



# Cosmic Cop or Loving Lord? The Influence of Parenting on Our View of God, Submission, and Contentment

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## Introduction

One of the most foundational Islamic beliefs is the acknowledgment of Allah’s sovereignty. Sovereignty refers to Allah’s absolute ownership, power, and supreme authority over the universe. Allah refers to Himself as ‘the Owner of Sovereignty’<sup>1</sup> (*Mālik al-mulk*), and *Sūrat al-Mulk* begins with the proclamation, “Blessed is He in whose hand is all sovereignty.”<sup>2</sup>

“Indeed, your Lord is Allah, who created the heavens and earth in six days and then established Himself above the throne. He covers the night with the day, which is in haste to follow it; and the sun, the moon, and the stars are subservient to His command. **Unquestionably, to Him belongs the creation and the command;** blessed is Allah, Lord of the worlds.”<sup>3</sup>

As the absolutely sovereign, Allah creates what He wills and commands as He desires. Thus, His sovereignty includes universal decrees (*awāmir kawniyya*) and legal commands (*awāmir shar‘iyya*). Universal decrees refer to Allah simply saying “Be” to bring something into existence, whether an object or an event. We generally have no choice regarding the occurrence of His universal decrees. Allah’s legal commands, meanwhile, inform us of what to engage in and what to refrain from. We have been given the volition to obey or disobey these legal commands. Allah’s sovereignty to create and command is not intellectually difficult for people to understand, but it can be psychospiritually difficult for them to accept. Just as people object to trying turns in life, from the loss of a job to a decline in health, so too do people sometimes object to God’s legal commands—such as inheritance laws or the prohibition of interest—and refuse to follow them unless they understand their underlying wisdom.

Why do some people accept Allah’s sovereignty intellectually, but not spiritually? Why do they struggle to surrender to His decrees and commands? This spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Qur’an, 3:26.

<sup>2</sup> Qur’an, 67:1.

<sup>3</sup> Qur’an, 7:54.

struggle, which we refer to as submission reluctance, manifests in such responses to hardship as “Why did God do this to me? I don’t deserve this,” or, “Why did God allow that evil thing to happen?”<sup>4</sup> Although asking ‘why’ out of a desire to better appreciate the situation is understandable; what we are referring to here are questions rooted in anger or resentment. The angels asked Allah why He would create humanity, but they asked out of curiosity, not hostility.

We believe that at the core of submission reluctance is a distortion in people’s perceptions of Allah. A distorted image of God fosters misunderstandings of the intent behind His commands and decrees, and subsequently rebellion. In this paper, our aim is to unpack how divergent understandings of God develop and, in turn, impact our worship, surrender to Him, and religious doubts.

## ***Taslīm* and submission reluctance**

The concept of submission (*taslīm*) is tied to our image of God and recognition of His sovereignty. Submission is not only the heart of Islam, it is the way of the entire universe. Allah informs us that every creation in the universe submits to Him, “So is it other than the religion of Allah they desire, while to Him have submitted [all] those within the heavens and earth, willingly or by compulsion, and to Him they will be returned?”<sup>5</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim explicitly ties trust in God to our image of Him, as he states, “The key to trust (*tawakkul*) is having good assumptions of Allah. A person’s trust in God is commensurate with their good assumptions of Him and hope in Him.”<sup>6</sup> The person who trusts God is able to submit to His will, and true submission implies complete acceptance of His legal commands and universal decrees.<sup>7</sup> The Prophet ﷺ demonstrated how acceptance of universal decrees is tied to our faith when he said, “Everything has a reality, and

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<sup>4</sup> See Sh. Mohammad Elshinawy’s paper for more on this question. Elshinawy, Mohammad, “Why Do People Suffer? God’s Existence & the Problem of Evil,” *Yaqaen*, July 2, 2018, updated February 14, 2021, <https://yaqaeninstitute.org/read/paper/why-do-people-suffer-gods-existence-the-problem-of-evil>.

<sup>5</sup> Qur’an 3:83.

<sup>6</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya, “faṣl fī manzilat al-tawakkul,” in *Madārij al-sālikīn bayn manāzil īyyāka na‘budu wa īyyāka nasta‘īn* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2018), 397-415.

<sup>7</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya, “faṣl fī manzilat al-taslīm,” in *Madārij*, 421-424.

the servant will not reach the reality of faith until he knows that what afflicted him could never miss him, and that what missed him could never have afflicted him.”<sup>8</sup>

The Qur’an elaborated on the connection between submission to commands and faith when Allah said, “But no, by your Lord, they will not [truly] believe until they make you, [O Muhammad], judge concerning that over which they dispute among themselves. Then, they will not find within themselves any discomfort from what you have judged and they will submit in complete submission.”<sup>9</sup> This verse delineates the elements of submission that comprise complete faith, including (1) seeking out Islamic guidance on any disputed or unknown matter, (2) finding no discomfort in one’s heart upon learning what Allah has commanded, and accepting the guidance without complaint.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, submission to His universal decrees involves satisfaction, acceptance, and contentment with whatever events Allah has not ordered us to fight against (e.g., injustice), especially those events that we have no power over, such as the tribulations of life that are unavoidable (e.g, losing a loved one, sickness). Ibn al-Qayyim concludes that a state of contentment and satisfaction (*riḍā*) is the fruit of trusting Allah and submitting to Him, all of which is built upon a healthy image of Him.<sup>11</sup>

The fruits of submission are as sweet as the fruits of submission reluctance are bitter. Submission reluctance to both decrees and commands is a major contributing factor to psychospiritual pathologies, including anxiety and depression. Behavioral therapies acknowledge this and have recently included acceptance as a major component in the treatment of mental illness. For example, dialectic behavioral therapy (DBT) includes radical acceptance as an essential skill to enhance distress tolerance, stating “Acceptance and surrender is the only way out of Hell in this life.”<sup>12</sup> (We would add that surrender is also essential to escaping Hell in the afterlife). Acceptance is what differentiates the experience of pain as a

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<sup>8</sup> *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad*, no. 26944.

<sup>9</sup> Qur’an, 4:65.

<sup>10</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Madārij*, 421-424.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Marsha Linehan, *DBT Skills Training Manual* (New York: Guilford Publications, 2015).

path to growth (i.e., post-pain growth) rather than a path to suffering due to objection (i.e., post-pain withering or stagnation).

Although it may not be difficult for people to intellectually appreciate the necessity of acceptance of God's decrees and commands, it is easier said than done. People may experience submission reluctance when they don't understand the intent behind God's decrees or if they fundamentally misunderstand who God is.

## Cosmic cop God image

People will struggle to love God, submit to His commands, and surrender to His decree if they internalize a distorted image of Him. Based on our empirical research and counseling sessions with community members, we find evidence that distortions in specific attributes of Allah lead to specific pathologies. For example, a perception of God as unforgiving is associated with elevated levels of anxiety and depression.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, this conception of God as cosmic cop is widespread. The cop-like image of God is often perpetuated in popular culture.<sup>14</sup> God the cosmic cop is cold, distant, and only concerned with strict adherence to His commands. He is a stringent lawmaker and callous enforcer less interested in our success than in our minute infractions of divine rules. We hypothesize that this false image of God develops due to an overemphasis on God's role as rule-maker (*al-Hakam*) coupled with neglect of His care, nearness, and love. While not an inherently malignant figure, the cop is more likely to be associated with fear and punishment than love and compassion. Thus, people who develop a cop-like image of God might fearfully wonder what wire they'll trip next, what wrath they will accidentally incur. They are likely to look at religion and scripture as a list of "dos and don'ts," blind to the majesty of God's message and estranged from a deeply intimate relationship with Him. They may perceive God's laws as barriers to a more pleasurable life. Thus, the relationship a person has with God when they

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<sup>13</sup> This finding comes from our analysis and will be published, *inshaAllah*, in a forthcoming paper.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Holmes, "Why Marvel Has Issues With God," Religion Unplugged, July 13, 2022, <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2022/7/13/marvel-has-issues-with-god>.

perceive Him primarily as a “cop” may be one of distance, resentment, objection, and excessive fear.

## The active ingredient of worship: Love of God

The human being was created to worship Allah.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, many people question why Allah asks us to worship Him.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, this question often results from confusing the concept of “worship” with ritual obedience. However, worship cannot be confined to ritual. It was beautifully defined by Ibn Taymiyya as the ultimate fusion of love and humble submission to Allah.<sup>17</sup> He states that a loving relationship with Allah cannot occur without properly understanding Him and cultivating appropriate feelings for Him. Ibn al-Qayyim, his illustrious student, further elaborates that complete servitude (*‘ubūdiyya*) is a byproduct of complete love, and complete love is a byproduct of the beloved’s perceived perfection.<sup>18</sup> **He added that love makes servitude delightful, lightens the weight of afflictions, and frees the mind from the enslavement of ruminating thoughts.**<sup>19</sup> Thus, perceiving God’s perfection facilitates loving Him, and loving Him facilitates our voluntary submission to His universal and legal commands.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ reinforced the notion that love and its opposite, hatred, are the elements necessary not only for making submission easier, but also for making it delightful and sweet. He ﷺ said, “Whoever has three within himself will find the sweetness of faith: one who loves Allah and His Messenger more than anything else, one who loves a servant only for the sake of Allah, and one who hates to turn back to disbelief after Allah has saved him, just as he hates

<sup>15</sup> Qur’an, 51:56.

<sup>16</sup> Mohammad Elshinawy, “Why Does God Ask People to Worship Him?,” *Yaqeen*, December 26, 2017, updated: October 21, 2020, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/why-does-god-ask-people-to-worship-him>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn Taymiyya, *Al-‘Ubūdiyyah: Being a True Slave of Allah* (London: Ta-Ha, 1999); Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Maḥabbat Allāh ‘azz wa jall* (Beirut: Dār al-Yamāma, 2007); Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu’ al-fatāwa*, <https://shamela.ws/book/7289/4733>.

<sup>18</sup> Muḥammad Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Miftāḥ dār al-sa‘ādah wa manshūr wilāyat al-‘ilm wa al-irādah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2002), 2:88–89.

<sup>19</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Madārij al-sālikīn bayn manāzil ḥayyāka na ‘budu wa ḥayyāka nasta ‘in* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2018).

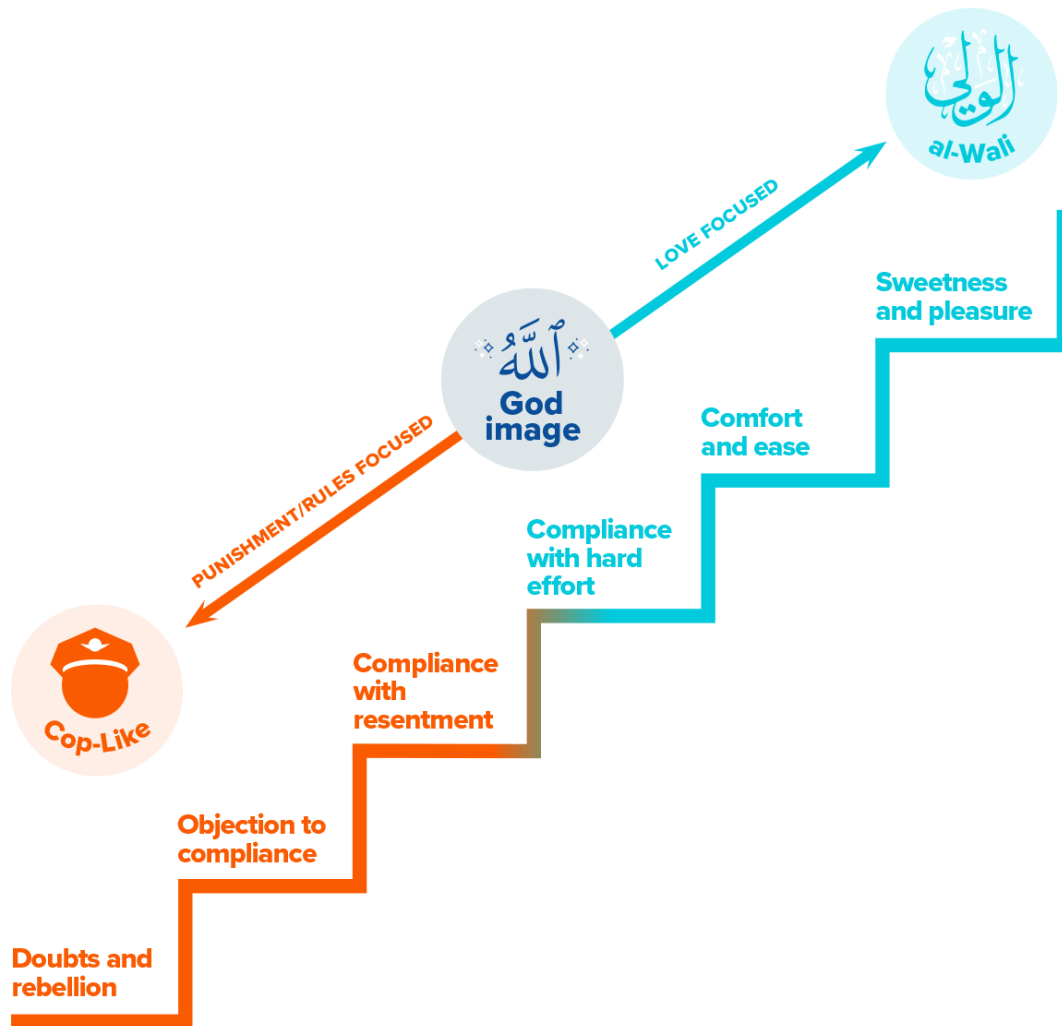
to be thrown into the fire.”<sup>20</sup> As Sheikh Mohammad Elshinawy beautifully said, “*Ibāda* (worship) represents a declaration of love for God, for ‘worshiping’ God without loving Him first is not *‘ibāda*, and the more one ascends the staircase of love, the more comfortable they become in the gardens of servitude.”<sup>21</sup> One may imagine submission as a staircase (see Figure 1), whereby each step leads to a deeper manifestation of *‘ibāda*. The first steps include compliance with the obligatory and recommended behaviors, followed by finding these behaviors easier and less burdensome, and culminating in the experience of sweetness and joy in worship.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 16; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 43.

<sup>21</sup> Elshinawy, “Why Does God Ask People to Worship Him?”

FIGURE 1:  
**The Staircase of Submission**



We can illustrate how love makes obligations easier and enjoyable through the relationship between a mother and her child. Despite a mother having many obligations towards her child, such as waking up at night, feeding, changing, bathing, and so much more over time, a mother who loves her child deeply will be able to handle these obligations much easier than a mother who does not, and even with a sense of satisfaction. Even though she may be tired and exhausted, she sees her child as an immense blessing and her love fuels her commitment to meeting the

child's demands. It is only because of her intense love that the demands of motherhood are not only bearable but sometimes delightful. However, a mother might struggle much more to fulfill these same demands for someone else's child. Thus, we can see that love is the difference between satisfaction and frustration in carrying out and accepting divine decrees and commands.

## The Loving Caretaker God image

There exists an alternative to the cosmic cop God image, captured by Allah's name *al-Walī* (The Loving Caretaker). This name encompasses many other Divine names and attributes, including *al-Qarīb* (The Intimately Close), *al-Wadūd* (The Loving), *al-Raḥīm* (The Compassionate), *al-Wakīl* (The Trustworthy), and *al-Mu'īn* (The Supporting and Helpful). Thus, the attributes of Allah subsumed under *al-Walī* combine acknowledgment of His sovereignty with His love, care, support, and the wisdom in what He decrees and commands. *Al-Walī* sets regulations out of His care and love for us, and imposes rules that facilitate human flourishing. Additionally, He provides help to those trying to obey Him and is Patient and Forgiving with mistakes. ***Al-Walī* is the Intimately Close who supports you and the Beloved who cares for and protects you.** Allah refers to Himself as the *Walī* of the believers multiple times in the Qur'an.<sup>22</sup>

The Loving Caretaker (*al-Walī*) image of Allah facilitates trust in Him, as one realizes that Allah only advises and commands us towards beneficial behaviors. Thus, people who develop an image of God as The Loving Caretaker (*al-Walī*) will not look at Islam as merely a list of "dos and don'ts." Rather, they will enthusiastically seek out His guidance because they know the secret to happiness is found in following His commands and accepting His decree. Thus, their relationship with God is one of nearness, trust, submission, and love. Furthermore, they understand that although His legal and universal decrees are ultimately rooted in care for the believers, He is Absolutely Powerful and can hold people accountable. Thus, they possess a reverence for His attributes of strength and

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<sup>22</sup> Qur'an, 2:257; 4:45; 42:38.

might, along with the understanding that He loves and supports the believers throughout the journey of life. “That is because Allah is the protector of those who have believed and because the disbelievers have no protector.”<sup>23</sup>

## The loving wisdom behind Divine commands

In a profound *ḥadīth qudsī*, Allah explains the connection between His commands and His love. The Prophet ﷺ narrates that Allah said, “Whosoever shows enmity to a *walī* (intimate friend) of Mine, then I have declared war against him. My servant does not draw closer to Me with anything more beloved to Me than the religious obligations I have enjoined upon him. My servant then continues to draw nearer to Me with supererogatory actions until I love him. When I love him, I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes and his foot with which he walks. Were he to ask [something] of Me, I would surely give it to him, and were he to ask Me for refuge, I would surely grant it to him...”<sup>24</sup>

This *ḥadīth qudsī* establishes that Allah commands us to perform the behaviors that bring us nearest to Him to maximize the love between the Creator and His creation. In other words, Allah desires proximity with His creation, and He helps us achieve this proximity. As our Creator, He knows what actions enhance our emotional bond with Him and it is those very actions that He makes obligatory. Once a reciprocal loving bond is established, we see the world as God wants us to see it, we hear as God wants us to hear, and even our limbs move as God wants them to move. Thus, the fruits of true worship free us from estrangement from our Creator to intimacy with Him.

Reflecting on this *ḥadīth* from another perspective, Ibn ‘Aṭā’illāh commented that Allah knew that people, when left to their own devices, would not seriously seek the path of Divine love and intimacy (*wilāya*). Therefore, He made the actions that lead to Divine love and intimacy obligatory upon them, which ultimately leads

<sup>23</sup> Qur’an, 47:11.

<sup>24</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6502.

them to paradise. Thus, by imposing these obligations upon us, He is in reality making entrance to paradise an obligation!”<sup>25</sup>

In another profound reflection, Ibn Taymiyya said, “I long contemplated what the most beneficial supplication might be and came to the conclusion that it is to ask for divine aid in fulfilling our obligation to worship Him. Then, I came to the realization that it was already in *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* when Allah said, ‘And You alone we worship and You alone we ask for support.’”<sup>26</sup> Thus, whether we realize it or not, out of His profound love, Allah made the most important thing to pray for an obligation on us at least seventeen times a day! To illustrate this concept, imagine if a loving father told his children that he would grant them whatever they wished for. A young child might ask for the greatest toy or the biggest home, whereas a wiser child may realize that they don’t actually know the best thing to ask for. After contemplating the matter further, the wise child says, “Dad, I am just a kid and don’t really know the best thing to ask for. However, I do know that you love and care for me deeply and are always looking out for my best interest. Therefore, the best thing I can ask for is your help in doing the things that you know are best for me, even when I don’t fully understand why.”

The image of Allah as *al-Walī* necessitates that His legal commands and universal decrees are rooted in our best interests, even when we may find them difficult to follow or hard to understand. Allah tells us in *Sūrat al-Baqarah*, “Fighting has been ordained for you although it is disliked to you; and it may be that you dislike a thing which is good for you and that you like a thing which is bad for you. And Allah Knows, while you know not.”<sup>27</sup> To understand Allah as our *al-Walī* is to understand that He aids us in accordance with the infinitely wise perspective of the Divine and not from the limited perception of the human. Therefore, the presence of Allah’s care is not synonymous with the fulfillment of our wants. Indeed, His aid and care will often manifest in worldly pain and loss. For example, the People of the Ditch mentioned in *Sūrat al-Burūj* were all killed by a tyrant ruler despite

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<sup>25</sup> Ibn ‘Aṭa’illah, *The Book of Aphorisms* (Malaysia: Islamic Book Trust, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Madārij al-sālikīn*.

<sup>27</sup> Qur’an, 2:216.

their unshakeable belief in Allah. Although people might see this as a great loss rather than success, Allah declared their martyrdom and entrance to Paradise as the great victory.<sup>28</sup> **Thus, His aid and support is not understood as making us outwardly victorious over our enemies, but rather making no enemy able to overpower our will to worship Allah.** It has been beautifully said that sailing with Allah does not mean that we don't encounter any waves, but that we sail in a ship that no wave can sink.



## Developing a God image

Despite Allah repeatedly telling us in the Qur'an that He is our *Walī*, people sometimes fail to internalize His love, nearness, care, and support for us. Sadly, many people internalize the opposite God image of a distant cop-like deity who does not help us. How do people develop such differing God images?

Throughout our lives, we develop a perception of God based on information we are explicitly taught and through our own experiences. Simply telling someone that Allah is loving is not enough to internalize a proper God image. Rather, they have to actually experience love, care, and support through human relationships to best attribute such experiences to Allah. This is what we refer to in our [prior paper](#) as an affective experiential perception of Allah, which is influenced by our relationship with our parents and others. Parent-child interactions in childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood collectively influence the development of our God image. We

<sup>28</sup> Qur'an, 85:11; see the following link for details of the story, accessed 30 May 2023, <https://en.islamway.net/article/20357/the-people-of-the-ditch-soorat-al-burooj>

have previously written about parental attachments as foundational in shaping our relationship with Allah. We want to build on our prior work by focusing on specific methods of parenting that we believe are related to how children grow up to perceive God as either a loving Creator to run towards or as a punishing power to flee from. Ultimately, a believer must internalize both hope for His forgiveness and fear of His punishment. Therefore, a healthy God image leads the believer to run towards God out of both love and fear—as the Prophet ﷺ said, “There is no refuge nor escape from You except to You.”<sup>29</sup> However, the person with a healthy God image of Allah recognizes the divine balance of attributes, as Allah said, “Indeed, My mercy prevails over My wrath.”<sup>30</sup>

## Parenting styles

Every parent develops an approach to raising their children based on their beliefs and life experiences. This approach to parenting is referred to as a parenting style. A parenting style can be defined as a constellation of attitudes that are communicated to the child that, taken together, create an emotional climate in which the parent’s behaviors are expressed.<sup>31</sup> Research on parenting has identified two central dimensions that constitute a parenting style: the (1) responsiveness and (2) demandingness of a parent towards their child.<sup>32</sup> Responsiveness refers to the degree to which parents foster self-confidence and independence by being supportive, accepting, and attuned to their children’s needs and preferences. Responsiveness includes showing warmth, being appropriately supportive of their autonomy, and engaging in reasoned bi-directional communication when appropriate.<sup>33</sup> Demandingness refers to the claims parents make on the child to become integrated into the family and society by their expectations, supervision, disciplinary efforts and willingness to confront the child who disobeys.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 247; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2710.

<sup>30</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 3194; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2751.

<sup>31</sup> Nancy Darling and Laurence Steinberg, “Parenting Style as Context: An Integrative Model,” *Psychological Bulletin* 113, no. 3 (1993): 487.

<sup>32</sup> Diana Baumrind, “Current Patterns of Parental Authority,” *Developmental Psychology* 4, no. 1p2 (1971): 1.

<sup>33</sup> Diana Baumrind, Diana. “Patterns of Parental Authority and Adolescent Autonomy,” *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, no. 108 (2005): 61–69.

<sup>34</sup> Darling and Steinberg, “Parenting Style as Context,” 487.

Demandingness includes parental monitoring, rules, consequences, and methods of controlling the child's behavior. To summarize, responsiveness refers to the dimension of parenting concerned with recognizing the child's sense of self and independence, whereas demandingness is concerned with the willingness to act as a socializing agent.<sup>35</sup>

Based on the two dimensions of responsiveness and demandingness, researchers have identified four common styles of parenting.<sup>36</sup> If we place responsiveness on the vertical axis and demandingness on the horizontal axis, we can visualize (see Figure 2) four parenting styles:

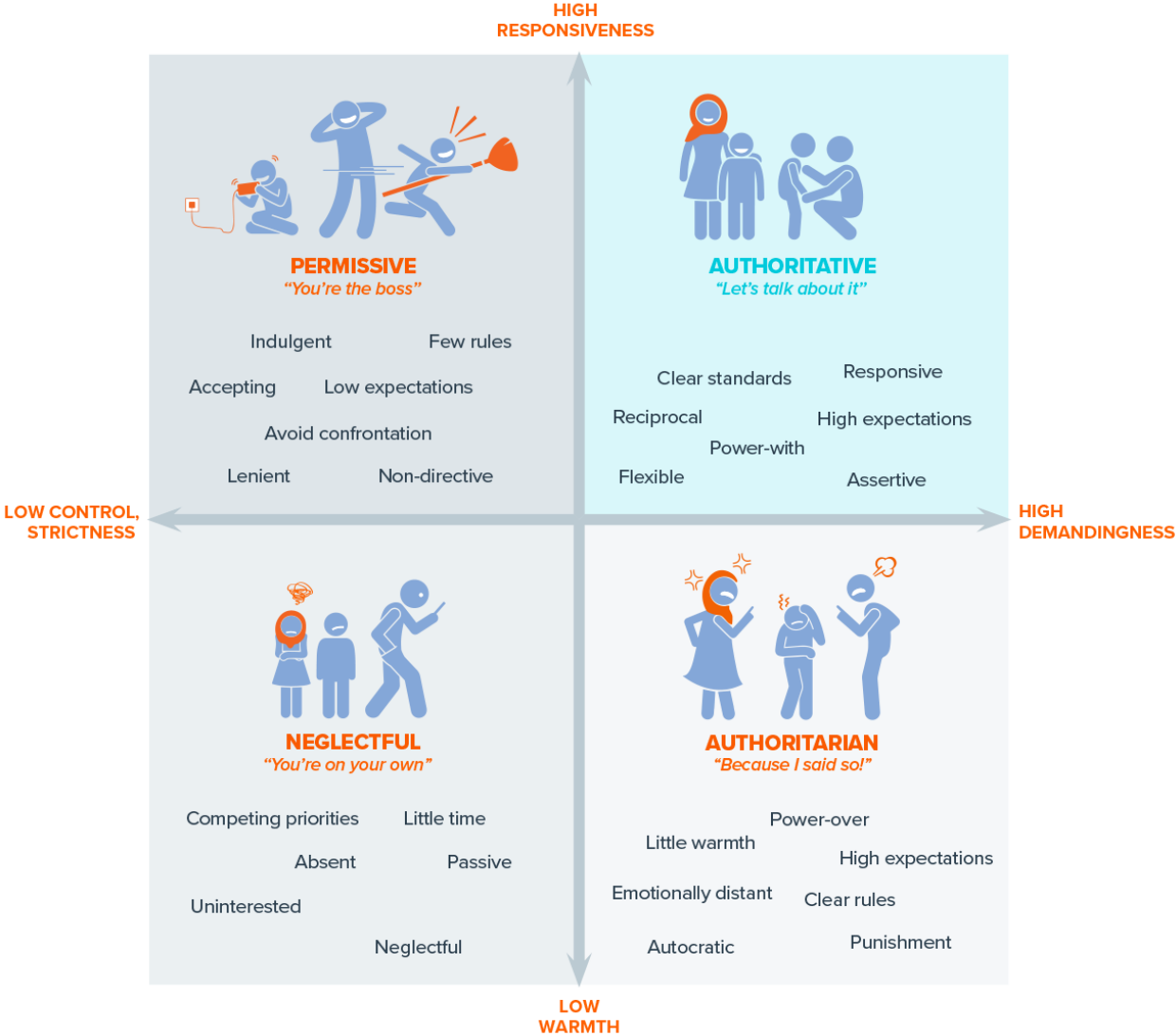
- (1) Authoritative parenting (top right)
- (2) Authoritarian parenting (bottom right)
- (3) Permissive parenting (top left)
- (4) Neglectful parenting (bottom left)

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<sup>35</sup> Darling and Steinberg, "Parenting Style as Context," 487.

<sup>36</sup> Eleanor E. Maccoby and John A. Martin, "Socialization in the Context of the Family: Parent-Child Interaction," *Handbook of Child Psychology*, formerly *Carmichael's Manual of Child Psychology* ed. Paul H. Mussen, 1983. We acknowledge that much of this research has been developed in Western individualistic cultures and that there are newer parenting styles that are emerging in various cultures. However, we found the four styles to be a helpful heuristic for the purposes of this paper.

FIGURE 2:  
**Overview of Parenting Styles**



A neglectful parenting style is low in responsiveness and low in demandingness. This parenting style reflects a general lack of warmth, supportiveness, and attempts to regulate or control a child’s behavior. Neglectful parents do not make time for their children and are generally disinterested in their children’s lives. Neglectful parenting is related to many maladaptive outcomes in children’s lives.

A permissive parenting style is high in responsiveness and low in demandingness. This parenting style reflects a high level of warmth and supportiveness, but does not include parental expectations of particular behavior or proper conduct. Permissive parents often desire to be their child's best friend and want their child to see them as cool. Permissive parenting is also related to many maladaptive behaviors in children and adolescents.

An authoritarian parenting style is low in responsiveness and high in demandingness. This parenting style reflects low levels of emotional support and autonomy, but high levels of control. Authoritarian parents typically demand that their children obey them without reasoned explanation and attempt to control their children's behavior by resorting to punishment and psychological manipulation of their children's emotions (e.g., withholding affection to punish the child).

An authoritative parenting style is high in responsiveness and high in demandingness. This parenting style reflects high levels of emotional support and autonomy accompanied by high expectations. Authoritative parents typically show plenty of love and create an emotional climate where kids can express their thoughts and concerns about parental expectations. Authoritative parents engage in reasoned explanation when appropriate and attempt to regulate their children's behavior by setting clear behavioral guidelines.

Baumrind, describing the authoritative parent, says, "She encourages verbal give and take, and shares with the child the reasoning behind her policy. She values both expressive and instrumental attributes, both autonomous self-will and disciplined conformity. Therefore, she exerts firm control at points of parent-child divergence, but does not hem the child in with restrictions. She recognizes her own special rights as an adult, but also the child's individual interests and special ways. The authoritative parent affirms the child's present qualities, but also sets standards for future conduct. She uses reason as well as power to achieve her objectives. She does not base her decisions on group consensus or the individual child's desires; but also does not regard herself as infallible or divinely inspired."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Diana Baumrind, "Authoritarian vs. Authoritative Parental Control," *Adolescence* 3, no. 11 (1968): 255.

Parenting styles play an important role in child development. Children with authoritative parents typically have the most favorable academic and psychological outcomes, such as positive self-esteem, self-reliance, and high academic achievement. Children with neglectful parents have the least favorable developmental outcomes, such as low self-esteem, poor self-regulation, poor mental health, and poor academic performance.<sup>38</sup> Children of permissive households don't do well academically and engage in maladaptive behaviors, such as drug use, alcohol use, and school misconduct. They have also been found to be more dependent on others, irresponsible, and selfish.<sup>39</sup> Finally, children of authoritarian households generally do well academically, follow the rules, and are obedient to adults. However, their conformity and obedience appear to have come at a heavy price to their sense of self. They lack self-confidence and have higher rates of depression than their peers from authoritative homes.<sup>40</sup> Through being “overpowered into obedience” they appear to have lost the ability to see themselves as autonomous and efficacious young people.<sup>41</sup>

Although the aforementioned outcomes are important, our fundamental concern as believers is to raise children who worship Allah and have a strong attachment to Him and His religion. Research on non-Muslim samples suggests that parents' God image influences their parenting and their children's God image. Parents with a loving God image are more likely to raise children who perceive God as loving, whereas parents who imagine God as distant are more likely to have children who

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<sup>38</sup> Sofie Kuppens and Eva Ceulemans, “Parenting Styles: A Closer Look at a Well-Known Concept,” *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 28 (2019): 168–181; Laurence Steinberg, Nancy E. Darling, and Anne C.

Fletcher, “Authoritative Parenting and Adolescent Adjustment: An Ecological Journey,” 1995; Laurence Steinberg, Susie D. Lamborn, Nancy Darling, Nina S. Mounts, and Sanford M. Dornbusch, “Over-Time Changes in Adjustment and Competence among Adolescents from Authoritative, Authoritarian, Indulgent, and Neglectful Families,” *Child Development* 65, no. 3 (1994): 754–770.

<sup>39</sup> Marwan Dwairy and Kariman E. Menshar, “Parenting Style, Individuation, and Mental Health of Egyptian Adolescents,” *Journal of Adolescence* 29, no. 1 (2006): 103–117.

<sup>40</sup> Adrian Furnham and Helen Cheng, “Perceived Parental Behaviour, Self-Esteem and Happiness,” *Social Psychiatry & Psychiatric Epidemiology* 35, no. 10 (2000); Keith A. King, Rebecca A. Vidourek, and Ashley L. Merianos, “Authoritarian Parenting and Youth Depression: Results from a National Study,” *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community* 44, no. 2 (2016): 130–139.

<sup>41</sup> Susie D. Lamborn, Nina S. Mounts, Laurence Steinberg, and Sanford M. Dornbusch, “Patterns of Competence and Adjustment among Adolescents from Authoritative, Authoritarian, Indulgent, and Neglectful Families,” *Child Development* 62, no. 5 (1991): 1049–1065.

think the same of God.<sup>42</sup> In a comprehensive study of five- and six-year-olds, mothers who imagined God as distant and strict resorted to stricter parenting and reported less affection, acceptance, and playful interactions with their children, which in turn predicted children's images of a punishing God. Mothers who imagined God as loving gave their children more autonomy, and had children who also imagined God as loving.<sup>43</sup> In this study, we examined how parenting styles amongst Muslim parents predicts children's God image, submission to God, and religious doubt.

## Parental socialization

The goal of parenting is to instill the proper beliefs, values, and behaviors in the hearts of our children so that they ultimately internalize these beliefs and behaviors as their own. We are not successful as parents if our children only do what they are requested under the threat of punishment or constant surveillance. Amongst the goals of parents is to socialize their children to conform to the necessary demands of others while maintaining a sense of personal integrity.<sup>44</sup> From a religious perspective, the demands of others include adherence to the demands of Allah first, followed by [reasonable] demands of parents.<sup>45</sup> How do parents get their children to conform to religious and parental demands? Permissive and neglectful parents are not very interested in compliance and obedience, so they generally ignore the child's lack of adherence to commands or they make excuses for the child and

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<sup>42</sup> Bradley R. Hertel and Michael J. Donahue, "Parental Influences on God Images among Children: Testing Durkheim's Metaphoric Parallelism," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1995): 186–199; De Roos, Iedema, and Miedema, "Young Children's Descriptions of God"; Pehr Granqvist, Tord Ivarsson, Anders G. Broberg, and Berit Hagekull, "Examining Relations among Attachment, Religiosity, and New Age Spirituality Using the Adult Attachment Interview," *Developmental Psychology* 43, no. 3 (2007): 590; Pehr Granqvist and Lee A. Kirkpatrick, "Religion, Spirituality, and Attachment," in *APA Handbook for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (Vol 1): *Context, Theory, and Research*, ed. K. Pargament (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2013), 129–55; Rosalinda Cassibba, Pehr Granqvist, Alessandro Costantini, and Sergio Gatto, "Attachment and God Representations among Lay Catholics, Priests, and Religious: A Matched Comparison Study Based on the Adult Attachment Interview," *Developmental Psychology* 44, no. 6 (2008): 1753.

<sup>43</sup> Simone A. De Roos, Jurjen Iedema, and Siebren Miedema, "Influence of Maternal Denomination, God Concepts, and Child-Rearing Practices on Young Children's God Concepts," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 4 (2004): 519–535.

<sup>44</sup> Darling and Steinberg, "Parenting Style as Context," 487.

<sup>45</sup> "The pleasure of the Lord is in the pleasure of the parents, and the displeasure of the Lord is in the displeasure of the parents." *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 1899.

absolve the child of any responsibility to follow rules. On the other hand, both authoritarian and authoritative parents desire adherence to demands. Therefore, for the remainder of this paper, we focus on the two pathways that parents may follow that lead to drastically different results: the authoritarian and authoritative ways of instilling obedience in children.

Authoritarian parents treat the parenting process as unidirectional. They consider themselves the ultimate authority and believe that rules are not meant to be questioned. They do not think about getting their children to buy into their rules, as observable compliance is the main concern. Therefore, the need to motivate them through a loving and supportive environment is not deemed necessary, as they believe that children should be motivated to comply through deference to parental authority. They believe that their love is expressed through their firmness and continuous monitoring of their children's behavior. When children ask for justification for rules or explanations for behavioral demands, authoritarian parents typically believe it is unnecessary to elaborate in any way. Through their harshness, authoritarian parents may unknowingly increase their children's resistance to parental advice, and this resistance might attenuate the otherwise beneficial effects of their involvement.

Authoritative parents, on the other hand, understand that the parenting process is bi-directional and dynamic. Children are not passively waiting to fulfill parental demands, as they have their own desires and thoughts about how to spend their time. The authoritative parent knows that they need to get their growing child to internalize the values and behaviors they are promoting. Therefore, through creating an emotional climate that is warm, supportive, and connected, they more effectively transmit beliefs and behaviors to their child, as the child becomes more open to being socialized in such a loving climate. Authoritativeness increases the effectiveness of parenting by altering the child's receptiveness that, in turn, strengthens the parents' ability to act as socialization agents.<sup>46</sup> For example, if a child has an intimate relationship with the parent, they will be more inclined to make their parents proud by adhering to a behavior known to be important to them.

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<sup>46</sup> *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 1899.

Additionally, authoritative parents sufficiently respond to their children's questions about rules and requirements by explaining why certain rules exist and why certain behaviors are required. When parents sufficiently articulate the intent behind their demands, children are more likely to internalize these rules and behaviors as their own.

## Trusting parental and Divine authority

Research on parenting styles does not provide guidance on how often parents should articulate to their children the purpose behind their demands. Rather than have a long conversation every time a child asks why they must do something, we believe that parents should only **sufficiently respond** to the extent that children learn to trust their judgment. In other words, parents should be judicious in considering under what circumstances they explain their reasoning. We find this to be in line with how Allah communicates His commands to us. Although there are numerous examples where Allah explains to us the wisdom and purpose behind our actions,<sup>47</sup> there are other times He doesn't explain. For example, when Allah informed the angels that He would create humanity on earth, they asked why. Rather than give a response, He simply said, "Indeed, I know that which you do not know."<sup>48</sup> As part of our submission to Allah, there are many ritual aspects that we cannot fully rationalize (*ta'abbudi* actions) and that Allah chose not to explain to us. These ritual obligations, such as the number of units in a particular prayer or the number of stones to throw at the *jamarāt* (stone pillars/walls) in Hajj, require submission regardless of whether we fully appreciate the wisdom behind them or not. Thus, parents should be mindful of not overindulging a child's requests for explanation, as it may well be a part of properly preparing the child to submit to the demands of Allah once a proper God image has been established.

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<sup>47</sup> Allah explains some of the benefits and reasons behind obligations and prohibitions in the Qur'an. For example, prayer (29:45; 20:14), alcohol and gambling (2:219; 5:90–91), and many rules are explained as having particular benefits or harms.

<sup>48</sup> Qur'an, 2:30.

Both authoritarian and authoritative Muslim parents are well-intentioned and hope to raise their children to be righteous and competent human beings. That is why both have high expectations of their children and set demands for their conduct. However, they have different ways of expressing their demandingness and responding to their children's needs. For example, they both want to teach their children that Allah is *al-Hakam*, the Lawgiver. However, they resort to different techniques to communicate God's authority. Authoritarian parents may rely more on extrinsic motivators, such as fear and punishment, as deterrents to disobedience. In contrast, authoritative parents will likely rely more on building intrinsic motivation, encouraging their children by invoking God's pleasure and appreciation of their efforts. Thus, authoritarian parents may unknowingly transmit to their children an image of God as cosmic cop, whereas the authoritative parent may transmit an image of God as loving and protective lawgiver. It may be these differences in parenting that lead to drastic differences in their children's God image, and subsequently their submission to Him and experiences of religious doubt (or lack thereof).

Let us demonstrate with an example. Imagine that a parent expects their teenager to pray *Maghrib* and complete their homework before going out with their friends. The parent wants to teach their children to prioritize tasks. If the teen fails to pray and complete the assigned tasks, the parent can deal with the situation in an authoritarian or authoritative manner. An authoritarian parent might yell at their teen, ridicule them for being irresponsible, shame them for being disobedient, and ultimately prohibit them from further outings with friends. The authoritative parent, meanwhile, may issue the same consequences, but will do so calmly, maybe even taking a moment to explain their reasoning while also permitting their child to respond with their own thoughts on the matter. The authoritative parent may also empathize with the child and explain the importance of prayer and completing our tasks. By clearly expressing their sadness at prohibiting their child from enjoying an outing with friends but insisting on the necessity of following the rules, the authoritative parent maintains a loving emotional climate even while insisting on consequences for negative behaviors.

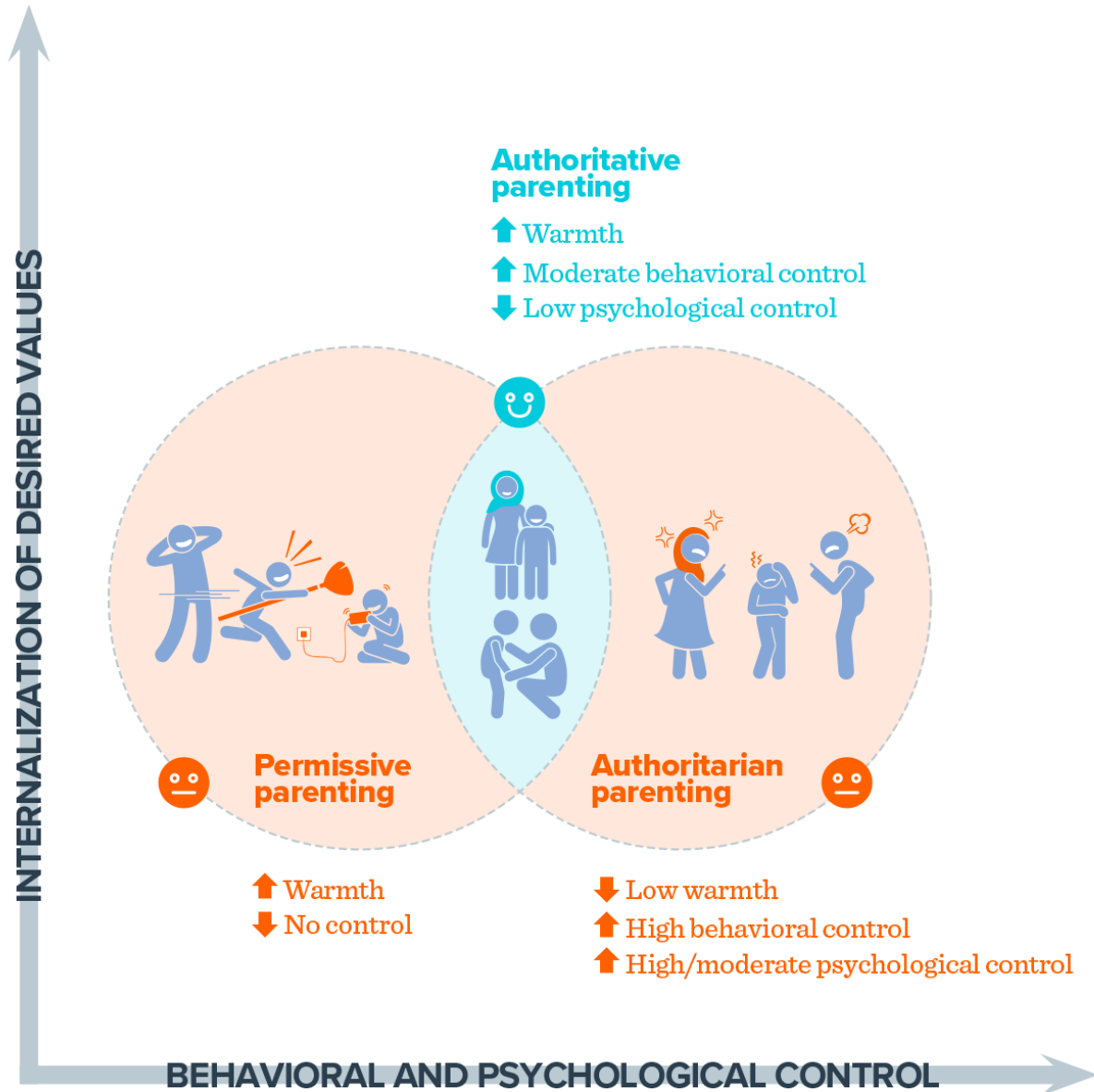
Though the consequences in both situations appear identical, the delivery makes the difference. The authoritarian parent transmits additional psychological pain to the child, encouraging a sense of shame and worthlessness. The authoritative parent transmits the opposite: the child is able to identify that their conduct was wrong but does not internalize a diminished sense of self. Additionally, the child recognizes that the consequences bring their parents no pleasure whatsoever but are nonetheless necessary to maintain accountability. The child thus feels the loving warmth of their parents even when they are losing a source of pleasure.

Thus, there are two primary differences between the authoritarian parent and authoritative parent.<sup>49</sup> First, the authoritarian parent resorts to using psychological tactics, such as shaming or withholding love, as part of their expression of demandingness to control their child's behavior. Second, the authoritarian parent does not cushion their demandingness with a warm and emotionally supportive environment. This tends to create a climate of fear, resentment, and alienation. The child does not interpret parental demands as expressions of love, which may facilitate feelings of resentment towards those demands. We depict the differences in parental control in Figure 3 below.

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<sup>49</sup> No parent is consistently authoritative/authoritarian in every situation. Rather, parenting styles are convenient labels that refer to the relative use of different parenting practices.

FIGURE 3:  
**The Sweet Spot Between  
Too Little & Too Much Control**



## Empirical study

We have presented a theory of parenting that we believe predicts children's God image and later religious outcomes. In order to test this theory, we surveyed 701

Muslims in Canada across various ethnicities and age groups.<sup>50</sup> Approximately 55% of the sample ( $n=384$ ) had children and 45% did not ( $n=317$ ). Parents were asked about their own perceptions of being authoritative or authoritarian, and adolescents and young adults without children were asked about their perceptions of their parents' authoritativeness or authoritarianism.

The primary questions we addressed were the following:

1. Are submission reluctance and religious doubt associated with cop-like and *al-Walī* images of God?
2. Does parental God image predict authoritarian and authoritative parenting styles? Does parenting style, in turn, predict how parents speak to their children about God?
3. Do adolescent and young adult perceptions of authoritarian and authoritative parenting predict their overall God image?
4. Do adolescent and young adult perceptions of authoritarian parenting predict their image of a cop-like God? How do these parenting perceptions and God image, in turn, predict their religious doubts and submission reluctance?
5. Do adolescent and young adult perceptions of authoritative parenting predict their image of God as supportive and caring (*al-Walī*)? How do perceptions of authoritative parenting and God image, in turn, predict their religious doubts and submission reluctance?

## Survey measures and analytic method

We asked a number of questions pertaining to various aspects of God image, authoritarian and authoritative parenting styles and behaviors, religious doubts, and submission reluctance. The list below captures the constructs of interest; measures and a full list of the questions can be found in Appendix A.

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<sup>50</sup> Of the sample, 78% were female and 22% were male. Approximately 8% were aged 12–17, 15% were 18–25, 29% were 26–35, 29% were 36–45, and 19% were 46+ years. The sample was 56% South Asian, 21% Arab, and 10% Black, and 13% were from other racial backgrounds.

- **God image.** Perceptions of God as Forgiving, Caring, Helpful, and cop-like. Caring and Helpful perceptions were combined to create a measure of *al-Walī*.
- **Authoritarian Parenting.** The dimensions of authoritarian parenting included verbal hostility, corporal punishment, punitive strategies, and directiveness (e.g., scolding and criticizing).
- **Authoritative Parenting.** The dimensions of authoritative parenting included warmth, involvement, and reasoning/induction.
- **Parental conditioning of God image.** Frequency of parents invoking God's love or anger to motivate their children.
- **Religious doubt.** The frequency, severity, and distress that religious doubts cause a person.
- **Submission reluctance.** The level of frustration when not understanding God's wisdom, experiencing aversive events, and prayers (i.e., *du'ā'*) not being answered.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to examine the relations among these variables. SEM helps us understand how processes work, as it permits us to test the associations between a series of constructs that we believe are related to each other.

## Results

Before delving into the main results, we share some general findings of interest. Age was correlated with a more benevolent God image ( $r = .31$ ). Mothers self-reported slightly higher levels of authoritative parenting compared to fathers. Youth and young adults also reported that their mothers were more authoritative than their fathers. There were no significant differences between ethnicities in God image or parenting styles. All tables of results are reported in Appendix B.

Our first question was whether God images would be related to submission reluctance and religious doubts. We found that having a cop-like image of God was associated with more submission reluctance ( $r = .49$ ) and religious doubts ( $r = .54$ ).

We also found that imagining Allah as a Loving Caretaker was associated with less submission reluctance ( $r = -.68$ ) and fewer religious doubts ( $r = -.61$ ).

Our second question was whether parents' own God image would relate to their parenting styles and whether their parenting style would predict how they speak to their children about God. We found that parental God image is associated with parenting style and how parents invoke the name of God to get their children to comply with their demands. We split the results into two diagrams for ease of understanding.

Figure 4 shows that parental benevolent God image is associated with less authoritarian parenting ( $B = -.18$ )<sup>51</sup>, and that authoritarian parenting is associated with parents more frequently invoking God's anger and punishment as a way to discourage undesirable behavior ( $B = .27$ ). In other words, the more parents imagine Allah as Caring, Compassionate, Forgiving, and Lenient, the less they report utilizing authoritarian parenting practices. This is meaningful because parents who report utilizing authoritarian parenting practices report invoking God's anger and punishment more frequently.

Figure 5 shows that parental benevolent God image is associated with more authoritative parenting ( $B = .20$ ), and that authoritative parenting is associated with parents more frequently invoking God's love and appreciation as a way to encourage desirable behavior ( $B = .43$ ). In other words, the more parents imagine Allah as Caring, Compassionate, Forgiving, and Lenient, the more they report utilizing authoritative parenting practices. This is meaningful because parents who report utilizing authoritative parenting practices report invoking God's love and appreciation more frequently.

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<sup>51</sup> The standardized Beta coefficient ( $B$ ) can be interpreted as follows: A one standard deviation increase in benevolent parental God image is associated with a  $-.18$  standard deviation decrease in perceptions of being an authoritarian parent. More generally, the standardized Beta is interpreted as "a one standard deviation increase in X is associated with a  $B$  standard deviation change in Y."

FIGURE 4:  
**Consequences of Authoritarian Parenting**



FIGURE 5:  
**Consequences of Authoritative Parenting**

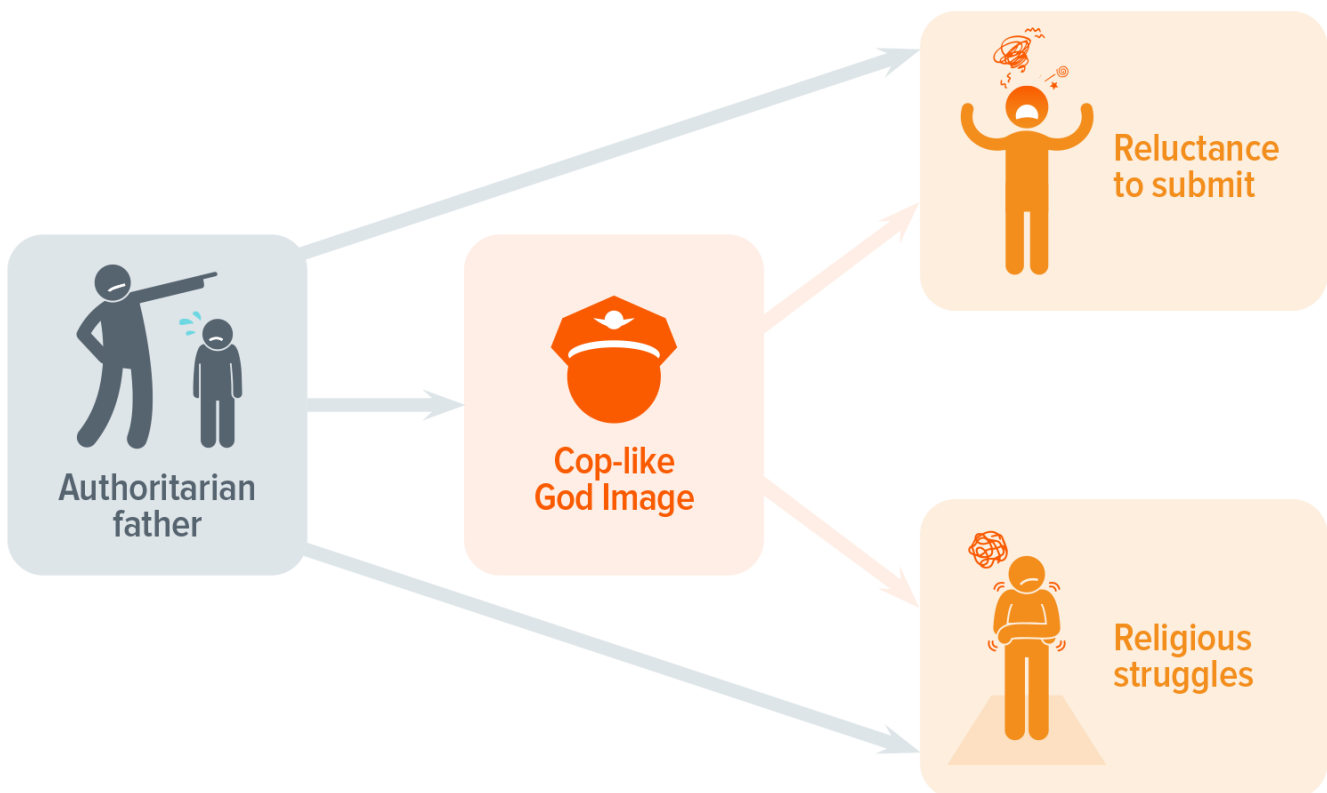


Our third question was whether adolescents' and young adults' perceptions of their own parents' parenting styles as authoritarian or authoritative would predict their own God image. We found that perceptions of parenting styles were related to God image. Youth and young adult perceptions of maternal authoritarianism ( $r = -.12, p$

= .04) and paternal authoritarianism ( $r = -.14, p < .001$ ) predicted less benevolent God images. Perceptions of maternal authoritativeness ( $r = .15, p = .01$ ) and paternal authoritativeness ( $r = .24, p < .001$ ) predicted more benevolent God images. This finding tells us that perceptions of authoritarian and authoritative parenting predict the overall God image of adolescents and young adults.

Our fourth and fifth research questions investigated whether perceived parenting styles would predict the two specific God images we presented earlier: the cop-like God image and the Loving Caretaker (*al-Walī*) God image. We also wanted to understand how those God images relate to religious doubt and submission reluctance. Figure 6 (paternal authoritarianism) and Figure 7 (maternal authoritarianism) depict the results that address question four, illustrating the relation between authoritarian parenting, a cop-like God image, and suffering from religious doubts and lack of submission to God. The results show that perceiving

FIGURE 6:  
**Effects of Paternal Authoritarianism**



one's parents as authoritarian correlates with reporting a more cop-like image of God. Subsequently, holding a cop-like image of God is associated with religious doubts and submission reluctance. Interestingly, perceiving one's father as authoritarian was also directly related to religious doubt ( $B = .13$ ) and reluctance with submission ( $B = .19$ ), whereas perceptions of an authoritarian mother were only indirectly related to these outcomes through a distortion in God image.

FIGURE 7:  
**Effects of Maternal Authoritarianism**

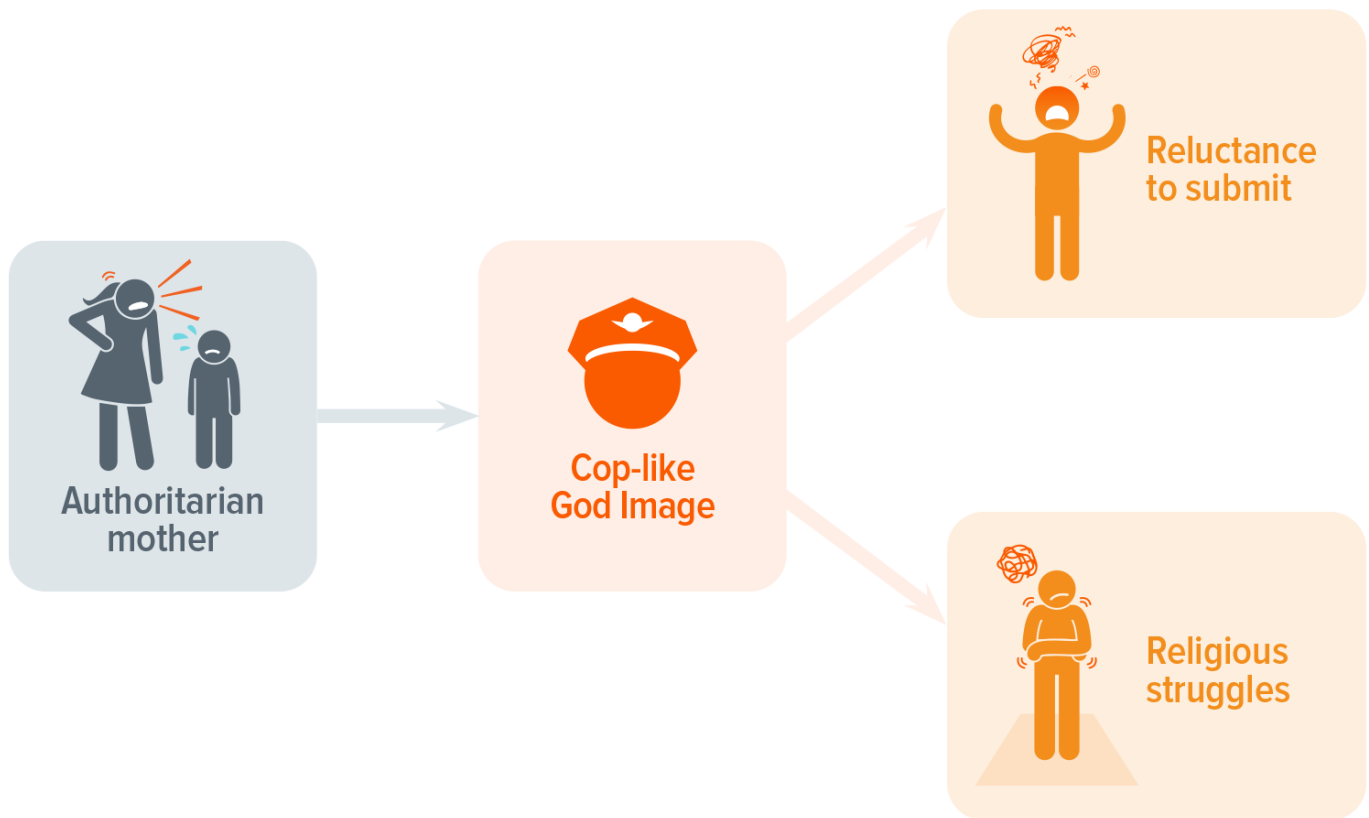


Figure 8 (paternal authoritativeness) and Figure 9 (maternal authoritativeness) depict the results that address question five, illustrating the relation between authoritative parenting, developing an image of God as *al-Walī*, and suffering from religious doubts and lack of submission to God. The results show that perceiving

one's parents as engaging in authoritative parenting correlates with reporting a more benevolent image of God as *al-Walī*, as One who is a caring, helpful, and loving protector. Subsequently, perceiving God as *al-Walī* is associated with fewer religious doubts and more submission to God's decree. See Appendix B for the full results of the SEM.

FIGURE 8:  
**Effects of Paternal Authoritativeness**

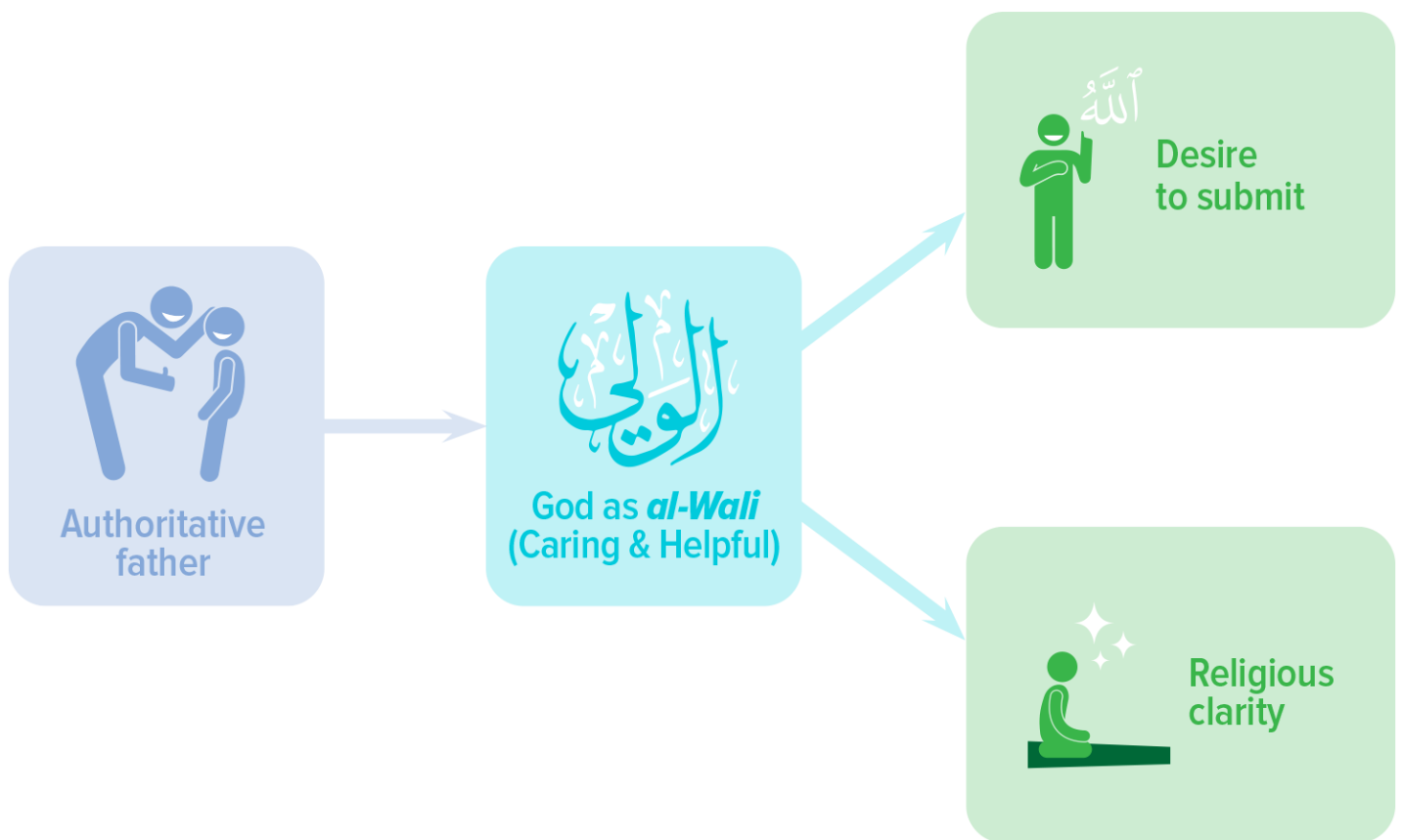
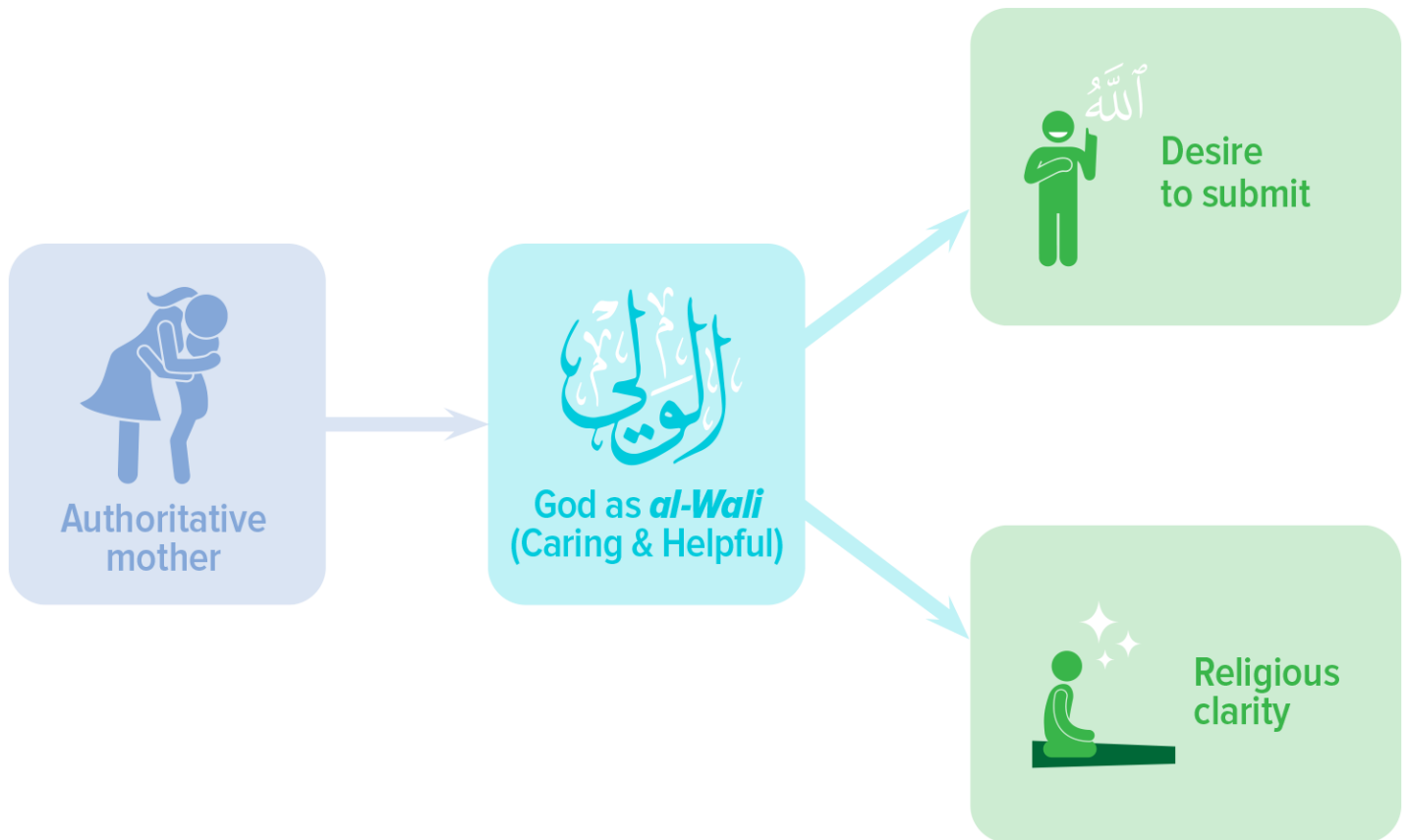


FIGURE 9:  
**Effects of Maternal Authoritativeness**



## Discussion

This paper has further developed our theory on the relations between God image and various spiritual struggles and religious outcomes. We found that adolescents and young adults who perceive their parents as authoritative also perceive Allah as more caring and supportive, whereas those who perceive their parents as authoritarian perceive Allah as more cop-like. **Ultimately, perceiving Allah as a cosmic cop correlates with submission reluctance and religious doubt, whereas perceiving Him as a Loving Caretaker correlates with the opposite.**

### **Possible roots of religious doubts and submission reluctance**

Our results strongly suggest that a distorted God image may be a major cause of psychospiritual issues. Specifically, a distorted perception of God as a cosmic cop is associated with submission reluctance and religious doubts. Therefore, we recommend that parents, mentors, and religious educators consider assessing a person's God image before answering their doubt-related questions. Rehabilitating one's image of Allah should always be prioritized and requires patience, as the process requires substantial unlearning of distortions that may have hardened over years based on incorrect information and negative emotional experiences. Adult socializers are encouraged to convey an image of God through both textual and relational means. We have [previously](#) emphasized the relational approach, which centers on spiritual modeling of warmth, compassion, love, and appropriate levels of demandingness.<sup>52</sup>

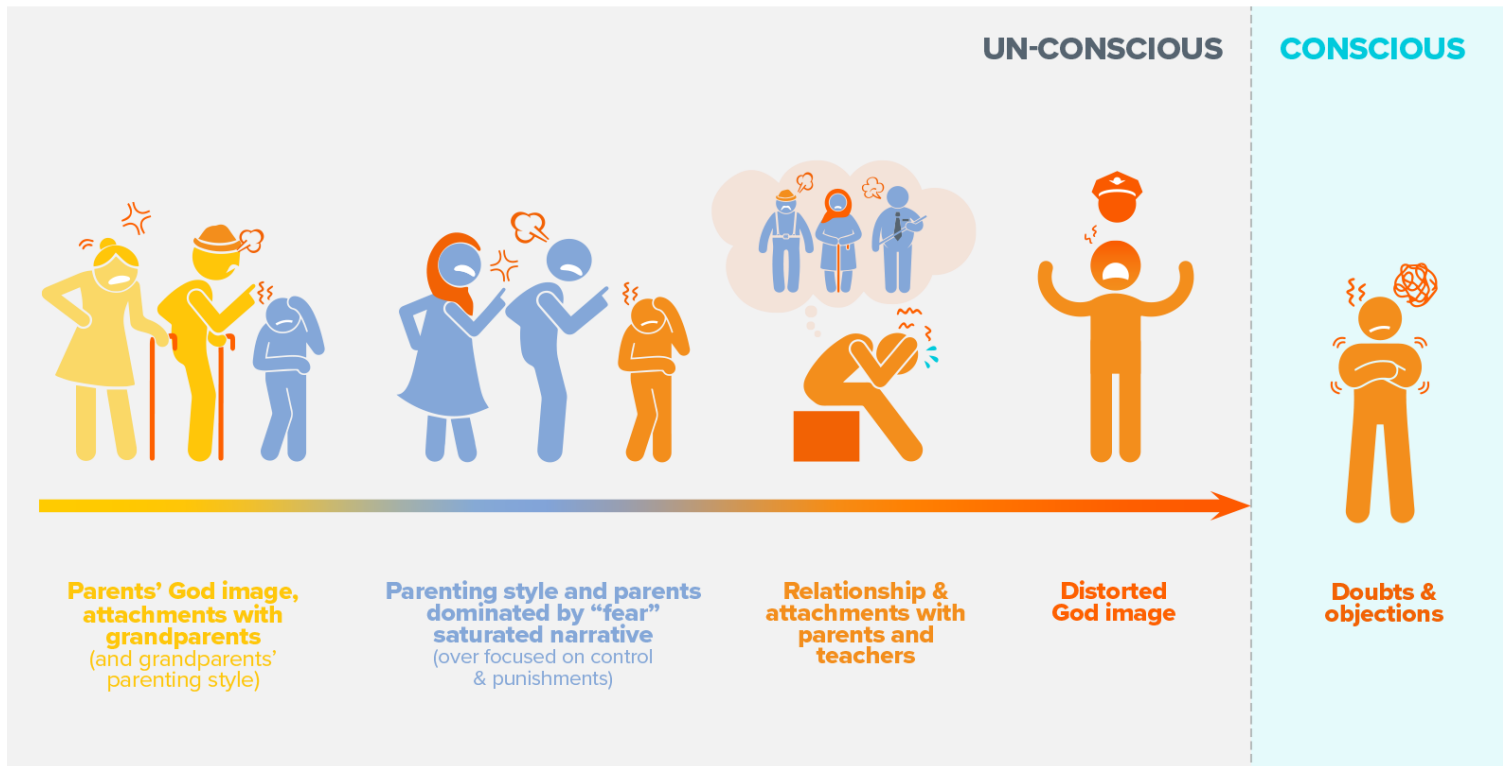
### **Breaking the intergenerational transmission of distorted God images**

Our results suggest that parents' God image shapes parenting style. Parents who imagine Allah as benevolent report engaging in more authoritative parenting, whereas parents who imagine Allah as strict and cold report engaging in more authoritarian parenting. Therefore, parents are highly encouraged to enhance their own God image for the sake of their own faith and as a gift for their spouse and children. Parents can end the intergenerational transmission of distorted God images by reflecting on their own upbringing. They should focus on learning about [God's names and attributes](#) and forming personal relationships with religious educators who will help them emotionally experience Allah's attributes holistically. Figure 10 illustrates our theoretical framing, linking psychospiritual struggles to the intergenerational transmission of a distorted God image.

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<sup>52</sup> Hassan Elwan and Osman Umarji, "The Alchemy of Divine Love: How Our View of God Affects Our Faith and Happiness," *Yaqeen*, December 29, 2022, updated June 9, 2023, accessed on 1 May 2023. <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/the-alchemy-of-divine-love-how-our-view-of-god-affects-our-faith-and-happiness>.

FIGURE 10:  
**Unconscious Intergenerational Roots  
of Doubts and Submission Reluctance**



### Love and fear: The forces driving parenting

Children are gifts from Allah, and they are the recipients of the most profound parental love. Yet this love brings with it fear—fear of harm and fear of loss. Religious parents in particular fear their children disobeying God and bearing the subsequent consequences in both this world and the hereafter. This fear often drives parents to resort to threats of punishment to ensure compliance with both their demands and God’s demands. Unfortunately, our results indicate that this type of authoritarian parenting, despite its good intentions, actually undermines children’s understanding of and submission to God. Even when harsh parenting tactics appear to ensure children’s compliance with religious commands, this

compliance is often a skin-deep performance masking deep resentment towards both parents and God. Children may internalize their acts of obedience as burdens, stripping their worship of its intended joys and benefits.

Furthermore, perceptions of paternal authoritarianism appear more detrimental than maternal authoritarianism. Thus, fathers need to be especially cognizant of the effects of their harshness. Inculcating a warm and emotionally secure bond may be more effective in transmitting religious beliefs and behaviors and preventing submission reluctance and religious doubts. As beautifully expressed by Ibn al-Qayyim, fear alone does not motivate anyone. It is love that motivates, fear that spurs, and hope that leads.<sup>53</sup>

While fear of failure may facilitate authoritarian parenting, another type of fear may facilitate its opposite. If parents fear upsetting their children or losing out on their love, they may resort to permissive parenting, defined as being overly warm and responsive without exerting any control. Although we did not explicitly measure permissive parenting in this study, we believe this parenting style may cultivate in children a sense of entitlement and a perception of God as a cosmic wish-granter. Children may then experience religious doubts when God does not give them what they demand. We hope to investigate pathways to entitlement and its consequences in future studies. Our goal here is to caution parents against either extreme of fear-based parenting, as overcorrecting from authoritarian to permissive or vice-versa may lead to distortions in God image and maladaptive psychospiritual outcomes. It is possible that these excessive fears and anxious parental dispositions may reflect parents' own submission reluctance, as they struggle to accept that they cannot prevent hardships in their children's lives.

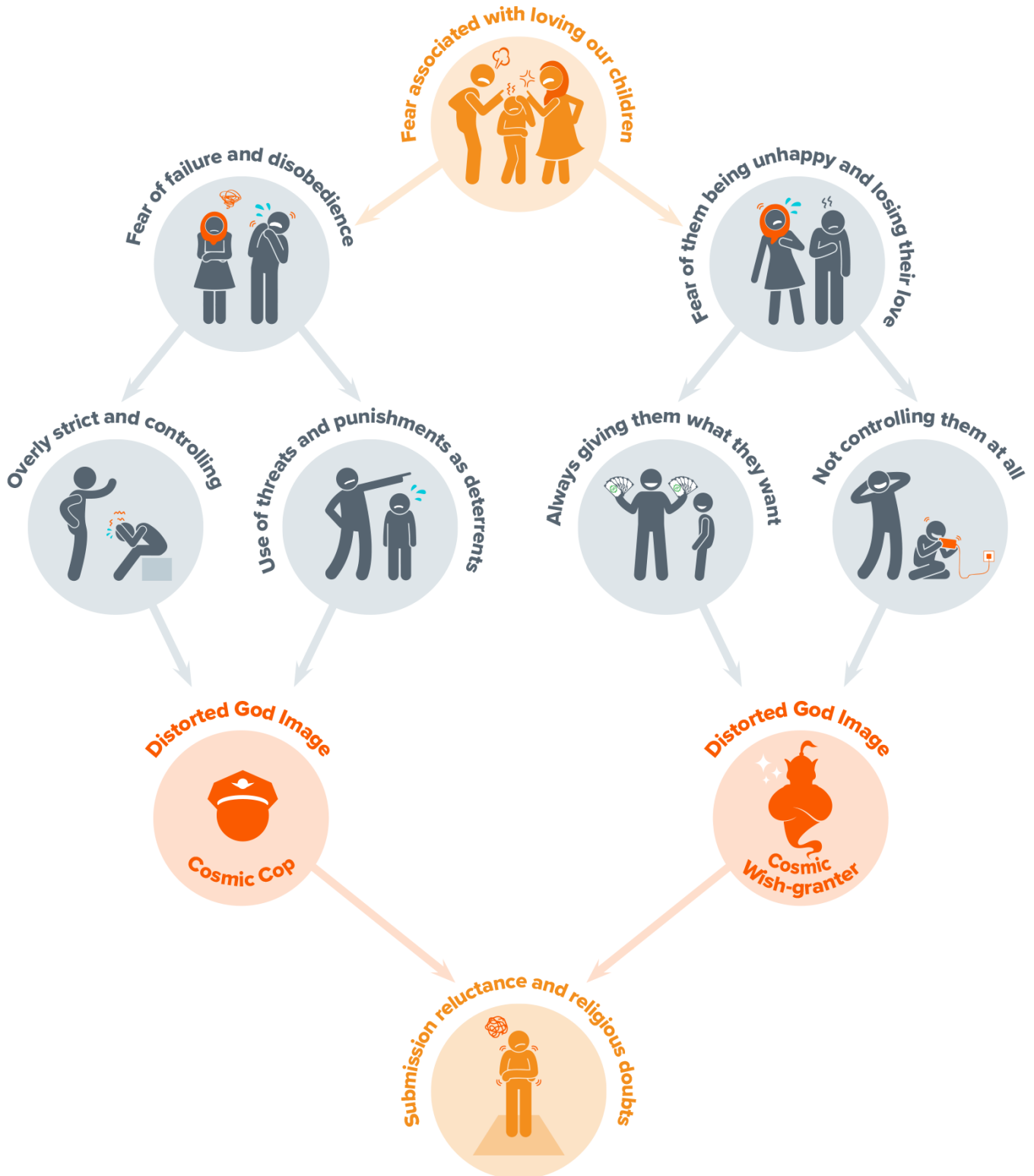
Figure 11 below depicts the potential consequences of these two forms of fear-based parenting.

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<sup>53</sup> Ovamir Anjum, *Ranks of the Divine Seekers: A Translation of Madārij al-sālikīn bayna manāzil iyyāka na'budu wa-iyyāka nasta'in* by Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya (d. 750/1351): Volume 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

FIGURE 11:

## Fear-based Parenting and Associated Outcomes



### From the parent as *walī* to God as *al-Walī*

Parents are supposed to be loving caretakers and protectors of their children. This requires that they set boundaries within an atmosphere of love. Warmth without demands (i.e., permissive parenting) or demands without warmth (i.e., authoritarian parenting) both lead to suboptimal outcomes. Therefore, parents are advised to strive for the middle path, balancing warmth and demandingness. Our results show that perceptions of parental authoritativeness are associated with perceptions of Allah as *al-Walī*, and accordingly with high levels of submission. Thus, through acting as a *walī* to our children, we build their understanding of Allah as their *Walī*.

Children nestled within loving bonds find it easier to submit to the demands placed on them by both their parents and their Creator. The Prophet ﷺ showed immense warmth and love to the youth and rebuked those who withheld it from their children. Upon hearing a man say that he had ten children whom he had never kissed, the Prophet ﷺ said, “Whoever does not show mercy will not receive mercy.”<sup>54</sup> The Prophet ﷺ habitually used warmth to encourage obedience. Mu‘ādh ibn Jabal narrated that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ once held his hand and said, “O Mu‘ādh, I swear by Allah that I love you. I swear by Allah that I love you,” and advised him to say at the conclusion of every prayer (*salāh*), “O Allah, help me remember You, express gratitude to You, and worship You in the best manner.”<sup>55</sup> Ibn Abbas narrated that the Prophet ﷺ hugged him and said, “O Allah, teach him the scripture.”<sup>56</sup> Whenever Fāṭima entered the Prophet’s home, he would stand for her, take her by the hand, kiss her, and seat her in his place.<sup>57</sup> In all of these examples, one can see the importance of physical affection in nurturing children.

In addition to the warmth that the Prophet ﷺ showed his daughter and his companions, he set appropriate limits by not giving in to every request. By

<sup>54</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5997; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2318.

<sup>55</sup> *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, no. 1522; *Sunan al-Nasā’ī*, no. 1303.

<sup>56</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 75.

<sup>57</sup> *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī*, no. 3872; *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, no. 5217.

sometimes denying our children the things they ask for, we prevent entitlement and build resilience. Fatima once asked the Prophet ﷺ for a servant to help her with housework. Rather than grant her a servant, he went to her home in the evening and told her and her husband, Ali, “Shall I offer you something better than that?” and taught them to say ‘How transcendentally exalted is Allah’ (*subḥān Allāh*) thirty-three times, ‘Praise be to Allah’ (*al-ḥamd li-Allah*) thirty-three times, and ‘Allah is the greatest’ (*Allah akbar*) thirty-three times before they went to sleep.<sup>58</sup> Due to the loving bond and trust that they had with the Prophet ﷺ, they were grateful rather than resentful. Ali said that he never skipped saying this any night of his life. They were confident that the Prophet ﷺ truly knew what was better, a confidence rooted in the love and care they received from him.

Appropriate levels of demandingness are necessary for children to thrive. However, excessive fear of our children’s failures may result in over-controlling behavior, where parents involve themselves in every minor affair to ensure success. Risk-averse parenting is detrimental to the long term well-being of children. Allah Himself, who loves us more than we love our children, does not shield us from all perceived failures or harms. Rather, in His Infinite Wisdom, He sometimes allows us to fail and fall into dark places so that we may grow stronger from our experiences. Parents have to accept that their children will indeed make mistakes in the journey of life, and that some of those mistakes are necessary for their success.

Once parents grant their children age-appropriate autonomy, they must teach them about repentance (*tawba*) and its fruits. Parents must remind their children that when they inevitably fall into sin, Allah loves it when they repent.<sup>59</sup> Stories of righteous people who slipped and repented, such as Ka‘b b. Mālīk or the archers at Uḥūd, should be regularly communicated to children to remind them to never despair of God’s compassion and mercy.<sup>60</sup> It is important to forgive their mistakes so they internalize Allah’s forgiveness.

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<sup>58</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5362.

<sup>59</sup> Qur’an, 2:222.

<sup>60</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2747.

## Between letting go and holding on

The delicate balancing act of allowing our children to explore the world and ensuring their safety by regulating their behavior is the hardest aspect of parenting today. Our Islamic values are often at odds with the secular values that surround our children. The more stock we put in our Islamic values, the more we will vigorously defend them, especially if we think they are threatened by the dominant culture.<sup>61</sup> The dilemma for religious parents is that their otherwise beautiful love of Islam may manifest in oppressively controlling parenting styles, ultimately alienating their children from the *dīn*.

This dynamic appears the moment toddlers begin to walk on their own. Parents are initially enthusiastic about their infants learning to explore the world on their own two feet. They motivate their children to take steps with words of encouragement, smiles on their faces, and arms wide open. However, as many parents can attest, that enthusiasm may diminish as they realize their child can now get into all kinds of trouble, such as falling down stairs, walking onto the street, or climbing a table and falling off. Thus, a parent begins to set limits to keep their child safe. They may tell the child not to walk down the stairs, wander outside, or climb the table. It is at this stage of life that a child begins to be socialized to behave in a certain way. It is at this time that the child must learn to tame their personal desire for adventure and learn to comply with the demands of their parents and other adults.

The key issue for parents is how they communicate these rules to the child, since no child happily complies after the first parental directive. This is where responsiveness and demandingness come into play. If the parent gets frustrated that the child does not immediately comply, do they resort to threats, punishments, and psychological manipulation to ensure the child obeys? For example, if the parent begins to spank the child, scream at the child, or withhold hugs and kisses, the child is likely to learn to submit out of fear of punishment or fear of losing the love

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<sup>61</sup> Karen Bogenschneider, Ming-yeh Wu, Marcela Raffaelli, and Jenner C. Tsay, "Parent Influences on Adolescent Peer Orientation and Substance Use: The Interface of Parenting Practices and Values," *Child Development* 69, no. 6 (1998): 1672–1688.

and approval of the parent. Alternatively, the parent may choose to communicate the rules through love coupled with firmness recognizing that children will not comply immediately and that they are only following their natural curiosity and trying to learn about the world. In such an environment, the act of submission to authority develops free from the fear of losing love, and the balance of freedom and security through obedience to rightful authority is acquired.<sup>62</sup> Ultimately, if the child's experience of submitting to human authority is associated with excessive threats of punishment, withdrawal of love, bribery, or coercion, they may grow to imagine submission to God in a similar manner.

## Concluding thoughts

Our image of God has profound effects on our ability to submit to Him. Perceiving Him as cold, distant, and cop-like leads to submission reluctance and religious doubts. This distorted image of God leads to appeasement at best and objection or rejection of the faith at worst. Imagining God as *al-Walī*, however, facilitates loving submission to Him, even when His decrees are difficult to understand. When we understand that Allah is our *Walī*, we understand that everything He commanded is a manifestation of His care and compassion for the believers. God's benevolence is not expressed through His granting us what we wish for, because ultimately we do not know what is best for us personally or collectively. Rather, as our Loving Caretaker, He sets appropriate limits to human behavior that maximize our well-being in this life and the next.

Parents have an important influence on their children's God image. In an ideal society with strong communal bonds and healthy institutions, other adults would help inculcate a proper image of Allah in the hearts of the youth. Unfortunately, in the individualistic societies that many of us reside in, parents play a larger role than they should have to. However, they are still not the only influence and not all distortions in God image are due to parents. In fact, children are quite resilient even when their parents make mistakes, and the role authoritarian parenting plays in

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<sup>62</sup> Daniel J. Heinrichs, "Our Father Which Art in Heaven: Parataxic Distortions in the Image of God," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 10, no. 2 (1982): 120–129.

cultivating a cop-like God image is small to moderate (neither trivial nor immense). Thus, parents don't need to be perfect—just good enough to facilitate healthy development.

Nonetheless, parents should strive to continuously improve their own God image. They may also benefit from surrounding their children with other socializers who reinforce a healthy image of God. Through building a relationship on love without sacrificing appropriate levels of control, parents can teach their children not only to submit to Allah in a state of contentment and satisfaction, but also taste the sweetness and joy of worship, *in shā`a Allāh*.

## Appendix A

All survey items used in this study by construct.

Cop-like God image - On a scale of 1 (Does not describe my feelings) to 5 (Clearly describes my feelings)

- I tend to feel that God is like a “cop” enforcing rules with rewards and punishments.
- How much do you feel that your religion is mainly a list of rules and restrictions?
- My religion seems like a list of obligations to me.

*Al-Walī* God image - On a scale of 1 (Does not describe my feelings) to 5 (Clearly describes my feelings)

Support Dimension

- In difficult situations, how often do you feel that God isn't at your side?
- Sometimes, when I really need God, I tend to feel left on my own.
- In difficult situations, I tend to feel that I don't get enough help from God.

Care Dimension

- I feel God's compassionate love filling my heart.
- I feel that God has always been reaching out to me.
- How often do you feel God's deep care for you?

Forgiveness - On a scale of 1 to 5

- How often do you feel that God is angry with you?
- I feel that God is not answering my prayers because I am not good enough or because of my mistakes.
- When I face affliction, I tend to feel it is because God is not pleased with me.

## Religious Doubts

- How frequently do you experience religious doubts?
- Sometimes, religious doubts shake my faith.
- When I face hardships, I feel troubled by doubts about my religious beliefs.
- I am troubled by some of God's commands and rulings.

## Surrender to God

- I feel upset/frustrated when I can't understand God's wisdom in my life.
- I feel frustrated/upset when God lets bad things happen to me or my loved ones.
- There are times I get frustrated/upset that God did not answer my prayers.

Authoritarian Parenting Perceptions (PSDQ) - On a scale of 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Separate ratings were given for each parent.

- My mother/father punishes me by taking privileges away from me (e.g., TV, games, computer, phone, visiting friends).
- My mother/father yells when she disapproves of my behavior.
- My mother/father explodes in anger towards me.
- My mother/father spansks me when I don't listen to what she says.
- My mother/father withholds her love when she is upset with me (e.g., she doesn't give me hugs and kisses).
- My mother/father scolds and shames me when my behavior doesn't meet her expectations.

Authoritative Parenting Perceptions (PSDQ) - On a scale of 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Separate ratings were given for each parent.

- My mother/father is responsive to my feelings and needs.
- My mother/father encourages me to talk about my troubles.
- My mother/father provides me with comfort and understanding when I am upset.
- My mother/father compliments (praises) me.

- My mother/father and I have warm and intimate times together.
- My mother/father explains why I have to follow her/his rules.

## Appendix B

**Table 1a. Descriptive Variables of God Image and Religious Outcomes**

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
<b>Caring God Image</b>	3.30	0.78	0	4
<b>Forgiving God Image</b>	2.90	0.88	0	4
<b>Aiding God Image</b>	3.42	0.78	0	4
<b>Cop-like God image</b>	0.42	0.72	0	4
<b>Total God Image</b>	3.30	0.61	0.75	4
<b>Religious Doubts</b>	1.62	0.77	1	5
<b>Submission Reluctance</b>	1.73	0.83	1	5

**Table 1b. Descriptive Statistics of Parenting Variables**

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Youth Perceptions of Maternal Authoritativeness	3.37	1.05	1	5	304
Youth Perceptions of Maternal Authoritarianism	2.27	0.96	1	5	300
Youth Perceptions of Mom Using Loving God Motivation	3.76	1.20	1	5	301
Youth Perceptions of Dad Using Punishing God Motivation	2.23	1.09	1	5	301
Youth Perceptions of Paternal Authoritativeness	2.77	1.13	1	5	272
Youth Perceptions of Paternal Authoritarianism	2.12	0.99	1	5	267
Youth Perceptions of Paternal Loving God Motivation	3.21	1.34	1	5	270
Youth Perceptions of Paternal Punishing God Motivation	2.04	1.03	1	5	270
Parent Self-Perceptions of Authoritativeness	4.22	0.65	1	5	386
Parent Self-Perceptions of Authoritarianism	1.94	0.60	1	4	376
Parent Perceptions of Using Loving God Motivation	4.16	0.91	1	5	374
Parent Perceptions of Using Punishing God Motivation	2.97	1.26	1	5	373

## Results of the Structural Equation Models

Structural Model for RQ2 (Authoritarianism)	B	Std Err	z-value	p-value
<b>Parental perceptions of authoritarianism</b>				
<b>Parental God Image</b>	-0.18	0.05	-3.56	0.000
<b>Parental use of God's anger as motivation</b>				
<b>Parental perceptions of authoritarianism</b>	0.27	0.05	5.7	0.000

Note: All coefficients are standardized.  
 $\chi^2 = 3.78 (1), p=.052$

<b>Structural Model for RQ2 (Authoritativeness)</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Std Err</b>	<b>z-value</b>	<b>p-value</b>
<b>Parental perceptions of authoritativeness</b>				
<b>Parental God Image</b>	0.20	0.05	4.06	0.000
<b>Parental use of God's love as motivation</b>				
<b>Parental perceptions of authoritativeness</b>	0.43	0.04	10.32	0.000
Note: All coefficients are standardized. $\chi^2 = 21.27 (1), p < .000$				

<b>Structural Model for RQ4 (Paternal Authoritarianism)</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Std Err</b>	<b>z-value</b>	<b>p-value</b>
<b>Cop-like God Image</b>				
<b>Youth/Young Adult perceptions of paternal authoritarianism</b>	0.17	0.07	2.22	0.026
<b>Submission Reluctance</b>				
<b>Youth/Young Adult perceptions of paternal authoritarianism</b>	0.19	0.06	3.06	0.002
<b>Cop-like God Image</b>	0.57	0.06	9.76	0.000
<b>Religious Doubts</b>				
<b>Youth/Young Adult perceptions of paternal authoritarianism</b>	0.13	0.06	2.19	0.028
<b>Cop-like God Image</b>	0.67	0.05	13.49	0.000
<b>Measurement Model</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Std Err</b>	<b>z-value</b>	<b>p-value</b>
<b>Cop-like God Image</b>				
<b>Cop 1</b>	0.74	0.04	17.47	0.000
<b>Cop 2</b>	0.72	0.05	15.93	0.000
<b>Cop 3</b>	0.70	0.05	15.14	0.000
<b>Submission Reluctance</b>				
<b>Submission Reluctance 1</b>	0.74	0.03	21.36	0.000

<b>Submission Reluctance 2</b>	0.77	0.03	23.87	0.000
<b>Submission Reluctance 3</b>	0.76	0.03	23.30	0.000
<b>Religious Doubts</b>				
<b>Doubt 1</b>	0.81	0.03	21.36	0.000
<b>Doubt 2</b>	0.84	0.03	23.87	0.000
<b>Doubt 3</b>	0.78	0.03	23.30	0.000
<b>Doubt 4</b>	0.71	0.03	21.38	0.000
Note: All coefficients are standardized. Correlated residuals not shown. $\chi^2 = 93.61 (38)$ , $p < .001$ . RMSEA=.068. CFI=.963				

<b>Structural Model for RQ4 (Maternal Authoritarianism)</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Std Err</b>	<b>z-value</b>	<b>p-value</b>
<b>Cop-like God Image</b>				
Youth/Young Adult perceptions of maternal authoritarianism	0.17	0.07	2.43	0.015
<b>Submission Reluctance</b>				
Youth/Young Adult perceptions of maternal authoritarianism	0.10	0.06	1.63	0.103
Cop-like God Image	0.59	0.06	10.02	0.000
<b>Religious Doubts</b>				
Youth/Young Adult perceptions of maternal authoritarianism	0.05	0.06	0.97	0.332
Cop-like God Image	0.69	0.05	13.8	0.000
<b>Measurement Model</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Std Err</b>	<b>z-value</b>	<b>p-value</b>
<b>Cop-like God Image</b>				
Cop 1	0.74	0.04	17.65	0.000
Cop 2	0.72	0.05	16.14	0.000
Cop 3	0.70	0.05	15.35	0.000

<b>Submission Reluctance</b>				
<b>Submission Reluctance 1</b>	0.74	0.03	21.58	0.000
<b>Submission Reluctance 2</b>	0.77	0.03	23.24	0.000
<b>Submission Reluctance 3</b>	0.76	0.03	23.34	0.000
<b>Religious Doubts</b>				
<b>Doubt 1</b>	0.81	0.03	31.83	0.000
<b>Doubt 2</b>	0.84	0.03	36.82	0.000
<b>Doubt 3</b>	0.78	0.03	28.25	0.000
<b>Doubt 4</b>	0.71	0.03	21.39	0.000
Note: All coefficients are standardized. Correlated residuals not shown. $\chi^2 = 94.52.6 (38)$ , $p < .001$ . RMSEA=.068. CFI=.962				

<b>Structural Model for RQ5 (Paternal Authoritativeness)</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Std Err</b>	<b>z-value</b>	<b>p-value</b>
<b>al-Wali God Image</b>				
<b>Youth/Young Adult perceptions of paternal authoritativeness</b>	0.24	0.06	3.80	0.000
<b>Submission Reluctance</b>				
<b>Youth/Young Adult perceptions of paternal authoritativeness</b>	-0.05	0.05	-0.96	0.336
<b>al-Wali God Image</b>	-0.90	0.03	-29.28	0.000
<b>Religious Doubts</b>				
<b>Youth/Young Adult perceptions of paternal authoritativeness</b>	0.00	0.06	-0.02	0.988
<b>al-Wali God Image</b>	-0.65	0.05	-13.64	0.000
<b>Measurement Model</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Std Err</b>	<b>z-value</b>	<b>p-value</b>
<b>al-Wali God Image</b>				
<b>Care 1</b>	0.58	0.04	13.37	0.000

<b>Care 2</b>	0.54	0.05	11.78	0.000
<b>Care 3</b>	0.65	0.04	17.42	0.000
<b>Aid 1</b>	0.61	0.04	15.33	0.000
<b>Aid 2</b>	0.71	0.03	21.72	0.000
<b>Aid 3</b>	0.84	0.02	35.89	0.000
<b>Submission Reluctance</b>				
<b>Submission Reluctance 1</b>	0.72	0.03	22.23	0.000
<b>Submission Reluctance 2</b>	0.75	0.03	24.66	0.000
<b>Submission Reluctance 3</b>	0.80	0.03	29.55	0.000
<b>Religious Doubts</b>				
<b>Doubt 1</b>	0.82	0.02	33.25	0.000
<b>Doubt 2</b>	0.85	0.02	38.08	0.000
<b>Doubt 3</b>	0.77	0.03	27.79	0.000
<b>Doubt 4</b>	0.69	0.03	20.18	0.000

Note: All coefficients are standardized. Correlated residuals not shown.  
 $\chi^2 = 159.700$  (69),  $p < .001$ . RMSEA=.064. CFI=.957

<b>Structural Model for RQ5 (Maternal Authoritativeness)</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Std Err</b>	<b>z-value</b>	<b>p-value</b>
<b>al-Wali God Image</b>				
<b>Youth/Young Adult perceptions of maternal authoritativeness</b>	0.17	0.06	2.60	0.009
<b>Submission Reluctance</b>				
<b>Youth/Young Adult perceptions of maternal authoritativeness</b>	0.07	0.05	1.42	0.155
<b>al-Wali God Image</b>	-0.92	0.03	-32.89	0.000
<b>Religious Doubts</b>				

<b>Youth/Young Adult perceptions of maternal authoritativeness</b>	0.06	0.05	1.14	0.254
<b>al-Wali God Image</b>	-0.66	0.05	-14.53	0.000
<b>Measurement Model</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>Std Err</b>	<b>z-value</b>	<b>p-value</b>
<b>al-Wali God Image</b>				
<b>Care 1</b>	0.58	0.04	13.6	0.000
<b>Care 2</b>	0.54	0.05	11.85	0.000
<b>Care 3</b>	0.66	0.04	17.73	0.000
<b>Aid 1</b>	0.62	0.04	15.44	0.000
<b>Aid 2</b>	0.71	0.03	21.48	0.000
<b>Aid 3</b>	0.84	0.02	35.38	0.000
<b>Submission Reluctance</b>				
<b>Submission Reluctance 1</b>	0.72	0.03	21.91	0.000
<b>Submission Reluctance 2</b>	0.76	0.03	24.94	0.000
<b>Submission Reluctance 3</b>	0.90	0.03	29.16	0.000
<b>Religious Doubts</b>				
<b>Doubt 1</b>	0.81	0.02	33.13	0.000
<b>Doubt 2</b>	0.85	0.02	38.06	0.000
<b>Doubt 3</b>	0.78	0.02	27.85	0.000
<b>Doubt 4</b>	0.69	0.03	20.16	0.000
Note: All coefficients are standardized. Correlated residuals not shown. $\chi^2 = 175.394$ (69), $p < .001$ . RMSEA=.070. CFI=.950				