

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<sup>37</sup> Qur'an 37:102.

<sup>38</sup> Leora E. Lawton and Regina Bures, "Parental Divorce and the 'Switching' of Religious Identity," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40, no. 1 (2001): 99–111.

divorce. However, regardless of how amicable divorce may be, divorce still reduces the likelihood of religious transmission due to other factors. Divorce leads to many changes in the household routine, and divorced parents who share custody often struggle to keep up with the continuity of religious practices in the home and attending religious community events.<sup>39, 40</sup> Furthermore, religious communities highly value the nuclear family, and families that have experienced a divorce may not be as welcomed and included in social gatherings, thus limiting religious opportunities for the children of these families.

Although Islam discourages divorce, it is permissible when the situation warrants, and divorced religious parents can still transmit religion to their children. There are likely many situations when couples should separate, as staying in a dysfunctional marriage may be more damaging to themselves and their children than staying together. Additionally, communities have to think of ways to support children and families struggling with the effects of divorce and find ways to be inclusive and nurture their faith.

Another aspect of family structure related to religious identity is whether parents have same-faith marriages or interfaith marriages. Same-faith marriages have repeatedly been found to be much more stable than interfaith marriages.<sup>41, 42</sup> Interfaith marriages generally do not transmit the religion of either parent well. In a longitudinal study of religious transmission, more than two-thirds of same-faith marriages produced children who followed their parents' religious tradition, whereas less than one in four interfaith marriages resulted in a child who followed either the mother's or the father's religious tradition. Additionally, in cases of interfaith couples who divorced, children were more likely to share their mother's religious tradition than the father's.<sup>43</sup> Although the samples in these studies were predominantly non-Muslim, Muslims need to carefully consider the serious implications of interfaith marriages for both the stability of marriage and the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Marks and Dollahite, *Religion and Families*.

<sup>41</sup> Howard M. Bahr, "Religious Intermarriage and Divorce in Utah and the Mountain States." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1981): 251–61.

<sup>42</sup> Evelyn L. Lehrer, *Religion, Human Capital Investments and the Family in the United States*, in *The Oxford Handbook of the Economics of Religion*, ed. Rachel M. McCleary (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>43</sup> Bengtson, Harris, and Putney, *Families and Faith*.

religious identity of their children, especially in a society where Islam is not a part of the dominant culture. While Muslim women are not permitted to marry non-Muslim men, we also find this concern in classical legal opinions that discouraged Muslim men from marrying non-Muslim women unless there was some overriding and substantial benefit.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, in his capacity as the *khalifa* (caliph), Omar bin Khattab encouraged one of his governors, Hudhaiya bin al-Yaman, to divorce his Jewish wife because there were numerous Muslim women available, and Omar was worried about the effects of Muslim men marrying non-Muslim women in predominantly non-Muslim lands.<sup>45</sup>

A final mechanism by which parents socialize their children into religion is by channeling them into other groups or experiences that reinforce and accentuate the religious values of the home environment.<sup>46, 47</sup> Thus, in addition to the direct effects that parental religiosity may have on their children's religious identity, parents indirectly influence their children's religious identity by selecting peer groups, schools, or religious institutions that further socialize their children.<sup>48</sup> For example, parents may elect to introduce their children to peers from families who share their Islamic values, or enroll their children in full-time Islamic schools, or take them to the *masjid* or other facilities for Sunday school, youth groups, camps, etc. These experiences will introduce them to a number of different peers, adults, and potential role models and socializers. The following section describes the role of peers as religious socializers.

## Peers and religious socialization

Theoretical models of religious identity development have posited that, during the adolescent years, people are strongly dependent upon peers in their efforts to

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<sup>44</sup> Abdullah bin Ahmad Ibn Qudamah, *al-Mughni* (Egypt: Maktabah al-Kaherah, 1968).

<sup>45</sup> Muhammad al-Tabari, *Tarikh al Rusul wa al Muluk*, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Maarif, 1963).

<sup>46</sup> Harold S. Himmelfarb, "The Study of American Jewish Identification: How It Is Defined, Measured, Obtained, Sustained and Lost," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1980): 48–60.

<sup>47</sup> Marie Cornwall. "The Determinants of Religious Behavior: A Theoretical Model and Empirical Test," *Social Forces* 68, no. 2 (1989): 572–92.

<sup>48</sup> Todd F. Martin, James M. White, and Daniel Perlman, "Religious Socialization: A Test of the Channeling Hypothesis of Parental Influence on Adolescent Faith Maturity," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 18, no. 2 (2003): 169–87.

formulate religious views.<sup>49</sup> One of the most salient features of the transition from childhood to adolescence is the heightened importance and influence of peer relationships. As adolescents enter a phase of life marked by exploring who they are and who they want to be, peers are heavily involved in negotiating these identities. However, there is less empirical evidence of the role of friends in religious identity development than there is on the role of parents. Depending on whether parents are able to channel their children into desired peer networks, parents and peers may share religious values and operate as complementary sources of socialization, or their values may be in conflict and operate as competing sources of socialization.<sup>50</sup> Peers are posited to influence youths' religious beliefs and behaviors through a number of mechanisms including modeling, social reinforcement and peer pressure, and through sharing religious experiences and ideas. The notion of peer socialization has been beautifully stated by Prophet Muhammad ﷺ who said, “A metaphor for [the influence of] a righteous friend compared to a bad friend is the example of a perfume-seller and a blacksmith. As for the perfume seller, you will either buy perfume from him or benefit from the good smell he exudes, whereas the blacksmith will either burn you or your clothes or the foul smell will rub off on you.”<sup>51</sup>

Peers may positively or negatively influence an individual's religious beliefs and behaviors depending on social group dynamics. The formation of adolescent cliques (small, tight-knit circles of friends) based on shared interests or similarities (i.e., homophily) may lead to changes in religious beliefs and behaviors. For example, adolescents who play on the same sports teams or work together on projects are likely to spend considerable amounts of “down-time” together, developing deep friendships, sharing experiences, and discussing values, goals, and aspirations. Through these interactions, they co-construct activity-based peer

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<sup>49</sup> James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

<sup>50</sup> James Youniss and Denise L. Haynie, “Friendship in Adolescence,” *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics* 13, no. 1 (1992): 59–66

<sup>51</sup> *Saheeh al-Bukhari*: chap. the perfume seller and selling musk.



cultures and identities.<sup>52</sup> Through these co-constructed cultures and identities, shared values and behaviors form.

The existing body of literature has shown that adolescents' religious beliefs and behavior are influenced by their friends. Thus, youth with religious friends tend to be more religious than youth with non-religious friends.<sup>53</sup> Adolescents are more likely to attend religious services in the present and future if they have friends who attend religious services, even when accounting for parents' religiosity and attendance. Similarly, adolescent ratings of religious importance and spirituality have been linked to the religiosity and support of peers.<sup>54</sup> In a rare study of the effect of peers in a Muslim sample, changes in the religiosity of Indonesian adolescents were predicted by the religiosity of their friends. Just as these aforementioned religious behaviors can be enhanced by friends, lower religiosity of one's peers has been linked to the increased likelihood of engaging in problematic behaviors such as drug use and sexual activity.<sup>55,56</sup> Thus, adolescents with more religious friends typically engage in more religious behavior, and adolescents with less religious friends typically engage in riskier and less religious behavior. The negative effect of peers is found in the Qur'an when Allah describes the regret a person will feel in the afterlife for having selected the wrong friend. "Oh, woe to me! I wish I had not taken that person as a friend. He led me away from the remembrance [of Allah] after it had come to me. Satan has always deserted mankind."<sup>57</sup> Literature on identity construction may help explain the processes by which friends and peer networks influence religious identity.

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<sup>52</sup> Jacquelynne S. Eccles, Bonnie L. Barber, Margaret Stone, and James Hunt, "Extracurricular Activities and Adolescent Development," *Journal of Social Issues* 59, no. 4 (2003): 865–89.

<sup>53</sup> Doran C. French, Urip Purwono, and Airin Triwahyuni, "Friendship and the Religiosity of Indonesian Muslim Adolescents," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 40, no. 12 (2011): 1623–33.

<sup>54</sup> Pamela E. King, James L. Furrow, and Natalie Roth, "On Adolescent Religiousness," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 21, no. 2 (2002): 109–20.

<sup>55</sup> Antoinette Landor, Leslie Gordon Simons, Ronald L. Simons, Gene H. Brody, and Frederick X. Gibbons, "The Role of Religiosity in the Relationship between Parents, Peers, and Adolescent Risky Sexual Behavior," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 40, no. 3 (2011): 296–309.

<sup>56</sup> Stephen J. Bahr and John P. Hoffmann, "Religiosity, Peers, and Adolescent Drug Use," *Journal of Drug Issues* 38, no. 3 (2008): 743–769.

<sup>57</sup> Qur'an 25:29.

One of the key aspects of identity construction is the importance of verbal and visual self-presentation.<sup>58</sup> Depending on the specific costs and rewards associated with manifesting a religious identity in a particular situation, youth may choose to make their Islamic identity more or less conspicuous. For example, if Muslim adolescents are out with their friends in the evening during *maghrib* prayer, how do they decide whether to step aside and pray? There are likely many considerations stemming from the numerous personal and social identities that reside within the individual. Perhaps the individual personally is committed to prayer, but the social group does not value prayer. Furthermore, there may be immediate psychological and emotional costs of engaging in prayer (e.g., fear of people mocking them, fear of missing out on fun) that the teenager has to weigh against the rewards that may not be immediately apparent. Thus, it is the complicated relationship between negotiating social and personal identities that may ultimately determine whether a Muslim youth in the process of developing their religious identity engages in religious practices in the presence of peers or not, likely depending on what the social group values and rewards. It is during this stage of adolescence when Muslim youth often decide if the Muslim identity that was given to them by their parents will mature into a personally chosen Muslim identity, which requires evaluation of one's own values and goals. Thus, one can appreciate how the exact same scenario would play out differently if the peers were religious and valued prayer. Then, there might be a psychological and emotional cost to *not* engaging in prayer. Finally, although parents and peers may be central to influencing religious identity, there are other more distal societal and cultural socializers that also play a role in religious identity. We next consider the role of educational institutions and mass media.

## **Institutional and cultural socializers**

The religious pursuits of American youth operate in social and institutional environments that compete for their time, attention, and energy. Adolescents' religious interests and values typically compete against those of school, homework, media, sports, and more. In the lives of many adolescents, religion occupies a quite

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<sup>58</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009).

weak and often losing position among these competing influences.<sup>59</sup> One example of these competing influences is the decline in enrollment of Muslim adolescents in religious educational programs relative to younger age groups. Although no published data to our knowledge has been gathered on age-specific enrollment, the majority of Islamic weekend school programs appear to be populated by elementary-school-aged children. In the North American context, once children reach adolescence they typically become far less engaged with religious education. In interviews with adolescents and their parents, the most common reasons given for decreased attendance in weekend schools and youth groups (from both parents and youth) are the mounting pressures of schoolwork, the need to focus on high academic achievement, and extracurricular sports. This is consistent with the major finding of a national study of youth values that found American youth perceive their parents to be far more concerned with academic achievement than anything else, including being a kind or caring person.<sup>60</sup> The subtle signals parents send their children through emphasizing sports and academics above religion likely influence children's own values for religion. With limited time in adolescents' busy lives, encouraging a balanced lifestyle may be particularly important for youth religiosity. As educational attainment has become an integral focus for families, including religious families, prior research has investigated the role of higher education in religious socialization.

## Higher education

Higher education is hypothesized to influence students' religious beliefs and values through exposure to secular philosophies and the methods of the social and natural sciences that de-emphasize the role of super-empirical beliefs and explanations (i.e., aspects of the unseen that are not empirically testable). University scientists have been found to endorse reason as the primary authority and they privilege science over other forms of knowledge.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, university scientists are

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<sup>59</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*.

<sup>60</sup> "The Children We Mean to Raise: The Real Messages Adults are Sending about Values," Harvard Graduate School of Education, July 2014, <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/children-mean-raise>.

<sup>61</sup> E. H. Ecklund, *Science vs. Religion: What Scientists Really Think* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

typically less religious than the general public.<sup>62</sup> In this context, it is possible that knowledge rooted in rational discourse and empirical methods may simply make super-empirical belief less plausible for some students. However, the literature on higher education and religion has shown mixed results depending on numerous factors.<sup>63, 64</sup>

Although there is no strong evidence that adolescents are abandoning their religious beliefs in college at large, there are numerous studies showing that religious beliefs may be reexamined, refined, and incorporated in subtle ways with other beliefs and philosophical dispositions.<sup>65</sup> For example, young Muslims may attempt to reconcile their religious identity with secular ideologies such as feminism and liberalism. In support of these hypotheses, US and Canadian data gathered over decades (from the General Social Survey in America and the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series in Canada) show that more education is correlated with decreased religious beliefs.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, a study using the NSYR data found that students who graduated from elite universities were much more likely to be skeptical of super-empirical entities (e.g., angels) and occurrences (e.g., miracles).<sup>67</sup> The author of the study, Jonathan Hill, suggested that the social status one gains from having graduated from college may explain increased religious skepticism, as those who are more educated may desire to distinguish themselves from the religious views of those with less education. In support of this idea, he found that the negative effects of college on religion were more significant for those who had graduated college rather than simply attended some college. Thus, shunning super-empirical explanations may simply be one way that young people come to identify themselves as knowledge-class professionals.

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<sup>62</sup> Neil Gross and Solon Simmons, "The Religiosity of American College and University Professors," *Sociology of Religion* 70, no. 2 (2009): 101–129

<sup>63</sup> A. W. Astin, H. S. Astin, and J. A. Lindholm, *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

<sup>64</sup> Jenny J. Lee, "Religion and College Attendance: Change among Students," *The Review of Higher Education* 25, no. 4 (2002): 369–384.

<sup>65</sup> Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini, *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research*, vol. 2 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005).

<sup>66</sup> Daniel M. Hungerman, "The Effect of Education on Religion: Evidence from Compulsory Schooling Laws," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 104 (2014): 52–63.

<sup>67</sup> Jonathan P. Hill, "Faith and Understanding: Specifying the Impact of Higher Education on Religious Belief," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50, no. 3 (2011): 533–51.

Another body of literature has found that higher education does not necessarily influence religiosity or religious identity negatively as it previously did.<sup>68, 69</sup> Smith and Snell suggest that “one factor seems to be a growing influence of campus-based religious and parachurch groups that provide alternative plausibility structures for sustaining religious faith and practice in college.”<sup>70</sup> We know of no published empirical studies on changes in religiosity of American Muslims; in fact, it is possible that Muslim students who actively participate in campus religious organizations (e.g., Muslim Students’ Association) may strengthen their religious identity over time. Further research is needed to better understand the influence of higher education on the religiosity of American Muslims.

## Mass media

Exposure to various types of media has also been hypothesized to relate to religious beliefs in adolescence. In today’s digital context, where youth regularly access media on their phones or computers, understanding how religiosity may be influenced is important. In a study investigating the relations among media use, religious identity, and religious practices, negative media use, which was defined as the frequency of playing violent video games and viewing pornography, was negatively associated with self-reported religious importance and frequency of engaging in religious practices (e.g., going to places of worship, prayer, reading religious content).<sup>71</sup> As this study was cross-sectional, it was not possible to explain the causal direction and possible confounding variables. In an NSYR study that utilized longitudinal data, watching R-rated movies in early adolescence was associated with decreases in religious salience and church attendance two years later, but not related to religious doubts, after controlling for prior religiosity, peer influence, and parental influence. Thus, adolescent religiosity may be influenced in

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<sup>68</sup> R. Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald A. Luidens. “Determinants of Church Involvement of Young Adults Who Grew Up in Presbyterian Churches,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1993): 242–55.

<sup>69</sup> Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Carolyn McNamara Barry, Laura M. Padilla-Walker, and Larry J. Nelson, “The Role of Mothers and Media on Emerging Adults’ Religious Faith and Practices by Way of Internalization of Prosocial Values,” *Journal of Adult Development* 19, no. 2 (2012): 66–78.

part by exposure to the content in R-rated movies, above and beyond the effect of other socializers.<sup>72</sup>

The current historical and political climate reflected in the news media may also relate to young Muslims' identity development. Half of adult Americans surveyed believe Islam is not part of mainstream American society and Muslims have been rated lower on a feelings thermometer<sup>73</sup> than any other religious group (e.g., Jews, Christians, Buddhists, and atheists), at a cold 48 degrees.<sup>74</sup> Exposure to negative media coverage about Muslims, including awareness of the rise in hate crimes against Muslims, may substantially affect an individual's developing religious identity. It has been hypothesized that individuals who perceive that they lack the resources to deal with being a target of stigma may experience threats to their self-perception.<sup>75</sup> One strategy to cope with identity threats involves disengaging from and avoiding identity-threatening situations.<sup>76</sup> For example, removing clothing that identifies oneself as a Muslim<sup>77</sup> or avoiding praying in public may be consequences of internalized Islamophobia. In a study of Turkish Muslims in Germany, perceived Islamophobia, negative media representations, and experiencing religious discrimination were all negatively associated with religious identity, which was measured by the reported importance of religious identity and engaging in religious behavior.<sup>78</sup> More research is needed to understand the role of

<sup>72</sup> Phil Davignon, "The Effects of R-Rated Movies on Adolescent and Young Adult Religiosity: Media as Self-Socialization," *Review of Religious Research* 55, no. 4 (2013): 615–628.

<sup>73</sup> In a January 2017 survey, Pew Research Center asked respondents to rate Muslims on a "feeling thermometer" ranging from 0 to 100, where 0 degrees indicates the coldest, most negative feelings and 100 degrees indicates the warmest, most positive feelings. On average, Americans gave Muslims a thermometer rating of 48 degrees, which was 8 degrees warmer than in 2014, when the Center first posed the question.

<sup>74</sup> "How the U.S. General Public Views Muslims and Islam," Pew Research Center, July 26, 2017, <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/how-the-u-s-general-public-views-muslims-and-islam/>.

<sup>75</sup> Brenda Major, Wendy J. Quinton, and Shannon K. McCoy, "Antecedents and Consequences of Attributions to Discrimination: Theoretical and Empirical Advances," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 34, (San Diego: Academic Press, 2002), 251–330.

<sup>76</sup> Claude M. Steele, Steven J. Spencer, and Joshua Aronson, "Contending with Group Image: The Psychology of Stereotype and Social Identity Threat," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 34, (San Diego: Academic Press, 2002), 379–440.

<sup>77</sup> Omar Suleiman, "Exploring the Faith and Identity Crisis of American Muslim Youth," Yaqeen Institute, March 3, 2017, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/omar-suleiman/exploring-the-faith-and-identity-crisis-of-american-muslim-youth/#.XbdiEedKgWo>.

<sup>78</sup> Jonas R. Kunst, Hajra Tajamal, David L. Sam, and Pål Ulleberg, "Coping with Islamophobia: The Effects of Religious Stigma on Muslim Minorities' Identity Formation," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 36, no. 4 (2012): 518–532.



Islamophobia and discrimination in the development of religious identity of Muslims in America.

## Conclusion

This literature review is meant to provide an overview of the various theories and mechanisms through which adolescent religious identity develops. The existing body of social science literature has identified numerous socializers of religiosity, including parents, peers, religious institutions, higher education, and mass media. Although there are many religious socializers in the lives of children and adolescents, none are more essential than parents. Smith and colleagues declare that “the single, most powerful causal influence on the religious lives of American teenagers and youth adults is the religious lives of their parents. Not their peers, not the media, not their youth group leaders or clergy, not their religious school teachers...beyond a doubt, the parents of Americans play the leading role in shaping the character of their religious and spiritual lives, even well after they leave home and often for the rest of their lives.”<sup>79</sup> Therefore, parents need to realize their tremendous potential in shaping the religious lives of their children. Furthermore, these socializers are embedded in the nested environments that youth reside in, and they collectively influence youths’ religious beliefs and practices. A central theme that cuts through all the environments in a child’s life is the importance of observational learning. Whether it be parents, siblings, peers, religious figures, or professors, youth observe the beliefs and behaviors of these socializers and may internalize them, especially if a strong relationship between the youth and the socializers has been established. Therefore, stakeholders in the process of religiously socializing Muslim youth should carefully consider these socializers and work to create environments in which Muslim youth can develop a healthy Islamic identity composed of proper beliefs and behaviors and a healthy sense of community belonging. For example, Muslims pursuing higher education may benefit from joining Muslim Student Associations and participating in the activities of the local *masjid* to develop their religious identity. The role of religiously oriented peers and spiritual role models may nurture religious beliefs

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<sup>79</sup> Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo, *Religious Parenting*.

and provide a buffer against the negative effects that college may have on religion. Additionally, for students who move away from home, families should carefully consider the choice of roommates and the housing environment. With the overall decline in religiosity in America, and specifically within the Muslim community, the need for evidence-based interventions is a high priority for Islamic institutions and Muslim families. However, the existing research may not be sufficient in creating the appropriate guidance and interventions for Muslims, although it contains important insights and will be important to build upon.

There are a few limitations to note on the existing research on religious identity development. First, this review primarily relied on Western academic theories and studies of religiosity and identity. Within the Islamic tradition, there are numerous models for inculcating a religious identity that were not addressed in this review. Second, the vast majority of the literature on this subject has relied on predominantly Christian and other non-Muslim samples. Therefore, although we believe the underlying mechanisms should not differ substantially for Muslims, more research on Muslim samples is important to increase the generalizability of the findings. Third, many of the published studies in this review relied on cross-sectional and correlational data, which limits our ability to understand religious development over time and infer causal mechanisms. Ultimately, these limitations underscore the necessity of gathering longitudinal data on Muslim youth and families from diverse backgrounds. This type of data will allow us to understand the process of religious identity formation, especially the predictors of religious conviction and doubt, religious behavior, and community engagement. Understanding these factors will provide the necessary insights that will facilitate the design of interventions and guidance for Muslim youth and families.