



The Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America
17th Annual Imams' Conference
Houston – United States

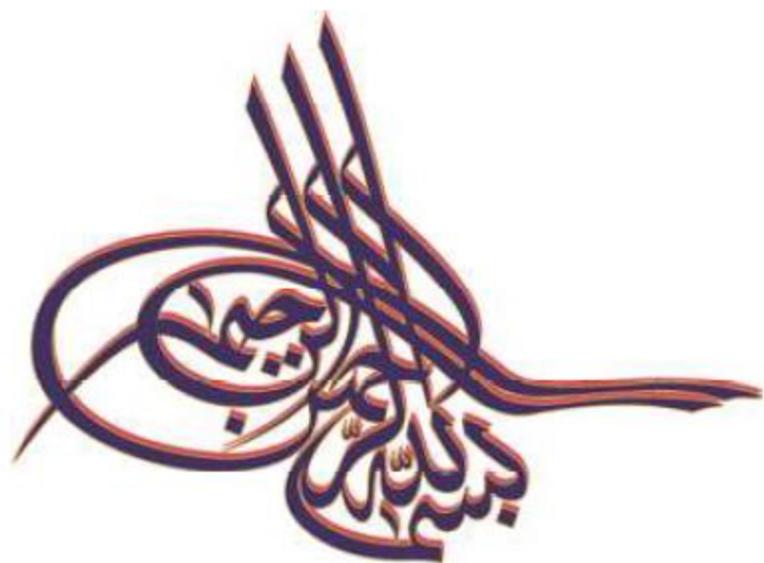
Emotional & Social Factors Impacting the Religious Persistence of Muslim Youth

Altaf Husain, MSW, PhD

Howard University

is a native of Cleveland, Ohio , and a double alumnus of Case Western Reserve University, having earned his B.S. in Biomedical Engineering and his M.S. in Social Work. He received his Ph.D. in Social Work from Howard University in Washington, D.C. Dr. Husain's research interests include the mental health and integration of immigrant and refugee families, and especially Muslim adolescents, in the United States. He serves as vice president of the Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research and advisory board member of the Peaceful Families Project - dedicated to the prevention of domestic violence. His past service to the community includes two terms as vice president of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), two terms as national president of the Muslim Students Association (MSA National) and a founding executive committee member of both the Muslim Alliance in North America (MANA) and the Peaceful Families Project. Dr. Husain and his family live in Northern Virginia.

"الأراء في هذا البحث تعبر عن رأي الباحث وليس بالضرورة عن رأي أمجا"
Opinions in this research are solely those of the author and do not represent AMJA.



Contents

Introduction	4
1. Context: Why is it important to study religious persistence among Muslim youth?	4
2. Definitions of Terms Commonly Used and Some New Terms	8
3. Pathways to Religious Persistence: The Role of Social and Emotional Factors	10
<i>3.1 Social Factors:</i>	<i>10</i>
3.1.1 Parents & Grandparents: Intergenerational Transfer of Faith	10
3.1.2 Religious Community: Addressing Moral and Social Concerns	11
<i>3.2 Emotional Factors: Personal Trauma & Crises of Faith</i>	<i>13</i>
3.2.1 Religion and Psychological Functioning of Adolescents	13
3.2.2 Personal Trauma	14
4. Recommendations to Imams and Masjid Leadership on Improving Religious Persistence	15
5. Root of Concerns Regarding Social & Emotional Factors Leading to Atheism	15
6. Preventing Rebellion Against Highly Religious Parents	16
7. Ensuring Positive Religious Social Experiences	17
8. Establishing Safe Spaces to Process Experiences of Personal trauma	20
Final Thoughts	22
References	23

In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Grantor of Mercy

Introduction

Growing up in the 21st century poses several challenges to Muslim youth and perhaps the greatest of those challenges is to develop their religious identity in a sociopolitical climate that is virulently anti-Islamic. How are those youths coping with these challenges? Are there particular emotional and social factors that are impacting their religious persistence? Research is only recently emerging on atheism as it relates to youth who once identified as Muslims. Therefore, this paper presents an overview of the research that informs our understanding of the religious lives of youth of mostly Christian or Jewish backgrounds, with emphasis on factors leading to atheism. While few studies have shed light on the pathways to doubt about Islam (Chouhoud, 2016) and even those Muslims who no longer identify with the religion of their birth (Mohamed and Sciupac, 2018), hard data on Muslims who are now atheists is just not available. Therefore, this paper uses the term *religious persistence* to refer to the range of possibilities from experiencing doubt but persisting as a Muslim to no longer persisting as a Muslim and actively not identifying as a Muslim.

First, the context for this exploration of religious persistence among Muslim youth is presented. Second, definitions are presented of terms most commonly used in the research and literature on this topic. Third, research on the topic is presented by identifying the broad themes that are emerging. Where available, findings based on samples of Muslims and Muslim youth have been incorporated. Where the findings are based on predominantly non-Muslim populations, the present author shares the potential utility of those findings for the Muslim youth, based on his professional experience and first-hand experience with serving the Muslim community over the last two decades. Finally, recommendations are presented for masjid leadership and especially Imams on how best to support youth experiencing religious persistence struggles.

1. Context: Why is it important to study religious persistence among Muslim youth?

It is almost impossible to imagine that the American Muslim Jurists Association (AMJA) would host a conference dedicated entirely to the theme of "The Challenge of Atheism Among Muslim Youth". And yet, in the year 2020, the 17th annual conference is dedicated to exploring just that challenge. Similarly, the Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research sponsored research to explore pathways to doubt among Muslims, the kind of doubt "which brings individuals to the cusp of leaving Islam or altogether abandoning their faith" (Chouhoud, 2016, p. 4-5). What happened? How did we get to this point? What are the social and emotional factors impacting the decision of some youth to transition to atheism? What is the scope of the challenge, meaning, is it impacting Muslim youth in

the tens, or the hundreds, or the thousands? The scope question must be taken seriously and answered via rigorous research studies with large samples drawn from the Muslim youth population. For now, it is important to contextualize how we even got to the point of discussing atheism among Muslim youth.

The paramount question repeated in magazine articles and convention and conference themes and programs for the last several decades has been about the Muslim identity, namely how to develop and nurture the Muslim identity among youth. Almost every national Muslim organization at one point or another has expended resources to address this question of identity with mixed success. Academics also attempted to tackle the question in books, articles and conference presentations. In reviewing the literature, it becomes evident that until 2001, the Muslim identity discussions were treated as routine. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, it is evident that the focus on the Muslim identity took a very urgent turn. Spawned in part by an atmosphere of intense anti-Islamic bigotry and in part by an increased scrutiny of people self-identifying as Muslims, the question of how to preserve the Muslim identity became of utmost concern to national, state and local Muslim organizations, to families, and indeed to individuals Muslims.

To be sure, there were differences both in the definition of Muslim identity and in the strategies to develop and sustain such an identity. It is important to understand this context because, as presented later in the paper, whether youth feel connected to their faith is to some degree a function of intergenerational transfer and dissemination of that faith. For the purposes of this paper, two approaches are discerned, reflecting mostly the experiences of the immigrant Muslim community.

First, those who remained ambivalent about their relationship with the United States as either their real or adopted homeland were likely to emphasize a definition of Muslim identity that neither outwardly accepted nor rejected American society or civic engagement. Rather, the emphasis was on maintaining a connection to Islam through the lens of their national origins. Immigrant Muslims kept strong ties to their homelands, with regular visits "back home" so their children could maintain their native language, culture and traditions. Their ambivalence was reflected in their public and private messaging, their community programs and activities, and ultimately their children, who perceived themselves only somewhat, if at all, fitting into larger American society. Indeed, those children went on to grow up, complete college, start a career, marry, and have children of their own. To what extent, if at all, this approach impacted the degree to which those children understood, fully valued and practiced Islam in that atmosphere of ambivalent belonging, and what shift if any they made in their own approach to raising their children, are still questions that have not yet been investigated rigorously.

Second, those who accepted the United States as their permanent home but were adamant in the belief that their identity could only be shaped by Islamic teachings were more likely to use the lens of those teachings to influence and drive their integration into American society. They developed programs and activities and ultimately organizations whose mission was to educate them and their children not just about Islam but how to live fully as a Muslim through practice of their faith and through service to larger American society. Even if culture of national origin played some role in this approach, its influence was secondary to the dominant influence of an emerging Islamic culture, rooted in contemporary interpretations of the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad, sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam. Historically, three national Muslim organizations it appears have attempted to promote this approach but with very specific interpretations of what practice of the faith would look and feel like and what integration into American society would look and feel like. Those organizations are the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and the Muslim American Society (MAS). Each of these organizations developed and nurtured youth programs and ultimately organizations such as the Muslim Youth of North America (MYNA), Young Muslims (YM) and the MAS Youth Department. To what extent and how, if at all, this faith-inspired integration approach impacted to what degree those children understood, fully valued and practiced Islam, and what shift if any they made in their own approach to raising their children, is still a question that has not yet been investigated rigorously. Readers may benefit from the works of social scientists such as Sulayman Nyang(1999), Yvonne Haddad (specifically Haddad and Lummis, 1987) and Jane Smith (specifically Haddad and Smith, 1994) have written extensively about the development of the Muslim American community but mostly without the benefit of data collected and analyzed from large-scale samples or even longitudinal studies.

As noted earlier in this section, after 9/11, external pressures on the Muslim community forced the conversation to the forefront about where and how Muslims fit into broader American society. Whether this conversation would have happened on its own, notwithstanding 9/11 and the aftermath, is unclear. However, what is clear is that for most of the first decade of the 21st century, the Muslim community found itself on the defensive: literally defending itself from attacks by the FBI and elected officials as renowned relief agencies were being raided or shut down; some Muslim American leaders were being questioned in their homes, at airports, at the border, and others were having their homes raided; incidents of anti-Islamic bigotry, commonly referred to as Islamophobic, increased exponentially as Muslims and even South Asians and Arabs who were mistakenly identified as Muslims were attacked on the streets and in neighborhoods, in the classrooms, in conference and board rooms of major corporations and kitchens and dining rooms of major restaurant chains. Readers will benefit from a thorough report by the Center for American Progress entitled *Fear, Inc.* (Ali et al., 2011) and the follow up to that report, *Fear, Inc 2.0* (Duss et al., 2015) which chronicled

in painstaking detail the rise of these attacks and of the emergence and persistence of a well-funded cottage industry dedicated to spreading and sustaining fear about the growth of the Muslim community in America.

Masjids and Islamic centers struggled to cope with increasing demands from their congregations to remain relevant and to offer programs which could help every day Muslims to cope with these attacks on their faith. Around the start of the second decade of the 21st century, the terms “unmosqued” and “third spaces” began to gain popularity. The terms attempted to describe the growing discontent with their local masjid or Islamic center among mostly young professionals, recent college graduates and even some high school students. Those who chose to lessen their frequency of attendance at the masjid or stop attending entirely were considered “unmosqued”. Some of these same mostly young people still wanted to gather to study Islam, to reflect upon and process their feelings regarding their faith, and to do so in what they considered to be a safe and judgment-free environment. Those gathering places became commonly referred to as “third spaces”. Readers will benefit from the work of the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, particularly the project “Unmosqued: Reimagining Muslim Spaces,” which was launched in 2013.

The Pew Research Center (2015) was among the first to shed light on the phenomenon of Muslims who no longer identify with the faith of their birth. Although that phenomenon had been regularly studied among Christians and Jews, for the most part, attention turned to Muslims due to the sustained interest on the question of both the growing Muslim population and the concurrent concerns about the “fit” of that growing population in the American landscape. Although the total sample size of the study was over 35,000, the total number of people who self-identified as Muslims was only 237, but still a representative sample because the overall population of Muslims in America, according to the Pew Research Center is estimated at 0.9% of the total American population. Findings from the 2014 Religious Landscape Study served as a wake-up call to national and local Muslim leaders: all was not well in the community because nearly 23% of the Muslims in the study reported that they no longer identified with Islam, the religion of their birth. Mohamed & Sciupac (2018) reported on the findings of a 2017 survey of Muslims using modified language from the questions used in the 2014 Religious Landscape Study. The 2017 findings (n=224) were consistent with the findings of the 2014 study (n=237) in that about 24% of the Muslims reported that they were raised as Muslims but no longer identify as a Muslim. Mohamed and Sciupac (2018) also focused their attention on religious switching, i.e. if one is not practicing the religion of their birth, did they switch to another religion? Of the 24% (n=54) who no longer identify as Muslim, 55% (n=30) selected the “none” category – they did not identify with any other religion, about 22% (n=12) identify as Christian, and about 21% (n=11) identify with any number of other faiths or as just being spiritual.

Other recent studies undertaken by the Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research have yielded similar results and will be discussed later in this paper. The context therefore is clear: majority of the youth who are raised as Muslims remain Muslim, but there is enough cause for concern because at least one out of four of those surveyed are reporting that they do not identify as a Muslim. The next section presents definitions of terms that are commonly used in discussions of the pathways that youth are undertaking as they come to terms with Islam, their religion of birth, in a world that is at best wary and at worst hostile towards their faith.

2. Definitions of Terms Commonly Used and Some New Terms

Until recently, the terms most commonly heard in discussions of the pathways of one's faith journey were religious, non-religious, spiritual, secular, agnostic, atheist, or convert and revert. To ensure proper understanding of the remaining content of this paper, both the commonly used and new terms and their definitions are presented.

Religious – the person has an understanding and appreciation of their religion of birth and strives to implement the teachings and acts of ritual worship of their religion in their daily life; likely to be connected to an organized faith community

Non-religious or “nones” – the person has made an intentional decision to not identify with the religion of their birth and has not switched to any other religion also; actively disconnected from an organized faith community

Spiritual – the person generally believes in the existence of a deity, draws upon teachings about morality and human existence from either the religion of their birth or from other religions or teachings of philosophers; most likely not connected to an organized faith community but may seek out a third space (see “Context” section above for definition)

Secular – the person may draw upon and apply teachings about morality, values and ethics in daily life; actively pursues life/lifestyle that disconnects from a religious or spiritual basis

Agnostic – the person neither accepts nor rejects belief in a deity; may draw upon and apply teachings about morality, values and ethics in daily life; actively believes that one cannot comprehend the existence of a deity that is unseen;

Atheist – the person rejects belief in a deity; may draw upon and apply teachings about morality, values and ethics in daily life but does not ascribe the origins of such a framework to God

Convert – the person has actively studied a religion other than the religion of their birth and has chosen to live their life according to that religion

Revert – the person has actively studied a religion other than the religion of their birth and has chosen to live their life according to that religion because they believe that religion should have been the religion of their birth

Religious switching – the person has actively studied a religion other than the religion of their birth and has either converted or reverted to that religion

Religious disaffiliation – the person actively disconnects from the religion of their birth and may become either secular, “none,” agnostic, or atheist

Religious persistence – a range of belief from experiencing doubts about the religion of their birth but persisting in that religion all the way to actively not identifying with the religion of their birth

Unbelief – the person may have been raised with a religion but has actively selected to disconnect from those beliefs and has not adopted any other religion; may still draw upon and apply teachings about morality, values and ethics in daily life but none connected to a religion

To conclude this section on definitions and profiles of belief and unbelief, two typologies are presented which may clarify the different faith pathways Muslim youth are exploring. These typologies were developed as a result of large-scale studies on youth in the United States. The typologies were not developed for Muslim youth, but the constructs are beneficial and potentially applicable in the Muslim context. First, Stoltz et al. (2016) postulate that pathways of belief or unbelief can be understood using these four categories: institutional, alternative, distanced and secular. The authors note that *institutional* refers to people who are religious and connected to formal religious communities. *Alternative* refers to people who are spiritual and ascribe to various forms of holistic practice and beliefs but not necessarily connected to formal religious communities. *Distanced* refers to people who are just not sure about their beliefs and who also choose not to place too much importance on the role of religion in their lives. *Secular* refers to people adopt a stance about good and evil in worldly affairs but do not participate in any religious practices or uphold religious beliefs. Second, Smith and Denton (2005) offer three broad categories to describe religion and spirituality among adolescents based on their study. *Spiritual seekers* are described by the authors as being *spiritual*, but they are not *religious*. Another category includes youth who are “entirely disengaged from religion” (Smith and Denton, 2005, p. 7). The last category is “religiously devoted teenagers” (p. 7).

Connecting the definitions provided earlier in this section and the two typologies just described, the *institutional* category would include people who are *religious*, *converts*, and *reverts*, or more broadly, the *religiously devoted*, those still connected to an organized, formal or institutional

practice of their religion. The *alternative* category would include people who are *spiritual* or *spiritual seekers*. The *distanced* category would include people who are possibly *unmosqued* and using *third spaces* but also some variation of people with *agnostic* beliefs. Lastly, the *secular* category would include those who are *atheists*, the *religiously disaffiliated*, those who are *disengaged from religion*, and a person with *unbelief*.

3. Pathways to Religious Persistence: The Role of Social and Emotional Factors

As noted earlier in the paper, research on religious persistence among Muslim youth is very urgently needed, especially since there is increasing evidence from small-scale studies that the trend towards religious disaffiliation and potentially atheism is already discernable. While the focus of this paper is predominantly on Muslim youth in the United States, it is beneficial to review findings from research with youth of other religious communities in the United States and Europe. Specifically, research findings related to social and emotional factors which impact religious persistence are highlighted.

3.1 Social Factors:

Socialization forces are critical and have the power to influence so many aspects of youth development, particularly their religious trajectory. Among the key social factors which emerge in the research are the role that parents, grandparents and the religious community, particularly how that community addresses moral and social concerns, have in shaping the religious outlook and attitudes of youth as well as impacting whether they will continue to persist in the religion of their birth.

3.1.1 Parents & Grandparents: Intergenerational Transfer of Faith

Bengston, Hayward, Zuckerman and Silverstein (2018) share findings from a study conducted over a 34-year period from 1971 – 2005. The study investigates the degree of influence of parents and grandparents in the lives of youth. Bengston et al. (2018) start by acknowledging that there are some commonly reported factors which explain the growth in people identifying as “nones” or non-religious. For example, a very traditional and possibly time immemorial explanation has to do with the phenomenon of youth rebelling against or at least distancing themselves from religious parents. Of course, we do not yet have large-scale studies to test whether those Muslim youth who distance themselves from their religion of birth as a reaction to highly religious parents, go on to declare themselves atheists. Later in this paper, recommendations are presented to assist Imams and masjid

leadership in developing programs to train parents and youth about the Islamic approach to adolescence. Another factor Bengston et al. (2018) cite from the literature is the negative relationship between an increase in higher education rates and a decrease in religious affiliation. Madge and Hemming (2017), in a study of over 10,000 youth in Australia, between the ages of 13-17, found that youth reported their beliefs and practices were affected by what they learned about in science. While this phenomenon is only recently being studied among Muslim youth, research conducted by the Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research shows evidence for concern. Chouhoud (2016) documents the increase in doubts among Muslims stemming from moral and social concerns as well as philosophical and scientific concerns. Presumably such doubts were occurring among well-educated Muslims, not unlike their counterparts of other faiths. However, in a follow-up study with a sample of 600 Muslims, Chouhoud (2018) reported an unexpected finding, that neither age nor education level were significant predictors of religious doubt. Rigorous studies with large samples of Muslim youth are needed to understand whether those doubts cause these Muslims to ultimately end up rejecting religion and become atheists or if they persist, attempting to do what Yaqeen Institute promotes – dismantle doubts and nurture conviction in Islam.

The focus of Bengston et al. (2018) beyond the common explanations is to explore the impact of multigenerational socialization on whether youth end up declaring themselves nones/non-religious or they end up persisting in their religion of birth. Among the social factors of concern regarding atheism, the role of parents and grandparents is possibly one of the most important ones, at least for non-Muslim youth, and potentially also for Muslim youth. Over the 34-year period of the study, the researchers found a stark increase in the number of parents and grandparents who resorted to socializing their children to a nonreligious worldview. Youth had been exposed over multiple generations to humanism, atheism and with some youth even falling into the category of “religious rebels”. Indeed, over the 34-year period of this research, the number of young participants in the study who reported being nonreligious tripled. Interestingly, Madge and Hemming (2017) note that among all the youth surveyed, nearly half reported that they held religious views like their mothers. Huuske et al. (2016) found among 1,925 Catholic school students that agnostics and atheists reported having lower levels of parental support compared to believing youth. Again, later in this paper, recommendations are shared to address the central responsibility that Islam places on the father and the mother in ensuring proper Islamic education and socialization into beliefs and practices.

3.1.2 Religious Community: Addressing Moral and Social Concerns

The importance of the religious community, the congregation or in Islamic understanding, the *jama'*, cannot be overemphasized in a discussion on social factors impacting religious persistence in

Muslim youth. In addition to serving as a place of belonging, the religious community also is a place of learning, of exchange, of socialization, and of safety and security. While there is a perception of a decline in the number of Muslim youths attending the masjid and some who have become *unmosqued*, the data simply does not exist from which to draw conclusions. What is clear is that the research among other religious groups confirms the central role of a religious community, even in instances where recorded membership is declining. Zupez (2018), writing predominantly about Christian congregations, notes that atheism is being discussed more openly but there is no evidence to support that the declining memberships in religious organizations are somehow matched by an increase in those identifying as atheists. Within the US context, Zupez (2018) notes that atheism has remained steady at around 3% of the population while young adults report holding on to spirituality even if they are less inclined to belong to a religious congregation or participate in ritual worship.

Chouhoud (2016) reports that some doubts stem from both moral and social concerns. Specifically, he notes that religious leaders and others serving the community reported having doubts related to how Islam addresses gender roles and sexuality and even about certain events in Islamic history. Despite very clear Islamic teachings regarding gender roles and sexuality, it appears both religious leaders and the community at large are engendering doubts among Muslim youth partly because of an inability to communicate those teachings clearly in a colloquial manner and partly because of the intermixing of cultural traditions with authentic Islamic teachings. Research demonstrates that religious upbringing and strong religious communities play a critical role in promoting religious persistence among youth. There are real world consequences to ensuring that the religious community provides a supportive, non-judgmental environment for youth to explore questions and doubts they may have about their religion. For youth who achieve a level of conviction and would be categorized as being religious, the outcomes generally are much better. In their study, Smith and Denton (2005) compared religious teens with non-religious teens and found that the former fared much better with regards to "risk behaviors, media consumption, sexual activity, emotional well-being, family relationships, morality and community participation" (p. 200). While it is difficult to draw conclusions from just that one study, the authors did submit that the unanswered question is whether religious teens fared better because of religion itself or because of a general moral framework to which they are exposed.

Lastly, with regards to social factors which impact the pathways to religious persistence, there is evidence also that a person could become an atheist despite a very strongly supportive religious community. Thiessen (2017) writes about his own experience as a devout member of the Mennonite Church who ended up becoming an atheist but insists that he did so not by choice. Through a process

of deep introspection and a focus on self-development, he found himself at a point where he just stopped believing in the Mennonite teachings. Unlike some youth, as discussed later in the section on emotional factors, Thiessen notes that he was not angry at God or the Bible for any aspect of his life. He was not also what some would term “marginal” in terms of participation in his religious community. His religious experiences included “years of theological training, Bible study, church attendance, fervent prayer, singing hymns and choruses, and all the cultural trappings” (Thiessen, 2017, p. 195) of his Mennonite community. Indeed, he makes it a point to share with the reader that he did not even reject belief in God per se. The distinction for him was that he would focus on improving himself as much as possible without turning to God, without asking God for help. His case may resonate with youth in the Muslim community, who despite having a religious community that is supportive, could still end up walking away from their religion of birth.

3.2 Emotional Factors: Personal Trauma & Crises of Faith

As noted earlier, one of the central developmental tasks of adolescence is identity development. Historically, findings from research exploring the relationship between adolescent psychological functioning and religiousness have demonstrated a net positive effect of religion, religious participation and religious social experiences although there just is not enough research to establish conclusively the direction of the relationships discerned in the research. While social factors are an integral part of the discussion about religious persistence among youth, it is imperative that attention also be given to the role of emotional factors such as experiences of personal trauma and crises of faith.

3.2.1 Religion and Psychological Functioning of Adolescents

Huuskes et al. (2016) have summarized these findings and note that a) religion may be beneficial in two concrete ways when youth experience identity confusion: tell youth it is ok to search for meaning and belonging and providing answers to challenging questions; b) religious participation may promote mental well-being by reducing depressive symptoms and risk of suicide; c) religious youth are less likely to engage in risky and delinquent behaviors, in particular less likely to engage in violent acts and to approve of delinquent acts; and d) religious social experiences emerged as more influential on psychological functioning than religious participation, a finding which will be discussed further in the next section on recommendations.

In their study of 1,925 grade 8 youth from seventeen Catholic schools in two Australian states, Huuske et al. (2016) set out to examine whether psychological functioning in youth is predicated upon the availability of resources which previous research has attributed to religious belonging and

participation and which presumably would not be available to youth who identify as agnostic or atheist. They explored subjective well-being, self-esteem, hope, cognitive empathy, affective empathy, friend support, parental support, teacher support, general health, and aggressive and rule-breaking behavior. Their study mostly confirmed findings of previous research with regards to the positive outcomes associated with belief in God. The study also found atheists had low mental health scores and agnostics and atheists perceived less support from teachers and they had "elevated levels of aggressive behavior" (Huske et al., 2016, p. 48). The researchers readily admit to the limitations of interpreting and generalizing the findings since the study was cross-sectional and because it explored the contentious topic of agnosticism and atheism among adolescents enrolled in Catholic schools. There are clear implications of this study for further research with most of these same variables examined among Muslim youth both in private Islamic schools and public schools.

3.2.2 Personal Trauma

While the bulk of the research presented in this paper has focused on youth of other faith, this sub-section on the role of personal trauma in engendering doubts in faith is based on research conducted under the auspices of the Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research. Chouhoud (2016) authored a report entitled "Modern Pathways to Doubt in Islam," based on in-depth interviews with 31 respondents who interact regularly and in face-to-face settings in their roles as Imams, chaplains and youth coordinators. Acknowledging that individuals experience different degrees of doubt in their faith at various points in their lives, this research focused on the kind of doubt "which brings individuals to the cusp of leaving Islam or altogether abandoning their faith" (Chouhoud, 2016, p. 4-5). As noted at the outset, asking this type of question itself would have been unthinkable among Muslim leaders at the local and national levels.

Chouhoud (2016) reports on three major areas in which doubt was reported by those working with the youth, namely, moral and social concerns, philosophical and scientific concerns and personal trauma. Next, the findings dealing with personal trauma only are presented because a) emotional factors impacting atheism is one of main focuses of this paper and b) personal trauma appeared most frequently as a pathway to doubt among the conversations the respondents reported having with their congregants. Personal trauma manifested in three ways in this study – prolonged, acute and triggered by the religious community. Respondents noted that a crisis of faith, mostly among women congregants, categorized as personal-prolonged (trauma) was most detrimental to individuals who were victims of various types of abuse, childhood, spousal, or sexual abuse by a family member, family friend or community leader. Instances of acute personal trauma that triggered a crisis of faith were the sudden death of a loved one, notification of a diagnosis of a serious illness, and dissolution of the family through separation or divorce. Lastly, respondents noted crises of faith

triggered by trauma individuals experienced because of excessive and often harsh judgment of their level of Islamic knowledge or practice and experiences of outright racism. There are obvious limitations of such research since the findings are not based on the responses of Muslims themselves who are experiencing doubt. In a follow up study with 600 participants entitled "2017 Muslim American Attitudes Survey," Chouhoud (2018) noted some findings consistent with the qualitative research published in 2016 and some unexpected findings. Although the quantitative study did not focus on a youth sample, these findings are illustrative of the types of questions to be asking regarding emotional factors triggering crises of faith.

4. Recommendations to Imams and Masjid Leadership on Improving Religious Persistence

It is important to point out that atheism is a concern for the Muslim community and yet Imams and community leaders should not make the mistake of calling this phenomenon an *epidemic* since the data simply does not exist to determine the extent to which Muslims young and old are abandoning their faith. In this final section, recommendations will be shared based on the review of the context, the definitions and the literature that has been presented above. First, an overview is provided about the root of our concern regarding the social and emotional factors leading to a will to no longer persist in the religion of birth and possibly declare oneself an atheist. Second, concrete recommendations are provided in four areas of concern about Muslim youth based on the findings of research presented above: a) preventing rebellion against highly religious parents; b) ensuring positive religious social experiences broadly and in particular training Imams to contextualize emerging social issues within the Islamic moral and social justice framework.; and c) establishing safe spaces to process doubts emanating from experiences of personal trauma.

5. Root of Concerns Regarding Social & Emotional Factors Leading to Atheism

Muslims are obligated to believe and to ensure that their offspring have enough knowledge about and appreciation of Islamic beliefs to aspire towards religious persistence. This combination of individual and collective responsibility to uphold belief is especially important in the American context where Islam is at best seen as a "foreign" religion and worst seen as a threat to American society and civilization. Parents, Islamic school teachers, Imams, youth coordinators, chaplains and other community leaders are concerned about the current sociopolitical climate and its impact on coming generations of Muslims. What will the children of the children worship after their parents and grandparents are gone? In the Qur'an (2:133), there is an intimate end of life conversation that is illustrative of the point being made here about the roots of the concerns for the intergenerational

transfer of faith. Imagine the relief Prophet Yaqub alayhis salam felt when he asked his family members: What will you worship after me? The sons responded that they would worship the Lord whom Yaqub alayhis salam worshipped. The sons also reassured their father that they understood correctly whom to worship by adding that it was the same Lord, the Lord of the forefathers of their father Yaqub alayhis salam, and named them as Ibrahim, Ismail and Ishaq, alayhum as salam. The challenge is that the current context demands that Muslims go beyond verbal assurances about faith transmission. There must be systems in place to ensure that Muslim youth are able to first learn the basic teachings of their religion, internalize the beliefs and values, apply the teachings, and ultimately remain firm in their conviction. Faith can be shaken in so many ways as presented above, so it is critically important that those systems can account for changes occurring both at the social and emotional levels. The constant attacks on the religion of Islam in broader society, along with trials and tribulations one may face on the personal level, could very well impact person's faith, could engender serious doubts about the relevance of Islamic teachings and even worse, cause a person to give up entirely and abandon their religion. The Prophet Muhammad sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam addressed fluctuations of faith and the occurrence of doubt in a Sahih hadith, recorded in Sunan Al-Tirmidhi (2518): "Leave what makes you doubt for what does not make you doubt. Verily, truth brings peace of mind and falsehood sows doubt." At the root of concern about factors which may lead to a lack of religious persistence is really the question of how Muslim youth would know where to turn to when they have doubts or experience a faith crisis? What type of training, what level of resilience must they have to be able to know they should leave alone what causes them to doubt? Parents are one part of the solution, but they can also be the source of the problem, causing youth to rebel and possibly reject the religion of their birth.

6. Preventing Rebellion Against Highly Religious Parents

Research cited above has given enough evidence that while there are other forces of socialization to contend with, parents play a critical role in the socialization of children towards a religion. The Prophet Muhammad sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam stated in an authentic hadith as narrated by Abu Hurairah radhi Allahu ta'ala anhu, that "No child is born except on Al-Fitra (Islam) and then his parents make him Jewish, Christian or Magian..." (Sahih Al-Bukhari, Vol. 6, Book 60, Hadith 298). While both fathers and mothers are equally important, Madge and Hemming (2017) reported that half of the youth in their study reported maintaining religious views like their mothers. So how should the community train parents to take on this important role? What challenges can occur and should be addressed? A common challenge potentially pushing Muslim youth away from Islam is the style of parenting especially during their adolescent or teenage years. A stricter approach to parenting, especially by parents perceived to be highly religious, can place tremendous pressures on a young

Muslim boy or girl. One possible consequence is that the youth rebel, they reject both the parenting style and in some cases, the religion itself.

Why does that happen? The literature on adolescent development is unequivocal: the main project of teenagers is identity development – as they explore different facets of their life, they search for meaning, they search for answers to questions such as “who am I?” and “why am I here on earth?” Adolescents expect, perhaps somewhat naively, that this process of exploration will be limitless, without constraints, without consequences, and most definitely without judgment. This approach to adolescence and even the concept of rebellion during the teenage years is not commonly accepted within an Islamic framework -- responsibility and accountability are the two key factors which separate a child from an adult. When a child reaches puberty, they are held accountable for upholding religious obligations and will be treated as an adult. But experience tells us that Muslim youth coming of age in the United States expect to be given the same latitude during their teenage years as their non-Muslim counterparts. Parents who are unfamiliar with, unaccustomed to, or unwilling to be flexible to account for these expectations from their children, are inevitably assessed by those children as being rigid and even judgmental. The result is not that different than why youth of other religious backgrounds distance themselves from highly religious parents.

It is imperative that resources are developed to train parents to handle difficult questions from their children and not just tell the children to stop questioning Islamic teachings. Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research is developing state of the art resources to help in this regard. Lastly, parents should focus on helping their children develop a connection with Allah, as that connection is of primary importance and when it is strong, children will focus on pleasing Allah through obedience to their parents. When that connection with Allah is missing, and there are so many pressures from society to abandon religious practice, the youth may only fulfil their religious obligations while in the company of their parents or rebel from doing so entirely. Such negative outcomes can be avoided if parents can be trained to exercise patience and wisdom in helping the youth do connect with Allah. Imams play an integral role in educating and training parents specially to develop that patience and wisdom in dealing with their youth proactively and not waiting to come to the Imam until the relationship has fallen apart.

7. Ensuring Positive Religious Social Experiences

Another key recommendation to ensure that youth develop religious persistence deals with ensuring that religious participation is not a goal in and of itself, rather the goal should be to help the youth to have positive religious social experiences. As noted earlier, research demonstrates that

positive religious social experiences are more influential on psychological functioning than religious participation. Atheism is the most extreme manifestation of doubt, and some of those doubts stem from very negative religious social experiences. Because youth are searching for meaning and a sense of belonging, it is no longer acceptable to simply focus on getting them to participate in various masjid or community programs and activities without spending time and effort to ensure that they have a positive experience. Starting with the planning for the Juma khutba, the halaqaat, various sporting events and outings, effort must be exerted to ask the question: how will the youth feel from the message of the khutba? How will they feel and what lessons will they derive during the halaqa discussions? How will they feel during and after these sporting events and outings? Why are their feelings important? If the youth can start to connect their religious participation with generally positive feelings, they will be more inclined to participate consistently and hopefully be trained to be the planners of these various religious activities. As the research reaffirms, their psychological functioning is linked to having positive religious social experiences and it behooves the masjid and community leadership to not risk alienating the youth further due to a lack of planning well or worse, from messages and learning experiences that sow doubts or further alienate the youth.

Imams especially can help to guide the development of the overall messaging and programs to ensure the youth can have positive religious social experiences. Ahmed, Patel and Hashim (2015) note that the youth programming which exists in masjids "often lacks direction, is underfunded and under resourced, lacks appropriate training and understanding of American Muslim youth, and rarely addresses risk behaviors" (p. 3). Imams can help by making the case to the masjid administration and/or board for the hiring of young male and female youth directors and then using a team approach to work with those directors to promote youth-friendly programming. In addition to the traditional weekend programming, considerable focus must be given to programming during breaks aligned with the public or Islamic school calendar, when most youth are available, and their parents would support them to be involved in constructive activities rather than sitting at home playing video games or any other pastimes. This type of programming should allow for the youth to have minimal-threat, high-learning, high-enjoyment type activities. The minimal-threat component is especially important for youth who are either rebelling at home in terms of daily worship, maintaining modesty, maintaining politeness and etiquette with their parents and siblings. If they sense that they will be put on the spot regarding Qur'an recitation out loud, leading prayers, being quizzed about one or the aspects teachings of Islam, or being shamed by invited speakers, two types of reactions could occur and regrettably, organizers tend to give more consideration to the positive reactions and may never even hear the negative reactions. The positive reactions will most likely come from youth who regularly practice Qur'an recitation or may even enjoy Qur'an memorization; youth who have experience leading prayers, especially those prayers in which the Qur'an is recited aloud; and youth

who enjoy being quizzed or may even have won Islamic quiz competitions. For youth without any of these experiences, or who have been traumatized because of the way their parents or other adults forced them to participate in the past, a repeat experience will be anything but positive and could push them even further to feel shame and possibly lower their self-esteem. Care must be taken to recruit enough trained volunteers who can help the youth directors to offer diverse and segmented activities so everyone feels comfortable at their level of Islamic understanding and practice. With enough positive religious social experiences, the youth who may have had past negative interactions in religious settings may likely volunteer to participate in activities which help them grow in their Islamic understanding and practice.

In addition, accessibility and approachability are two factors that will assist in this process. Youth often complain that their Imam is not accessible. Think about how the daily schedule is set-up. What times blocks can be set aside during hours when the youth are not in school? Do youth need to make an appointment or are there open office hours? Where is the Imam or youth director's office located? If everyone in the community can see who comes in and out of those offices, youth are less likely to approach the Imam or youth director. In terms of approachability the question really should be, do the youth generally feel comfortable making small talk with the Imam and youth director? If these personnel are seen only as authority figures, who are sought out in only serious circumstances, then most likely the approachability factor will be very low. On the other hand, if the Imam and youth directors are seen at community functions, relaxing, speaking to youth, inquiring about their general well-being, about school, about their interests, the approachability factor could likely be higher and result in the youth feeling a higher sense of belonging. Ahmed, Patel and Hashem (2015) refer to such environments as "youth-affirming congregational cultures" (p. 9). Absent such cultures, combined with what the youth perceive as "hypocritical behaviors of religious role models," the impact is highly negative. Ahmed et al. (2015) assert that such an environment "can contribute to confusion, negative experiences, feelings of disempowerment, and marginalization from the Muslim community and Islam as a religion" (p. 9).

Lastly, youth can potentially have positive religious social experiences if Imams and youth directors have training to contextualize emerging social issues within the Islamic moral and social justice framework. Whether through school, social media, youth groups, or the discussions at home and with friends, the youth are constantly having to make sense of news events, bigoted attacks on their beliefs and even just genuine questions which arise in their own search for meaning. To whom should they turn? While the internet is an accessible and seemingly easiest resource for information, youth would benefit tremendously from someone to guide them through the seemingly endless answers to their questions. In fact, some of the information online is deliberate misinformation and

distortions about Islam, while other individuals and organizations (see *Fear, Inc.* report) are determined to stoke fear about and hatred against Muslims and the religion of Islam. Training Imams and youth directors to handle the genuine inquiries of the youth is an urgent recommendation. Consider just one example: doubts regarding gender roles abound and women advocating for better access to the masjid, more welcoming spaces in the masjid, and even rights to full participation are often branded as *feminists*, using the term in the most pejorative way possible. Chouhoud (2016) reports on one respondent's perception of the interactions between some Imams and women expressing genuine concerns about certain Islamic teachings.

Some scholars are picking fights with feminism—trying to win an argument when they should be trying to win people over [...] [These feminists] are not trying to attack, they are merely saying 'Hey, I don't think this is fair, give me something to allay my concerns and show me that you respect me.' Chouhoud (2016, para 35)

Most Imams have the requisite knowledge to respond to questions about how contemporary social justice issues can be addressed via an Islamic moral and ethical framework. However, it is important to learn how to use that knowledge to articulate responses to the questions posed by the youth in a most non-compromising, non-apologetic, and yet, easily understandable manner. Again, the Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research is dedicating tremendous effort to develop state of the art resources to offer data-driven khutba talking points about some of these social justice issues, short videos, infographics and even a journal with detailed articles. Imams, youth directors, and other masjid leaders will benefit from using these resources as starting points to hold various programs and activities to engage the youth at their level, in their language.

8. Establishing Safe Spaces to Process Experiences of Personal trauma

There is emerging evidence that the onset and persistence of personal trauma in the lives of Muslim youth impact their religious persistence all the way from expressions of doubt to abandonment of Islam altogether. The youth expression of doubts could range from being in some aspects of Islamic teachings, to disdain for those in religious authority due either to the role of such individuals in abuse of some type or developing outright hatred for the religion because they mistakenly blame Islamic teachings or Allah as allowing the trauma to occur. Where are these youths expected to process such experiences of personal trauma? Professional counseling is the obviously the immediate and first step. However, when the personal trauma leads to a faith crisis, counseling alone may not be enough. Imams and masjid leadership can play an integral role in facilitating the establishment of safe spaces to process these faith crises which develop as a result of personal trauma.

First, Imams can benefit from receiving training to serve as first responders. The youth undergoing a faith crisis may not even realize or want to accept that they need professional counseling. They may seek out Imams, youth directors and other masjid leaders to vent or to express their outrage at what they believe to be Islamic teachings or Allah letting them down. As noted earlier, this outrage could be triggered by the sudden death of a loved one or by being the victim of or aware of the victimization of a loved one through some type of abuse by a religious authority. Obviously, if the perpetrator of abuse is the Imam or a member of the masjid leadership, there must be a recourse for the victim to air their grievances as well as for protection against any retaliation from the alleged perpetrator(s). Notwithstanding the circumstances just mentioned, if the Imam can respond, it would be so much better if he had already been trained in the basics of mental health. Thankfully, training is more accessible now due to the work of organizations such as the American Muslim Health Professionals (AMHP). The organization offers a "Mental Health First Aid Certification Program" which would be invaluable to Imams and masjid leadership in their roles as first responders. Another amazing resource that provides a combination of Islamic knowledge and professional counseling is the Khalil Center (<https://khalilcenter.com/>) which provides training for Imams and masjid leadership, and in-person counseling and web-therapy through offices in several metropolitan areas in the United States.

Second, as mentioned earlier, messaging is critically important, and the Imams play a central role in promoting the acknowledgement of and seeking professional assistance for mental health conditions. Saritoprak and Exline (2020) point out the stigma that is often associated with Muslims seeking mental health treatment. The Imam can utilize a strengths approach and help the congregation distinguish between considering medical and mental health conditions as a type of test from Allah, but which must be treated professionally and these same conditions being the result of weak *iman* or faith. That distinction is paramount. Too often, serious mental health challenges are denied as existing or miscategorized as being a result of weak faith and no actual treatment is ever sought. Youth especially suffer in silence because they associate the onset of depression, intense grief, and potentially even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) resulting from experiences of child molestation or sexual abuse, because of their weak faith. As Chouhoud (2018) noted, without access to trained first responders to process doubts about their faith, some of the youth experiencing personal trauma could be at risk of abandoning Islam or indeed inclining towards atheism. Fortunately, the Family and Youth Institute (<https://www.thefyi.org/toolkits/>) toolkits which can help Imams, youth directors and masjid leadership broadly to serve more effectively as first responders in cases of youth presenting with issues such as bullying, grief, suicide, religious/spiritual abuse, and tragic events. While the toolkits are not a substitution for referrals to professional counselors, the content is evidence-based and sensitive to Islamic culture and tradition. In addition, Imams can also

be trained to understand better the roots of various forms of abuse that occur within the family such as verbal, neglect, physical and sexual. Such training will also help shift the messaging from casting such abuse as Islamically sanctioned, Divine Decree or worse, a test of the victim by Allah. There is so much potential for a crisis of faith when children are witnesses to abuse within the family. The Peaceful Families Project (www.peacefulfamilies.org) provides Imam training programs that provide a safe space for Imams and masjid leaders to come to terms with their own knowledge about how best to support victims of such abuse.

Final Thoughts

Religious persistence among Muslim youth is very achievable and Imams and masjid leadership can play a tremendous role in helping youth learn about, appreciate and practice Islam in their daily lives. This paper provided the context to demonstrate why it is so important to explore the topic of religious persistence among Muslim youth. After presenting definitions of terms most commonly used in the research and literature on the topic, selected research was presented to share broad themes that are emerging. Lastly, the paper presents recommendations to Imams and masjid leadership on how best to support youth experiencing religious persistence struggles. It is hoped that the paper is of benefit in improving not only our understanding of the social and emotional factors that lead youth to decline in their religious persistence but offering concrete recommendations to help the youth be strong in their faith and avoid either abandoning Islam or worse, inclining towards atheism.

References

- Ahmed, S. Patel, S. & Hashem, H. (2015). *State of American Muslim Youth: Research & Recommendations*. Washington, DC: Institute for Social Policy and Understanding.
- Ali, W., Clifton, E., Duss, M., Fang, L., Keyes, S., & Shakir, F. (2011). *Fear, Inc. The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America*. Washington DC: Center for American Progress. URL: <http://www.americanprogress.org>, (2011/08).
- Bengtson, V. L., Hayward, R. D., Zuckerman, P., & Silverstein, M. (2018). Bringing up Nones: Intergenerational influences and cohort trends. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 57(2), 258–275. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12511>
- Chouhoud, Y. (2018). What causes Muslims to doubt Islam? A quantitative analysis. Retrieved from the Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research website: <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/youssef-chouhoud/what-causes-muslims-to-doubt-islam-a-quantitative-analysis/#.XhtURJNKjIU>
- Chouhoud, Y. (2016). Modern pathways to doubt in Islam. Retrieved from the Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research website: <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/youssef-chouhoud/modern-pathways-to-doubt-in-islam/#.XhkI1ZNKjIU>
- Duss, M., Taeb, Y., Gude, K., & Sofer, K. (2015). *Fear, Inc. 2.0: The Islamophobia Network's Efforts to Manufacture Hate in America*. Washington DC: Center for American Progress. URL: <http://www.americanprogress.org>, (2015/02).
- Haddad, Y. Y., & Smith, J. I. (Eds.). (1994). *Muslim Communities in North America*. New York: SUNY Press.

- Haddad, Y. Y., & Lummis, A. T. (1987). *Islamic values in the United States: A comparative study*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Huuskes, L. M., Heaven, P. C. L., Ciarrochi, J., Parker, P., & Caltabiano, N. (2016). Is belief in God related to differences in adolescents' psychological functioning? *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 55(1), 40–53. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12249>
- Madge, N., & Hemming, P. J. (2017). Young British religious 'nones': Findings from the youth on religion study. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(7), 872–888. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2016.1273518>
- Mohamed, B. & Sciupac, P. E. (2018). The share of Americans who leave Islam is offset by those who become Muslim. Retrieved from the Pew Research Center website: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/26/the-share-of-americans-who-leave-islam-is-offset-by-those-who-become-muslim/>
- Nyang, S. S. (1999). *Islam in the United States of America*. Chicago, IL: Kazi Publications
- Pew Research Center (2015). *America's changing religious landscape*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewforum.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2015/05/RLS-08-26-full-report.pdf>
- Saritoprak, S. N., & Exline, J. J. (2020). Religious Coping Among Muslims With Mental and Medical Health Concerns. In A. Bagasra & M. Mackinem (Eds). *Working with Muslim Clients in the Helping Professions* (pp. 201-220). Hershey, PA: IGI Global.

- Smith, C., & Denton, M. L. (2005). *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stolz, J., Könnemann, J., Purdie, M. S., Englberger, T., & Krüggeler, M. (2016). (Un) believing in modern society: religion, spirituality, and religious-secular competition. New York: Routledge.
- Thiessen, L. (2017). Not an Atheist by Choice. *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 33, 191-199.
- Zupez, J. (2018). Open wide your hearts, beginning with the mass: Looking into the future of the Catholic Eucharistic Celebration. *Way*, 57(1), 85–99. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=132996275&site=ehost-live>