



How to Raise Religious Teens: A Self-Determination Theory Approach

JIHAD SAAFIR

OSMAN UMARJI

YAQVEEN™
INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC RESEARCH

Author Biography

Dr. Jihad Saafir has a Bachelor's degree in Arabic studies, Master of Arts in Islamic Studies and Leadership, and a Ph.D. in Practical Theology from Claremont School of Theology. He is the resident Imam and the Founding Executive Director for Islah Academy. He is also an Assistant Professor of Religion and Community Development at Bayan, where he teaches courses in Muslim adolescent identity formation, leadership development, and Islamic education.

Dr. Osman Umarji holds a Bachelor's of Science in Electrical Engineering and a Master's and Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from UC Irvine. He has studied Islam at al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt. His research interests include the development of human motivation, religious socialization, spirituality, and Islamic legal theory. Dr. Umarji is also an Adjunct Professor in the School of Education at UC Irvine. He has previously taught child development, adolescent development, and statistics. His expertise in both psychological and Islamic sciences allows him to conduct empirical research on contemporary issues facing Muslims.

***Disclaimer:** The views, opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in these papers and articles are strictly those of the authors. Furthermore, Yaqeen does not endorse any of the personal views of the authors on any platform. Our team is diverse on all fronts, allowing for constant, enriching dialogue that helps us produce high-quality research.*

Copyright © 2022. Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research

Introduction

Adolescence is always a time of unexpected challenges and tumultuous emotions, but for Muslims growing up in the West, it is particularly frightening. During this fraught period, Muslim youth are burdened with the difficult task of negotiating religious identity amidst racial and class hierarchies, peer pressure, anti-religious polemics, and faith-shaking secular ideologies. The 12th century luminary Abū al-Faraj ibn al-Jawzī singles out this stage as “being the most distinguished regarding the struggle against the self (*jihād al-nafs*), one’s unbridled passions (*al-hawā*), and the attacks of Satan (*ghalabat al-shayṭān*).”¹ To endure this onslaught from destructive external and internal forces, adolescents require significant support from adult Muslim socializers, including parents, teachers, and other community members. These socializers need to be equipped with the skills to steer our youth towards internalizing Islamic values, beliefs, and behaviors. Contemporary psychologists also suggest that internalization of values is a fundamental goal of socialization that is beneficial for a young person’s well-being.

2

Let us consider the hypothetical cases of two adolescents, Bilqis and Abdullah, both of whom represent common adolescent experiences in the Muslim community. Abdullah wholeheartedly accepts Islam as his religion. He regularly prays out of his own volition and enthusiastically attends events at his local *masjid* every week, where he enjoys spending time with many good friends. Abdullah’s parents, who are also religious, speak to him about religion regularly. However, rather than being overly critical, they are positive in their communication and encourage him to ask questions. Bilqis’s parents, meanwhile, regularly criticize and lecture her about all the things she is doing wrong according to Islam. Bilqis reluctantly attends the *masjid* youth group on Friday nights, but only to avoid being further shamed or harangued by her parents. At the *masjid*, she is overcome by boredom, as there are rarely activities that pique her interest. Bilqis prays whenever her parents ask her to, yet she does so resentfully with a sense of compulsion.

¹ Ibn al-Jawzi, *Awakening from the Sleep of Heedlessness* (Birmingham: Dar as-Sunnah Publishers, 2012), 26.

² Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2017).

At this point in life, Abdullah has internalized Islamic values and behaviors more so than Bilqis. Based on their current trajectories, we would expect Abdullah to have a stronger commitment to Islam as he grows into adulthood. Although guidance is ultimately from Allah, as Islamic psychologists, we strongly believe there are identifiable factors that explain the differences in religious commitment between Abdullah and Bilqis. Notwithstanding differences in personalities and other social factors, how did their families and communities socialize them in ways that made them more or less attached to Islam?

Religious socialization refers to the interactive process through which social agents (e.g., parents and religious educators) influence individuals' religious beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes. The Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ method of *tarbiya* (religious nurturing) is the gold standard for how we should socialize our youth. How did he motivate his young companions to love Islam? How did he develop an Islamic environment that supported the internalization of Islamic beliefs and practices? Deploying concepts from the contemporary science of psychology that we Islamically substantiate below, we posit he ﷺ created an environment that made his followers feel a sense of religious competence and self-efficacy. Furthermore, he gave them the autonomy to enact unique Islamic identities, whereby different companions distinguished themselves via their diverse talents and dispositions. Although the companions were unique in many ways, the Prophet ﷺ ultimately ensured the environment facilitated a strong sense of belonging to the community.

Self-determination theory and psychological needs

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ understood that religious motivation was central to the process of internalizing the faith and adopting a healthy Islamic identity. This concept is well captured in the famous hadith, “Indeed, actions are [motivated and evaluated] based on their intentions.”³ By motivation, we do not simply mean momentary enthusiasm regarding a behavior. Rather, motivation is the process by

³ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 54; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1907.

which goal-directed behavior is instigated and sustained by personal and social factors. Thus, believers will engage in religious thoughts and behaviors to the extent that they are motivated by their faith.

We believe that self-determination theory (SDT) sheds light on some of the ways in which the Prophet ﷺ motivated and socialized his companions. SDT investigates the growth tendencies and innate psychological needs that form the basis of people's motivation and personality integration.⁴ SDT, which draws from humanistic psychology, suggests that people have personal agency and are motivated to self-actualize.⁵ Psychological needs are as essential as physiological ones—they are the sleep and nutrition of the mind and soul, without which optimal functionality is impossible. SDT considers the personal and social conditions that may foster or impede human motivation.⁶ According to SDT, we will likely internalize a religious identity when we experience religious environments that provide the three universal psychological needs of (1) a sense of competence, (2) autonomy, and (3) relatedness. Therefore, SDT provides a framework for us to investigate the factors that may explain the religious differences between Abdullah and Bilqis.

Of course, as a framework that draws from humanistic psychology, SDT assumes secular notions of selfhood and autonomy. As such, it is blind to the role that faith can and does play in psychological fulfillment. We address this blindspot by aligning SDT's insights with an Islamic understanding of the human being. Through applying a faith-congruent SDT framework and drawing from the Qur'an and the life of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, we propose that Muslim adolescents are more likely to thrive and fully internalize their Muslim identity when they are raised in religious environments that support feelings of religious competence, autonomy, and relatedness. In the following section, we discuss each psychological

⁴ Koole, Sander L., Caroline Schlinkert, Tobias Maldei, and Nicola Baumann. "Becoming Who You Are: An Integrative Review of Self-Determination Theory and Personality Systems Interactions Theory," *Journal of Personality* 87, no. 1 (2019): 15–36.

⁵ Humanistic psychology is derived from humanism and is a perspective that differs from behaviorist and psychodynamic perspectives on human behavior.

⁶ Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Overview of Self-Determination Theory: An Organismic Dialectical Perspective," *Handbook of Self-Determination Research* 2 (2002): 3–33.

need and provide examples of how the Prophet ﷺ established environments supportive of these needs.

The psychological need for religious competency

Competence refers to the human desire to feel efficacious enough to produce the desired results in any situation. From a religious perspective, competence-supporting environments give youth the tools, encouragement, and feedback necessary to gain mastery in practicing their faith and a sense of confidence that they can successfully observe Islam in their lives.⁷ Youths' perceptions of their capabilities are powerful forces that contribute to their successes and failures. These feelings of competence derive from several social factors, including social comparisons with those performing a similar religious task, measuring the difficulty of the religious task, and surveying the opinions of others (parents, teachers, peers, etc.) regarding their performance of the task.⁸ Competence beliefs are central motivators in deciding whether to engage in a particular task, as we typically engage in activities that we believe we can succeed in and avoid activities that we perceive as too difficult.⁹ Feelings of incompetence are produced by religious environments where a person's behavior is constantly criticized as sinful, or when feedback is overwhelmingly negative.

As part of his *da'wa* strategy, the Prophet ﷺ made those around him feel like they were competent Muslims. He would praise them and reinforce their righteousness in various circumstances, even when they were being ridiculed or chastised for making mistakes. In one instance, after hearing Bilāl's footsteps in front of his in Paradise, he ﷺ inquired about the best religious act that Bilāl ibn Rabāḥ had performed after accepting Islam. Bilāl responded, "I did not do anything worth mentioning except that whenever I performed ablution during the day or

⁷ Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 69.

⁸ Ryan and Deci, "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation," 84.

⁹ Jacquelynne Eccles, "Who Am I and What Am I Going to Do With My Life? Personal and Collective Identities as Motivators of Action," *Educational Psychologist* 44, no. 2 (2009): 78–89.

night, I prayed after that ablution as much as was written for me.”¹⁰ Imagine the feelings of efficacy that must have enveloped Bilāl when he was told he would be with the Prophet ﷺ in Paradise.

Even when a companion committed a serious sin, the Prophet ﷺ was keen to make that companion feel efficacious, **rather than use harsh words that would have harmed the individual’s sense of self**. We see this clearly in the case of a companion named ‘Abdullāh who used to make the Prophet ﷺ laugh. ‘Abdullāh had been previously lashed for drinking wine, and one day ‘Abdullāh was found drunk again and the Prophet ﷺ ordered him to be lashed again. Another man said, “O Allah, curse him! How many times has he been brought?” However, the Prophet ﷺ quickly interjected saying, “Do not curse him. By Allah, I know that he loves Allah and His messenger.”¹¹ Imagine how ‘Abdullāh felt hearing these words from the Prophet ﷺ affirming his love for Allah and His messenger in a moment where he could have internalized the ridicule and felt incompetence and low self-worth.

In another profound event demonstrating the Prophet’s ﷺ attention to creating a competence-supportive environment, ‘Abdullāh ibn Mas‘ūd, the great companion, was once climbing a tree to grab some branches of *miswāk*. Upon seeing his thin legs, some of the companions began laughing at him. One might imagine that ‘Abdullāh ibn Mas‘ūd may have felt some embarrassment. The Prophet ﷺ swiftly responded to the laughter, saying, “What are you laughing at? I swear by Allah that his two legs are heavier on the scale [of deeds] than the mountain of Uḥud.”¹² As these few examples demonstrate, the Prophet ﷺ was always aware of his companions’ psychological states. By praising their religiosity while they were emotionally vulnerable, he ﷺ ensured that they felt reassured of their competency as Muslims.

The psychological need for religious autonomy

¹⁰ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 1149.

¹¹ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6398.

¹² *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 3981.

The need for autonomy refers to the need to experience behavior as volitional and reflectively self-endorsed.¹³ Muslims might object to this notion of autonomy because it appears to give unbounded choice to the individual to do as he or she wills. However, we want to clarify that Islam does not approve of an unbounded notion of choice that violates religious values and laws. Therefore, we must restrict religious autonomy to choices within the realm of the permissible (halal). Religious autonomy is rooted in the notion that, within the halal, there are so many different ways to engage in worship that are faith-congruent and personally chosen. When we perform actions with autonomy, we are more likely to put our hearts into these actions because we choose them voluntarily. On the contrary, when people feel pressured to behave a certain way, they may experience frustration and subsequently have less motivation to persist. Whether it be in the home, school, workplace, or a religious setting, studies have shown that people thrive more when they feel a sense of autonomy. Children with more autonomy-supportive parents have fewer behavioral problems.¹⁴ Employees in work settings that foster autonomy enjoy their work more.¹⁵ Students who are given more autonomy in educational settings have higher levels of engagement in the classroom.¹⁶ In the SDT paradigm, autonomy “refers to the experience of an action as fitting with interests and integrated values that one is wholeheartedly behind.”¹⁷

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ created an environment where his companions felt comfortable practicing their faith with a sense of autonomy. Consider how he ﷺ responded to a companion who added some words to a *dua* in prayer. Conventionally, when the imam says “*sami‘a Allāhu liman ḥamidah*” after rising from bowing, the followers respond by saying “*Rabbanā wa lak-al-ḥamd.*” One day while praying behind the Prophet ﷺ, a companion decided to extend the phrase by saying “*Rabbanā wa lak-al-ḥamdu, ḥamdan kathīran ṭayyiban mubārakan fīh*” (O our Lord! All praises are for You, many good and blessed

¹³ Ryan and Deci, “Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation,” 68.

¹⁴ Ryan and Deci, *Self-Determination Theory*, 319.

¹⁵ Dan N. Stone, Edward L. Deci, and Richard M. Ryan, “Beyond Talk: Creating Autonomous Motivation through Self-Determination Theory,” *Journal of General Management* 34, no. 3 (2008): 6.

¹⁶ Ryan and Deci, *Self-Determination Theory*, 351.

¹⁷ Ryan and Deci, *Self-Determination Theory*, 51.

praises). After concluding the prayer, the Prophet ﷺ did not condemn the man but instead curiously inquired, “Who said these words?” The man replied, “Me.” The Prophet ﷺ responded, “I saw over thirty angels competing to write them first.”¹⁸ Another companion loved Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ so much that he recited it whenever he led the congregational prayer. Those placed under his charge became concerned about his choice to recite Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ in every prayer that he led. They asked the Prophet ﷺ about the permissibility of this action. After discovering that this man recited this chapter out of his love for Allah, the Messenger of Allah ﷺ told them, “Tell him that Allah loves him.”^{19, 20}

Beyond simply allowing a level of autonomy in religious practice, the Prophet ﷺ created a climate that encouraged his companions to share their suggestions and offer feedback on important matters. For example, the companions felt comfortable recommending particular military strategies to the Prophet ﷺ in battle. During the Battle of Badr, Ḥubāb ibn Mundhir asked the Prophet ﷺ if his choice of where to settle the army was based on revelation from Allah or a personal choice. When the Prophet ﷺ told him that it was his personal decision, Ḥubāb recommended the Prophet ﷺ move the army in front of the wells to control the water and prevent Quraysh from accessing it.²¹ Similarly, when the Prophet ﷺ was preparing for the Battle of Aḥzāb, Salmān al-Fārisī suggested that the Muslim army dig a trench around them to prevent the army of the confederates from penetrating Medina. In both instances, the Prophet ﷺ listened carefully to his companions and accepted their suggestions.

More powerful than any particular story is how the Prophet ﷺ accepted the diversity of personalities amongst his companions, eschewing any attempt to cast them in the same mold. This was not about autonomy in a particular issue, but allowing each companion to have a unique personality and disposition. Abū Bakr (rA) and ‘Umar (rA) were his closest companions, yet so different were their personalities. Abū Bakr (rA) was known to be incredibly gentle and sensitive,

¹⁸ *Sahih al-Bukhari*, no. 799.

¹⁹ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 742.

²⁰ *Sirat Ibn Hisham: Biography of the Prophet* (Cairo: al-Falah Foundation, 2002).

²¹ *Al-Mustadrak*, no. 5801.

‘Umar (rA) rougher and tougher. These personality differences likely manifested in varying interpersonal skills and behavioral preferences.

The great companions and scholars of Islam understood this notion of religious autonomy well, never imposing their personal preferences of how to worship on others. Once, when ‘Abdullāh ibn Mas‘ūd was asked why he did not engage in more voluntary fasting, he replied, “When I fast, it weakens my ability to recite the Qur’an, and reciting the Qur’an is more beloved to me than optional fasting.”²² Thus, we see ‘Abdullāh (rA) personally valued the recitation of the Qur’an over voluntary fasting, and that he felt he had the autonomy to choose from multiple righteous actions what he valued most. This understanding of religious autonomy can also be seen in the life of Imam Mālik. One day a righteous man sent him a letter inviting him to engage in more spiritual practices rather than spending time teaching Islam. Imam Mālik responded beautifully, saying, “Allah, exalted is He, apportioned people’s actions as He apportioned their sustenance. Sometimes He grants a spiritual opening to a person in terms of [optional] prayers, but not [optional] fasting. Or He grants an opening in giving charity, but not in fasting. To another, He may grant them an opening for jihad. As for spreading sacred knowledge, that is from the best of deeds, and I am pleased with what Allah has opened to me. However, I do not imagine that what I am engaged in is any less than what you are engaged in; and I hope that both of us are upon goodness and righteousness.”²³

The psychological need for relatedness and belonging

Relatedness refers to our human need to feel cared for by others and have a sense of belonging to a social group.²⁴ It has been suggested that humans experience a nearly universal drive to form and maintain relationships with other people.²⁵ These desired social bonds have two aspects: frequent positive or neutral (not

²² Ibn Abi Shaybah, *al-Musannaf*, no. 8909; al-Tabarani, *al-Mu‘jam al-kabir*, no. 8868.

²³ Al-Dhahabi, *Siyar a‘lam al-nubala* (Beirut: Mu’assasah al-Risalah, 1998), 8:114.

²⁴ Ryan and Deci, *Self-Determination Theory*, 3.

²⁵ Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, “The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation,” *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 497–529, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497>.

negative) interactions, and an ongoing framework of mutual caring. Numerous *ahadith* touch on the idea of relatedness and belonging to a group. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Every Muslim is a brother to every other Muslim. He does not wrong him, nor surrender him. Whoever fulfills the needs of his brother, Allah will fulfill his needs. Whoever relieves a Muslim from distress, Allah will relieve him from distress on the Day of Resurrection. Whoever covers the faults of a Muslim, Allah will cover his faults on the Day of Resurrection.”²⁶ This hadith motivates believers to cultivate intimate bonds between one another as a means of connecting with Allah.

The Prophet ﷺ taught that a community requires these interpersonal connections to thrive. He created an environment that fostered a sense of belonging and relatedness amongst his companions. When he arrived in Medina after the migration, one of the first things he did was pair people together from Mecca and Medina in brotherhood and sisterhood. This allowed companions from different backgrounds to love each other and feel valued by their community. The Meccan companions, many of whom came empty-handed to Medina, could impart their knowledge of Islam and feel that they were contributing to their new home. Conversely, the Medinan companions were able to provide housing and food, all while helping their Meccan brothers and sisters acclimate to the city. The Prophet ﷺ was especially keen to ensure his adolescent companions felt valued, and he gave them personal attention and major responsibilities. For example, when the Prophet ﷺ migrated to Medina, he assigned ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (rA) to stay in his bed as a decoy and to return the people’s possessions. He ﷺ also assigned to a teenage companion, Usāma ibn Zayd (rA), the role of leading a military expedition.²⁷ One can imagine the deep sense of belonging that these companions must have felt as trusted members of the Muslim community.

Religious internalization and motivation

²⁶ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 2422; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2580.

²⁷ *Saḥih al-Bukhari*, no. 4469.

Thus far we have argued that healthy religious socialization, as exemplified by Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, requires that religious environments provide support for people's sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. The fulfillment of these psychological needs provides the necessary motivation for one's personal commitment to Islam. Thus, when youth feel a sense of religious competence, autonomy, and relatedness, they will most likely make a conscious decision to practice the faith out of their own conviction and love for Islam. However, we know that youth vary in their motivation to practice Islam. Some youth have no religious motivation whatsoever, others practice Islam to please their parents or to avoid disapproval from others, and still others deeply enjoy their religious commitment.

How can we better understand these differences in motivation? According to SDT, these different motivations reflect differing degrees to which Islamic values and behavioral regulations have been internalized and integrated. Internalization refers to the process of “taking in” a value or regulation, and integration refers to the assimilation of that value or regulation into one's sense of self.²⁸ A subtheory of SDT, called organismic integration theory (OIT), details the different types of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, as well as the contextual factors that either promote or hinder internalization and integration. OIT categorizes motivation into three states: (1) amotivated, (2) extrinsically motivated, and (3) intrinsically motivated. Amotivation refers to a state where the individual has no desire or intention to do a particular behavior. Extrinsic motivation refers to the performance of an activity in order to attain some external outcome. Intrinsic motivation refers to doing an activity for the inherent satisfaction of engaging in that activity.²⁹

There are four types of extrinsic motivation in OIT that reflect varying degrees of integration and internalization of a behavior. External regulation refers to performing an action in order to avoid a punishment or gain a reward. Socializers typically use rewards and punishments to secure compliance from others. Introjected regulation is slightly more autonomous in nature, as the individual

²⁸ Ryan and Deci, *Self-Determination Theory*, 3.

²⁹ Ryan and Deci, *Self-Determination Theory*, 3.

performs a behavior to please others, avoid personal guilt, or feel some pride. Identified regulation is where behaviors become more self-endorsed, as engagement is driven by feelings of personal importance and value. Finally, integrated regulation occurs when a person performs a behavior that is fully in line with their identity, congruent with their values, and fully integrated into their sense of self. See Figure 1 for an overview of OIT.

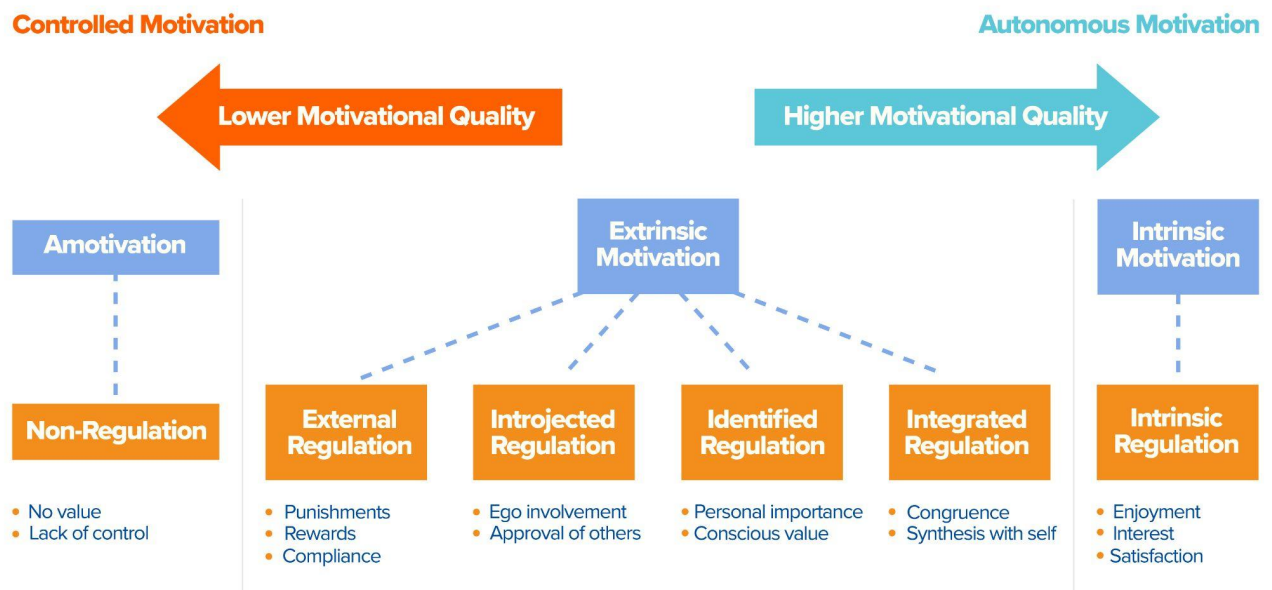


Figure 1. Overview of Organismic Integration Theory

Classical Islamic scholars also discussed motivation, especially how it pertains to the quality of religious behavior. Imam al-Nawawī presented a classification of motivation when discussing the types of intentions that underlie religious worship. He suggests three motivational levels that are the root of religious worship. The first motivational level is the *worship of the servants* (*‘ibādat al-‘abīd*), which is when a Muslim does religious acts out of fear of God’s punishment. The second motivational level mentioned by al-Nawawī is *transactional worship* (*‘ibādat al-tujjār*), which describes worship that is done primarily to attain the reward of Paradise. These two motivational levels are extrinsic because they are done for primarily external outcomes (avoiding punishment or seeking reward). Although OIT considers behaviors done for rewards and punishments as similar in

motivational quality (external regulation), al-Nawawi considers the pursuit of Paradise a higher motivational state than the avoidance of punishment. From a religious perspective, worshiping Allah out of fear of hellfire or desire for Paradise is considered acceptable. However, there are higher stations one should aim for. Thus, the highest quality of motivation identified by Imam al-Nawawī is the worship of the liberated and free (*‘ibādat al-aḥrār*), which refers to acts of worship that are performed out of love and reverence for Allah.³⁰ This type of motivation represents a deeper level of internalization and integration, as the person autonomously performs the behavior because it completely aligns with their personal values. This state is what OIT would refer to as integrated regulation or intrinsic motivation. Both OIT and al-Nawawī consider this the ideal. For example, someone who remembers Allah out of complete reverence (and joy) will typically perform higher-quality actions than one who engages in remembrance to avoid hellfire.

Socializing agents, such as parents and religious educators, need to be aware of how intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can aid or obstruct an adolescent's path towards identity internalization and integration. Although intrinsic motivation is the highest quality and the level to aspire towards, other levels of extrinsic motivation may be acceptable and a normal part of the developmental process. For example, socializers may utilize rewards to temporarily move someone from a state of amotivation to extrinsic motivation. However, although these extrinsic motivators may be adaptive at times, socializers should not exclusively rely on them because they do not lead to a high level of integration and internalization. For example, if parents use guilt, shame, or punishment to extrinsically motivate their children to pray, it is unlikely to result in the child internalizing the act of prayer as fulfilling and desirable. Although it may lead to temporary compliance and thus appear to work, the use of such forms of punishment is likely to contribute to resentment and dissociation from the action itself over time.

OIT breaks motivation into a spectrum of behavioral regulations that range from purely external and extrinsic (no internalization) to purely internal and intrinsic

³⁰ An-Nawawi, *Sharh matn al-arba'een an-Nawawiya* (Maktaba Dar al-Fath, Damascus, 1984).

(complete integration). Let us again take prayer as an example of the motivational spectrum. On the most extreme—and lowest quality—end of the spectrum is motivation by coercion, where a parent threatens to severely punish their child for missing a prayer (external regulation). Similarly, they may bribe a child by promising to pay them if they pray. This is done to ensure compliance even if the child is only praying to avoid the punishment or get the reward. Alternatively a parent could inform their child of how proud they would be if they prayed (introjection). This type of motivation is based on obtaining approval from others, which is still extrinsic in nature. Neither of the aforementioned types of motivation will automatically lead to a greater integration of prayer. To get towards integration and intrinsic motivation, a parent may model consistency in prayer themselves, educate their child about the value of prayer, help their child think about how prayer is personally meaningful to them, and explore the meaning of prayer in different life situations. These practices are more likely to make the child personally identify with the action itself, which is more likely to lead to higher levels of internalization. As a youth integrates the act of prayer into their personal life and religious identity, they are more likely to enjoy and find satisfaction in it, as the action is being done autonomously. This motivation for prayer is akin to when the Prophet ﷺ said, “Beloved to me in this world are women and perfume, yet the delight of my eyes is in prayer.”³¹

Recommendations for socializers

In the introduction of this article we mentioned the case of Bilqis, an adolescent Muslim struggling with her Islamic identity, whose religious environments are highly controlling and punitive. In this section we offer practical advice for socializers whose children share similar identity challenges as Bilqis. We recommend that socializers provide Muslim adolescents with structured religious environments that guide them towards a path of religious internalization. Environments that are chaotic and unpredictable typically fail to provide feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Informational structures, meanwhile,

³¹ *Sunan al-Nasāʾī*, no. 3939.

should warmly and clearly communicate religious responsibilities and expectations that reflect adolescents' unique religious capacities. Such structures should not be controlling but rather organized and well-planned to ensure that adolescents are able to more thoroughly internalize religious values due to support of competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Every young Muslim adolescent is unique and needs space to become the best versions of themselves, not clones of their peers. Socializers should inculcate mastery learning in their youth, which emphasizes learning at their own pace and mastering prerequisite knowledge before moving on to more detailed aspects of the faith. For example, socializers should not focus on social comparisons between youth, nor should adolescents be shamed for memorizing less Qur'an or knowing fewer companions than their peers. Comparing youth to one another should be avoided as much as possible, as comparisons typically reduce feelings of competence and increase extrinsic motivation. The Prophet's ﷺ sublime emotional intelligence led him to support his companions' competence beliefs whenever they felt inferior. On one occasion, the poor amongst the *muhājirūn* (immigrants from Mecca to Medina) felt that Allah favored the rich believers over them, so they disclosed their feelings to the Messenger of Allah ﷺ. In an effort to increase their sense of competence and comfort their hearts, he ﷺ responded by informing them that the poor will enter Paradise before the wealthy.³²

Another motivational strategy is for socializers to explain the wisdom behind the behaviors that Allah commands or prohibits. Adolescents are more likely to internalize religious guidelines and behaviors when they understand the benefits associated with religious obligations and the harms associated with prohibited behaviors. For example, if a young adolescent woman is told to wear the hijab without being informed of its wisdom and benefits, she may not fully internalize the hijab as it may appear to be an arbitrary rule. However, through empathetic conversation about her concerns and explanation of Allah's wisdom in prescribing Islamic attire, she may begin to internalize hijab as part of her Islamic identity, as the practice has additional value after understanding it better. Similarly, appropriate

³² *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2354.

explanations of the wisdom behind prayer and fasting are essential for youth to adopt these practices wholeheartedly.

Another recommendation for inculcating competence and autonomy is to provide process-focused feedback.³³ Feedback that focuses on the process that led to either success or failure is more beneficial than feedback that is centered around the individual. Our youth will inevitably make mistakes and may have setbacks in the process of internalizing Islam. Feedback after mistakes such as “You are a bad Muslim” or “Allah is going to punish you” are aimed at shaming the individual and are not focused on the the process that led to the behavior. An effective process-oriented strategy is asking “why” or “how” questions such as, “Why did you miss prayer today?” In the situation of a youth missing *Fajr* prayer, the youth may explain that they slept very late. A parent may follow up with a question such as, “Can you think of some ways that you can sleep earlier?” Calmly discussing these questions gets at the process behind the inaction, which in turn suggests actionable solutions. Allowing individuals to arrive at their own solutions further fulfills their need for autonomy.

Adolescent Muslims must be given ample opportunities to be heard and to express their creativity; they should also be provided opportunities to make decisions related to religious thoughts and behaviors.³⁴ Muslim adolescents should be encouraged to share their ideas about religious activities to facilitate their motivation. For example, when planning youth events, allowing youth to suggest topics, speakers, the format of the event, and other details encourages them to take ownership of religious activities and engage in these activities of their own volition. If youth are not given an opportunity to give feedback and make decisions, it is likely that their desire to participate will diminish. When intrinsic motivation is reduced, socializers will often resort to rewards and punishments that may have limited effectiveness.

³³ Ryan and Deci, *Self-Determination Theory*, 319.

³⁴ Jennifer G. La Guardia, “Developing Who I Am: A Self-Determination Theory Approach to the Establishment of Healthy Identities,” *Educational Psychologist* 44, no. 2 (2009): 95.

Finally, we encourage socializers to provide youth with mentors and role models they can connect with on a personal level. Youth crave strong relationships with nurturing mentors who listen to them and are empathetic. When youth are able to connect with mentors who can relate to their experiences, their sense of belonging is enhanced. Through learning from a mentor who may have overcome similar challenges, youth are more likely to imagine themselves growing into the faith.

Conclusion

This paper explored Muslim adolescent religious motivation from the perspective of self-determination theory. Religious socializers should be mindful of the psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness that Muslim adolescents need to willfully engage in religious behavior. Through a structured approach to providing need-supportive environments for our youth in all spaces, youth are more likely to integrate Islamic values and behaviors into their lives autonomously. An honest assessment of the strategies used to motivate our youth may uncover the practices that enhance or diminish the religiosity of young Muslims. The development of youth religious identity and motivation is complex and includes many psychosocial factors, and socializers need to investigate the extent to which youths' psychological needs are being met in the various environments they are raised in. Furthermore, strategically thinking about ways to inculcate more autonomous motivational states requires the willingness to let go of extrinsic motivators that appear to work in the moment but may backfire in the future. The process of integrating Islamic behaviors and internalizing the Islamic way of life in the heart of our youth is long and requires foresight to create the proper conditions and patiently wait for the results, with the blessing of Allah.