



The Alchemy of Divine Love: How Our View of God Affects Our Faith and Happiness

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Introduction

Allah is Perfect. His perfection extends into every realm imaginable. He is the absolutely Merciful (*al-Raḥmān*), Compassionate (*al-Raḥīm*), Loving (*al-Wadūd*), Forgiving (*al-Ghaḥūr*), Helping (*al-Muʿīn*), the One to put complete trust in (*al-Wakīl*), and so much more.

However, we do not always see Allah's perfection directly. Allah is the Apparent (*al-Zāhir*) and the Immanent (*al-Bāṭin*). "Vision perceives Him not, but He perceives [all] vision."¹ Thus, every single one of us has to grapple with and answer two fundamental questions:

- 1) Although I cannot see Allah directly, how do I imagine Him to be?
- 2) Allah sees everything I do, what does He think of me?

How we answer these two questions has a profound effect on our lives. The answers influence our attachment style, our relationship with Allah and others, as well as our religiosity, religious struggles, and self-worth. Inculcating a healthy image of God that reflects the harmony between all His attributes is essential for positive religious development.

People have varying and sometimes distorted perceptions of God. If a person perceives Him as a "cosmic cop," they will fearfully wonder what Allah will pull them over for and for what He will let them go. They may imagine the Qur'an as only a book of "dos and don'ts," missing out on all the majestic aspects of God's message. They might perceive God's laws as stopping them from enjoying a more pleasurable life. Thus, the relationship a person has with God when they perceive Him as a "cop" may be one of distance, appeasement, and fearful conformance.

On the other hand, some people think of God as "a magic genie" who, when properly obeyed, responds by giving them what they wish for.² They may worship

¹ Qur'an 6:103.

² This is akin to the American theological doctrine known as prosperity gospel that equates the Christian faith with material and financial success.

God with the false expectation that their belief in Him entitles them to get whatever they want. However, when life's inevitable challenges hit and God, in His infinite wisdom, does not grant them what they desire, they may harbor anger and resentment towards Him.³

The way we imagine God affects how we relate to Him, ourselves, and to the world. Having a healthy and balanced perception of God, based on scripture and prophetic guidance, is essential for thriving. This paper introduces the topic of “God image”⁴ and attachment. We explain what a God image is and how a healthy or distorted God image develops. We also explain God attachment styles and how our image of God influences how we relate to Him. Finally, we discuss the consequences of a distorted God image on religious and self-concept struggles. We present a theory of God image based on classical Islamic sources and modern psychology, and the results of our scientific study on the topic.

What is a God image?

There is a perception of God that exists in each of our minds.⁵ Some theologians refer to this perception as a God image. It does not refer to a physical image of Allah, but refers to how we perceive and experience His presence and attributes. This image forms in our hearts and minds from two primary sources. The first is a cognitive propositional set of beliefs about God's attributes. For example, one might say, “God is the Creator. God is One. God is all Powerful.” The second is an

³ Qur'an 22:11. “And of the people is he who worships Allah on an edge. If he is touched by good, he is reassured by it; but if he is struck by trial, he turns on his face [to the other direction]. He has lost [this] world and the Hereafter. That is what is the manifest loss.”

⁴ We are using the term ‘image’ due to its common use in literature on the psychology of religion. The Prophet ﷺ himself used the term when he said, “Indeed, Allah created Adam upon His image.” The notion of God “image” derives from “imagination” — we imagine God in the same way we imagine his attributes. This term should in no way be construed as referring to a picture or physical image of God in our minds. As we referenced earlier, the Qur'an emphatically states, “Vision perceives Him not, but He perceives [all] vision.” (6:103).

⁵ “Everyone forms a God image out of necessity, in order to end the infinite regress of questions about the origin of the world and consolidate the representational fragments born of their early life. This representation is there whether or not the person uses it in their belief system. Atheists have a God image of a God many would never want to believe in. Everyone has some image of God even if they reject it, as total atheism is a psychodynamic impossibility.” Ana-Marie Rizzuto, *Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

affective experiential perception of God that is personal.⁶ For example, one might say, “I feel God is near to me” or “I don’t feel God’s mercy in my life.” The cognitive and affective aspects of one’s God image may influence each other.⁷

The cognitive propositional set of beliefs typically comes from what we are explicitly taught about Allah by our parents, religious educators, and theological books.⁸ They come from formal lessons in educational settings and informal comments we hear about Allah. These belief-based mental representations of Allah generate our conscious, abstract knowledge of the Divine. On the other hand, our affective experiential perception of Allah typically comes from personal life experiences to which we attach theological meaning. This perception emerges from personal encounters where we did or did not perceive the Divine, the emotions we felt during religious experiences, and implicit ideas about who Allah is.⁹ This experiential, relational component of our God image can be considered the experiential knowledge of the heart. It is an affect-laden representation that underlies a person's emotional experience of the Divine.

This affective experiential perception of Allah is often learned through experiences and relationships with parents and religious educators who teach about God. In other words, people do not only learn about Allah through what their parents and religious teachers explicitly tell them. They also learn about Allah through how their parents and religious teachers interact with them.

⁶ Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya proposed that the heart possesses two central abilities: (1) the ability to gain knowledge and intellectually differentiate between things and (2) the ability to desire and love. See *Ighāthat al-lahfān fi maṣāyid al-Shaytān*, <https://shamela.ws/book/18612/77>.

⁷ Hanneke Schaap Jonker, Elisabeth H. M. Eurelings-Bontekoe, Hetty Zock, and Evert Jonker, “Development and Validation of the Dutch Questionnaire God Image: Effects of Mental Health and Religious Culture,” *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 11, no. 5 (2008): 501–15.

⁸ Simone A. De Roos, Jurjen Iedema, and Siebren Miedema, “Young Children’s Descriptions of God: Influences of Parents’ and Teachers’ God Concepts and Religious Denomination of Schools,” *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 22, no. 1 (2001): 19–30.

⁹ Edward B. Davis, Glendon L. Moriarty, and Joseph C. Mauch, “God Images and God Concepts: Definitions, Development, and Dynamics,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 5, no. 1 (2013): 51.



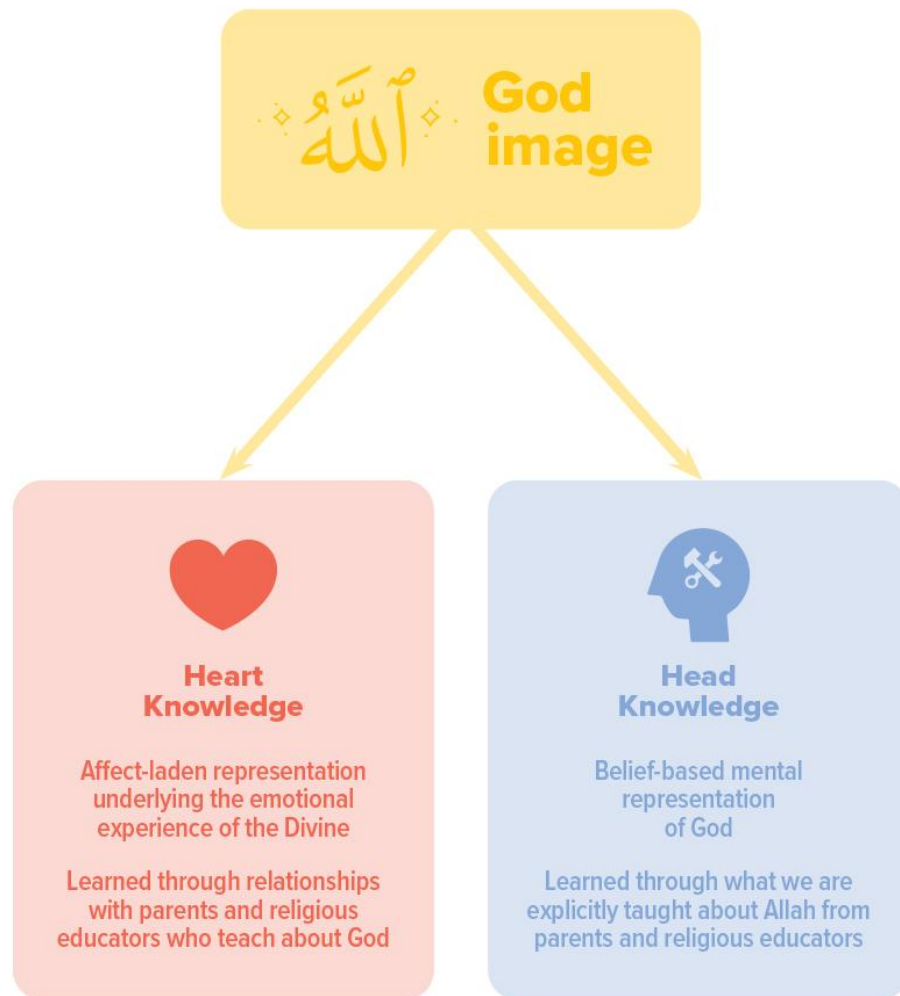
This experiential, relational component of our God image can be considered to be **the experiential knowledge of the heart**. It is an affect-laden representation that underlies a person's emotional experience of the Divine.

These two sources of information may converge to form a cohesive God image, where our cognitive beliefs about God match our emotional experiences of Him. Conversely, these two sources of information may diverge if our beliefs do not align with our experiences. For example, many Muslims know Allah's attributes, yet they have difficulty experiencing those attributes in their lives. For them, Allah is only known through a set of theological facts. An incongruence between what the mind believes about Allah and what the heart feels towards Him leads to dissonance in one's God image. This dissonance may sit at the root of many spiritual and psychological struggles.

Allah has a real and definitive set of attributes that describe Him perfectly. However, the human being does not have absolute and unfiltered access to these sublime attributes. Rather, we rely on information we have received, consciously and unconsciously, and on personal experiences to create an image in our minds of His essence. From childhood to adolescence to adulthood, we breathe in information, emotions, and thoughts pertaining to Allah. We evaluate each of these breaths as pleasurable or painful, enjoyable or aversive. We process all of this and eventually exhale beliefs about who Allah is—about His role in the universe and in our personal lives.¹⁰

¹⁰ Brad Hambrick, *God's Attributes: Rest for Life's Struggles* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing Company, 2012).

FIGURE 1:
Two Sources that Inform Our God Image



The accuracy of our God image lies on a spectrum of absolutely accurate to absolutely inaccurate. Unfortunately, many people have held grossly inaccurate God images, past and present. These inaccurate images are influenced by numerous factors, including false and superstitious beliefs present in various cultures, anti-God messaging in modern pop culture, low-quality religious education and environments, and poor relationships with parents and religious educators. Allah captures the essence of an inaccurate God image when He says,

مَا قَدَرُوا اللَّهَ حَقَّ قَدْرِهِ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَقَوِيٌّ عَزِيزٌ

In no way have they estimated Allah in His true estimation.
Surely, Allah is Powerful and Mighty.¹¹

Allah is making it clear that He is more sublime, majestic, benevolent, and capable than what people imagine. These misestimations of Allah are based on conjecture and erroneous assumptions. Commenting on the idolaters' theological deviations, Allah says, "They follow not except assumptions [about Allah] and what [their] souls desire, and there has already come to them from their Lord guidance."¹² He further describes the hypocrites and idolators in the Qur'an as "those who assume about Allah an evil assumption."¹³

The response of the hypocrites and the doubters to the Battle of Uhud demonstrates the psychological impact of misestimating Allah. Desire for the spoils of war motivated them to join the battle,¹⁴ yet after the defeat they second-guessed the Prophet's decision to fight and objected to what Allah had decreed. They said that the believers would have won if only the Prophet ﷺ had listened to them instead. Allah described these hypocrites and doubters as "...a faction worrying about themselves, thinking of Allah other than the truth—thoughts of ignorance..."¹⁵ The struggle of excessive worrying in the face of adversity is rooted in thinking incorrectly about Allah. Thus, our God image produces certain expectations of Him, which shape how we interpret life and cope with adversity.

¹¹ Qur'an 22:74.

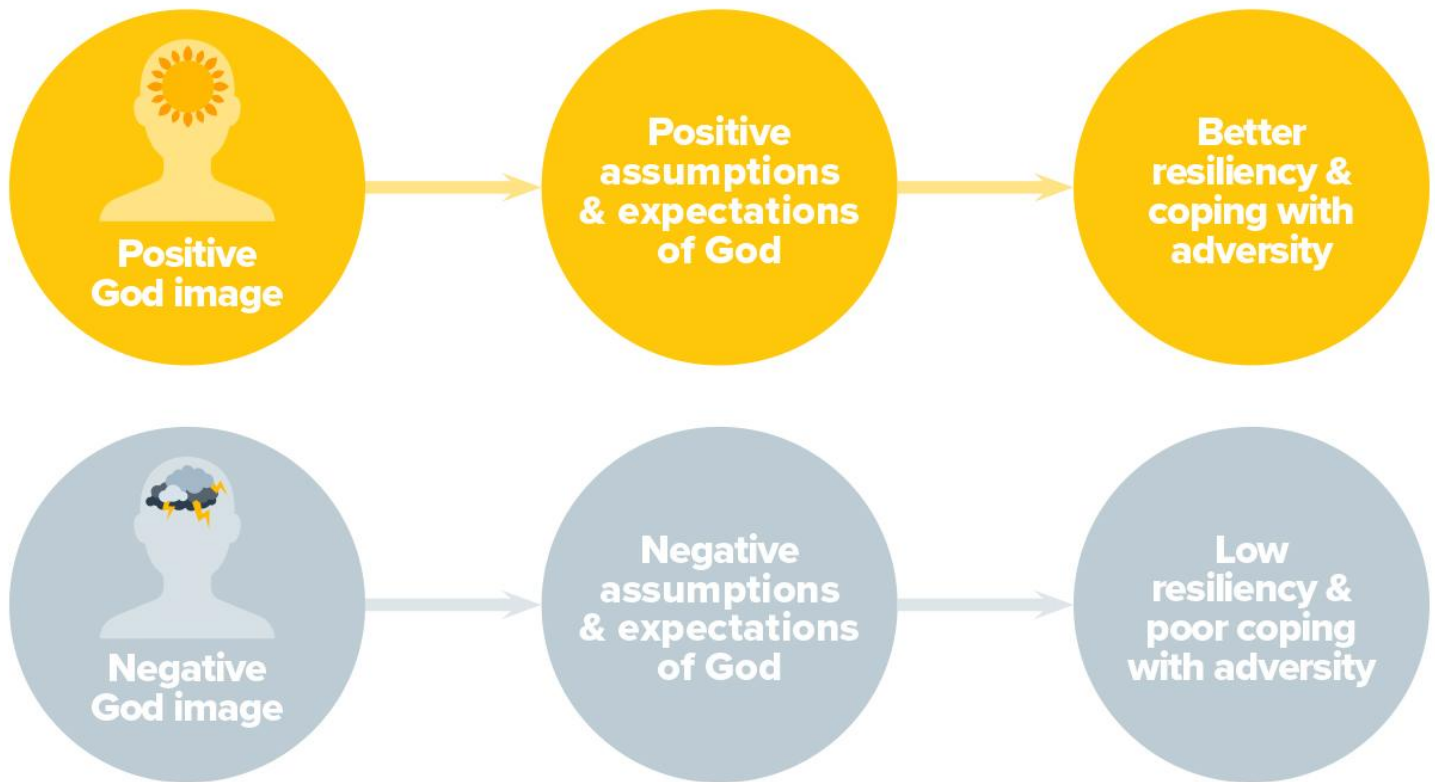
¹² Qur'an 53:23.

¹³ Qur'an 48:6.

¹⁴ Al-Qurtubi, *al-Jami li ahkam al-Qur'an*.

¹⁵ Qur'an 3:154.

FIGURE 2:
Consequences of Positive and Negative God Images



One of the most vivid Qur’anic examples of the psychospiritual ramifications of divergent God images is found in its account of the Battle of the Trench. The Muslim army numbered approximately 3,000 soldiers, compared to the confederate army of nearly 10,000.¹⁶ When the hypocrites and weak believers saw that the confederates vastly outnumbered them and were laying siege to the city of Medina, they proclaimed, “Allah and His Messenger did not promise us except delusion.” However, the believers strong in faith, who saw the exact same 10,000 enemy combatants surrounding them, said, “‘This is [exactly] what Allah and His Messenger had promised us, and Allah and His Messenger spoke the truth.’ And it increased them only in faith and acceptance.”¹⁷ This incident demonstrates that

¹⁶ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 33:9.

¹⁷ Qur’an 33:22.

diametrically opposed God images between people were the root cause of their diverging emotional states.

Allah encourages us to see and feel His [beautiful attributes](#) by having good assumptions about Him (*ḥusn al-ẓann bi'llāh*). The Prophet ﷺ narrated that Allah said, “I am as My servant expects of Me.”¹⁸ Allah is thus inviting us to perceive Him positively so that we experience Him positively in our lives. We find plenty of examples in both religious texts and our life experiences of people who have positive and negative assumptions about Allah. We see people who [accurately] imagine Allah as intimately near and personal, as well as people who [inaccurately] imagine Him as distant and impersonal. To some, Allah is experienced as warm, loving, and benevolent, whereas to others He is perceived as cold, distant, and punitive. Some perceive God as helpful and easy to please, whereas others see him as demanding and difficult to please. Some perceive God as always having His door open to them, whereas others feel God has long abandoned them. These disparities in God images show us that distortions exist and that they contribute to our psychological struggles, such as our ability to cope with adversity. Based on our framework, a distorted God image stems from two primary factors: (1) incorrect propositional beliefs about Allah and (2) skewed affective experiential perceptions of Allah.

A distorted God image will disturb our relationship with God and may lead to psychospiritual problems such as religious doubt, low self-worth, and [mental illness](#). We believe that our basic need to understand and bond with our Creator is programmed in our *fiṭra* (innate disposition). We are wired to connect, and our neurobiological systems predispose us to develop nurturing relationships. We have a relationship-seeking system within us from birth, and our neural circuitry and hormones react to facilitate deep bonds with others. Satisfying relationships are the most important source of happiness and sense of meaning in life.¹⁹ We not only seek these bonds with humans, but are biologically primed to seek moral meaning

¹⁸ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 7505; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2675.

¹⁹ Eric Klinger, *Meaning and Void: Inner Experience and the Incentives in People's Lives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977); Jonathan L. Freedman, *Happy People: What Happiness Is, Who Has It, and Why* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978).

and a spiritual connection to the transcendent.²⁰ Thus, it is in our *fiṭra* (innate disposition) to desire Allah.²¹ Even before our exposure to formal knowledge of Allah, the human psyche has been inspired with “deocentric intrapsychic endowments” that serve as precursors to the experience of God. Allah created this internal God-centered drive *a priori*, existing before any psychological experience with Him. The infant therefore has some primordial, preverbal awareness of God’s presence.²²



A distorted God image will disturb our relationship with God and may lead to psychospiritual problems such as religious doubt, low self-worth, and mental illness.

An infant does not have the cognitive ability to understand Allah and His love directly. However, over time, with knowledge, relationships, and life experience, the child internalizes an image of God. The process of internalizing a God image is possible because there is a God-given ability to comprehend and experience Him.²³ However, the human desire for intimacy with Allah requires sound experiential knowledge of Him. Ibn Taymiyya stated that one’s love for God intensifies according to one’s knowledge of Him and the soundness of one’s *fiṭra*, and that it diminishes with reduced knowledge and the pollution of one’s *fiṭra* with corruptive vain desires.²⁴

²⁰ Kathleen Kovner Kline, “Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities,” in *Authoritative Communities* (New York: Springer, 2008), 3–68; Barney Zwart, “Infants ‘Have Natural Belief in God,’” *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 26, 2008, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/infants-have-natural-belief-in-god-20080725-313b.html>.

²¹ Abu Huraira reported: The Prophet ﷺ said, “No child is born but that he is upon the natural disposition. Then, his parents make him a Jew, or a Christian, or Magian.” *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 1292; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2658.

²² Moshe Halevi Spero, *Religious Objects as Psychological Structures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

²³ Spero, *Religious Objects as Psychological Structures*.

²⁴ Ibn Taymīyyah, *Dar’ ta’āruḍ al-‘aql wa-al-naql* (Riyadh: Jāmi‘at al-Imām Muḥammad b. Sa‘ūd al-Islāmiyyah, 1991), 7:73.

Attachment theory

No child is born but that he is upon the innate disposition. Then, it is his parents who make him into a Jew, a Christian, or Magian.²⁵

As the Prophet ﷺ explained, parents are the primary worldly factor in the religious development of their children.²⁶ They have the ability to preserve or corrupt the *fiṭra* of their offspring. One might interpret this hadith as only referring to the role parents play in conveying a cognitive propositional set of beliefs to their children. However, many parents fail to realize that they also influence the development of their children's affective emotional experiences with Allah through their parenting practices.

Before developing a conscious relationship with Allah, a child first develops a relationship with their parents. The infant develops a particular attachment style depending on the quality of their interactions with their parents.²⁷ According to attachment theory, the early attachment bond formed with our parents, or primary caregivers, through repeated daily experiences creates an internal working model that functions as a relationship blueprint for our future relationships.²⁸ The internal working model provides the child with an internal representation of their own worth, as well as a guide for how to view others. Within this bond, the child learns to trust or mistrust, a sense of security or insecurity, and this attachment bond largely depends upon the consistency, predictability, and quality of parental responses to the child. Healthy feelings of security and satisfaction emerge if the child is nurtured appropriately.²⁹ However, if the child is inconsistently nurtured,

²⁵ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 1292; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2658.

²⁶ See for a review of parental influences on religiosity. Osman Umarji, "Will My Children Be Muslim? The Development of Religious Identity in Young People," Yaqeen, January 16, 2020, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/will-my-children-be-muslim-the-development-of-religious-identity-in-young-people>.

²⁷ John Bowlby, "Attachment and Loss: Retrospect and Prospect," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 52, no. 4 (1982): 664.

²⁸ Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss Volume II: Separation, Anxiety and Anger* (London: Hogarth Press, Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1973), 1–429.

²⁹ Appropriate nurturing refers to the ability to notice infant signals, to interpret these signals correctly, and to respond to them promptly and appropriately by adapting behaviors to the infant's needs. Taken from:

what will emerge instead are feelings of resentment, frustration, anger, and insecurity.³⁰

Attachment theory classifies children as having a secure or insecure attachment style. Secure attachments predict many positive psychological outcomes, whereas insecure attachments are a risk factor for psychological dysfunction.³¹ Securely attached people hold a positive view of themselves and a positive view of others. They typically form healthy and loving relationships with others. They feel that they can trust others and be trusted, love and accept love, and grow close to others with relative ease. They are also able to depend on others without becoming totally dependent.³² Secure attachments in childhood foster emotional resilience and habits of seeking out selected attachment figures for comfort, protection, advice, and strength.³³ Relationships based on secure attachments result in effective use of cognitive functions, emotional flexibility, enhancement of security, assignment of meaning to experiences, and effective self-regulation.³⁴

Insecure attachment styles are typically classified as either anxious, avoidant, or disorganized. Anxious attachments are typically the product of interactions with caregivers whose responses are inconsistent and who are not readily available in times of need. Anxious attachments are marked by a fear of abandonment. Anxiously attached people tend to be insecure about their relationships, desire constant validation, and are often very clingy or needy.

Mary D. Salter Ainsworth, Mary C. Blehar, Everett Waters, and Sally N. Wall, *Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation* (New York: Psychology Press, 2015).

³⁰ 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.

³¹ Susan M. Johnson, *Attachment Theory in Practice: Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) with Individuals, Couples, and Families* (New York: Guilford Publications, 2019).

³² Kelly Gonsalves, "The 4 Attachment Styles In Relationships + How To Find Yours," mindbodygreen, October 17, 2022, <https://www.mindbodygreen.com/articles/attachment-theory-and-the-4-attachment-styles>.

³³ Theodore A. Stern, Gregory L. Fricchione, and Jerrold F. Rosenbaum, *Massachusetts General Hospital Handbook of General Hospital Psychiatry* (N.p.: Saunders Elsevier, 2010).

³⁴ Stern, Fricchione, and Rosenbaum, *Massachusetts General Hospital Handbook*.

Avoidant attachment styles are marked by a fear of intimacy.³⁵ The avoidant pattern of attachment usually develops when a child learns to expect rejection when seeking care. People with an avoidant attachment style tend to have trouble getting close to others or trusting others in relationships, and relationships can make them feel suffocated. They typically maintain distance in relationships and prefer to be independent and rely on themselves. In later life, the avoidant individual will tend not to seek the love and support of others and will endeavor to become emotionally self-sufficient.³⁶ Disorganized attachments have elements of both anxious and avoidant attachment styles. Disorganized attachments are marked by fear of the caregiver and lack of trust in them. Children with a disorganized attachment do not know what to expect from their caregiver or if their needs will ever be met.³⁷

Another pathway to an insecure attachment may be overparenting.³⁸ Overparenting is characterized by excessive affection, protection, and control of children, especially into adolescence and emerging adulthood. For example, ‘helicopter’ parents are so involved in their children’s lives that their children never develop age-appropriate autonomy and decision-making skills.³⁹ This type of risk-averse and anxious parenting attempts to shield children from any perceived obstacle or failure. This leads children to reduce their exploratory behaviors. They learn to fear new experiences and may become overly cautious and insecure.⁴⁰ Perceptions of being over-parented relate to insecure attachments, poor parent-child communication, low self-efficacy, reduced trust and increased alienation amongst peers, and higher levels of entitlement.⁴¹

³⁵ Kim Bartholomew, “Avoidance of Intimacy: An Attachment Perspective,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 7, no. 2 (1990): 147–78.

³⁶ Tamara Kotler, Simone Buzwell, Yolanda Romeo, and Jocelyn Bowland, “Avoidant Attachment as a Risk Factor for Health,” *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 67, no. 3 (1994): 237–45.

³⁷ “Disorganized Attachment: Causes & Symptoms.” The Attachment Project. Accessed 10/5/2022. <https://www.attachmentproject.com/blog/disorganized-attachment/>

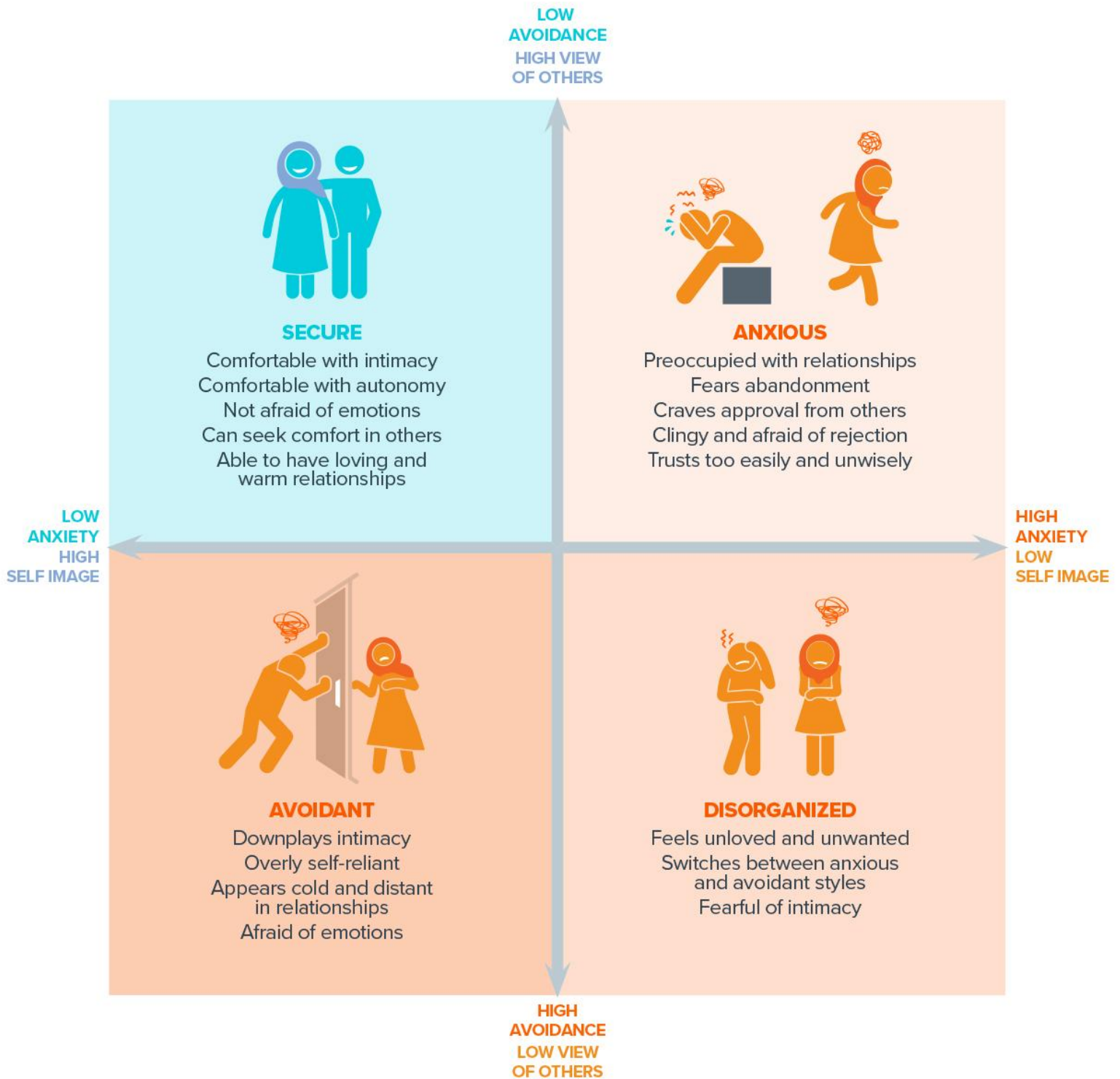
³⁸ Jian Jiao and Chris Segrin, “Overparenting and Emerging Adults’ Insecure Attachment with Parents and Romantic Partners,” *Emerging Adulthood* 10, no. 3 (2022): 725–30.

³⁹ Chris Segrin, Alesia Woszidlo, Michelle Givertz, Amy Bauer, and Melissa Taylor Murphy, “The Association between Overparenting, Parent-Child Communication, and Entitlement and Adaptive Traits in Adult Children,” *Family Relations* 61, no. 2 (2012): 237–52.

⁴⁰ Heinrichs, “Our Father Which Art in Heaven,” 120–129.

⁴¹ Daniel J. van Ingen, Stacy R. Freiheit, Jesse A. Steinfeldt, Linda L. Moore, David J. Wimer, Adelle D. Knutt, Samantha Scapinello, and Amber Roberts, “Helicopter Parenting: The Effect of an Overbearing Caregiving Style on Peer Attachment and Self-Efficacy,” *Journal of College Counseling* 18, no. 1 (2015): 7–20.

FIGURE 3:
Classical Attachment Styles



Many researchers have suggested that our attachment style with our parents heavily influences our affective experiential image of God and our attachment style with Him.⁴² The internal working model of relationships we develop through our parental attachments influences how we initially feel about Allah and attach to Him. If a child feels wanted by one's parents and feels a sense of trust, safety, and security with them, they will likely apply this internal working model to Allah. If the child does not feel wanted or does not feel a sense of trust or safety, they will likely project this onto Allah as well. This largely unconscious process forms a default, but malleable, image of Allah and a particular type of attachment to Him.⁴³ We want to stress that our image of, and attachment to, God can indeed change.⁴⁴

Another mechanism that may shape our God image is symbolic and vicarious conditioning by parents, especially mothers.⁴⁵ Children may develop a notion of who God is through associations with symbolic stimuli, such as emotion-arousing words used by parents. For example, children may perceive God as pleasant if they hear their parents repeatedly use words such as kind, loving, and gentle when describing God. Similarly, in vicarious learning, the emotional responses of parents when talking about God may be communicated through vocal and facial expressions, which may arouse strong emotional reactions in the child. For example, a parent's smiling face when speaking about God may nurture a child's image of God as friendly, loving, and caring.⁴⁶

⁴² Heinrichs, "Our Father Which Art in Heaven"; Lee A. Kirkpatrick, *Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion* Guilford Press, 2005.

⁴³ Rizzuto, *Birth of the Living God*.

⁴⁴ Lee A. Kirkpatrick, "God as a Substitute Attachment Figure: A Longitudinal Study of Adult Attachment Style and Religious Change in College Students," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 24, no. 9 (1998): 961–73; Trevor Olson, Theresa Clement Tisdale, Edward B. Davis, Elizabeth A. Park, Jiyun Nam, Glendon L. Moriarty, Don E. Davis, Michael J. Thomas, Andrew D. Cuthbert, and Lance W. Hays, "God Image Narrative Therapy: A Mixed-Methods Investigation of a Controlled Group-Based Spiritual Intervention," *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 3, no. 2 (2016): 77.

⁴⁵ Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press, 1971).

⁴⁶ 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): 519–35.

Attach to survive or survive to attach?

Attachment theorists argue that the attachment process was an evolved emotional-behavioral-motivational system designed by natural selection to maintain proximity between helpless infants and their primary caregivers. The theory draws heavily from evolutionary theory and ethology, and states that attachment-related behaviors serve to maximize survival and reproduction. Such theories posit the evolutionary process as the central explanation for the existence of loving attachments. In other words, attachment is merely a means to an end: survival. However, it is beyond the capability of the scientific method to prove this claim, and as Muslims we fundamentally disagree with this explanation.⁴⁷

We argue, from an Islamic perspective, that attachments are not simply a means to survival. Rather, attachment to God can be conceived as the fundamental purpose of life. The human being was created to lovingly attach and voluntarily submit to (i.e., worship) Allah, and the development of a secure attachment to caregivers in childhood serves as a means to facilitate a secure attachment to Allah.⁴⁸ Thus, if our ultimate purpose in life is to lovingly attach and submit to Allah, the ability to survive in this world is a necessary means to that end. Survival allows us to learn, see, and experience Allah's sublime attributes in the world, and through survival we realize our purpose of connecting with Him.

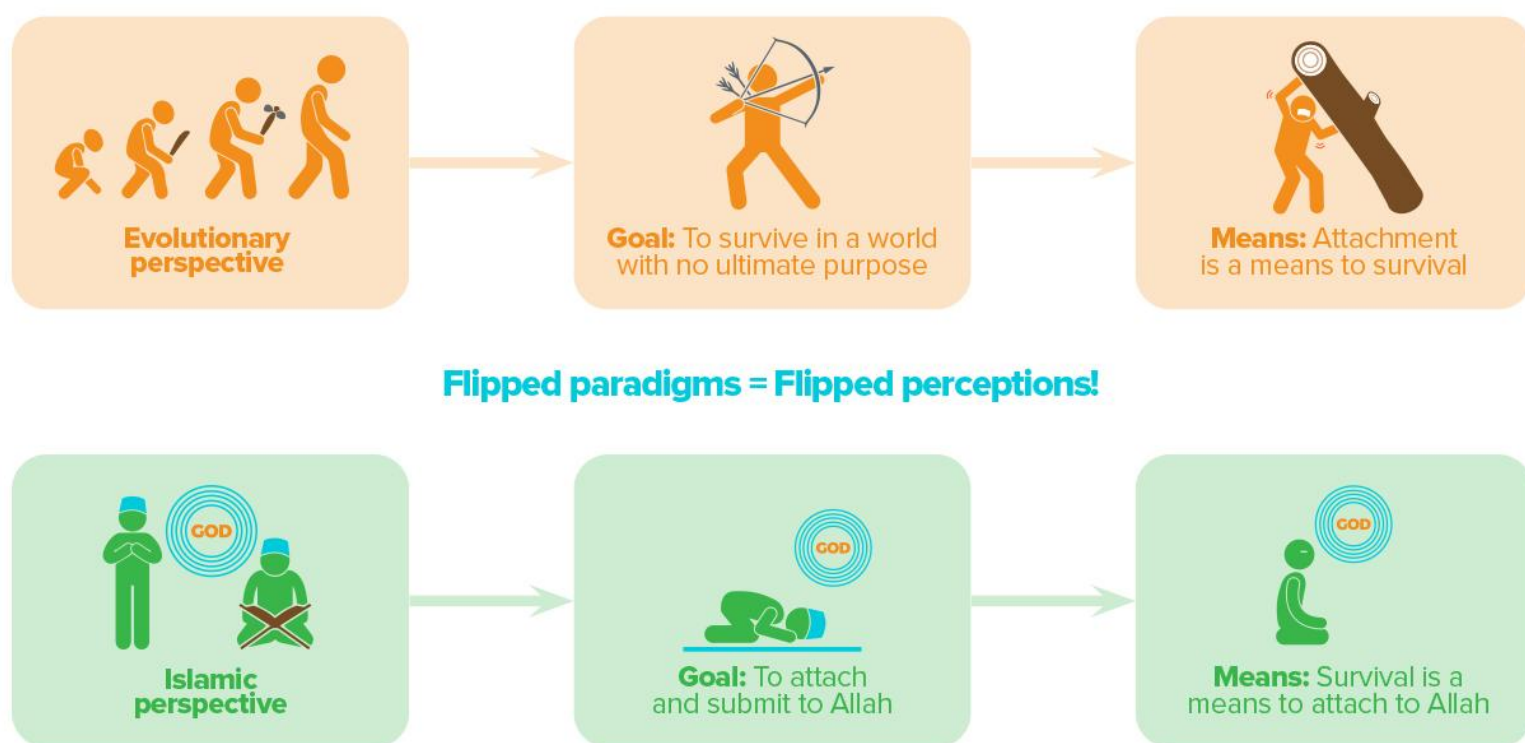
Yet parental attachment has a purpose beyond facilitating a healthy attachment to Allah. In His infinite wisdom, Allah has chosen to deliver sustenance and love to the helpless and dependent child through his parents. Thus, *al-Wadūd* (the Loving) plants love for the child in the hearts of the parents, who are then rewarded for delivering this love to their child. This is crucial because the child does not have the cognitive capacity to understand who Allah is or to recognize His love directly.

⁴⁷ Osman Umarji, "Scientism and Certainty | Dr. Osman Umarji | Ramadan Sessions 2021," Al-Arqam Institute, YouTube video, May 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILKdiHJB8T0>.

⁴⁸ This is not to say that the notion of a secure attachment as defined by modern psychology fully captures what a healthy faith-congruent attachment to Allah entails. Nonetheless, we agree that viewing Allah positively and one's self relatively positively (not to the extent of grandiose narcissism) is a healthy state to aspire to.

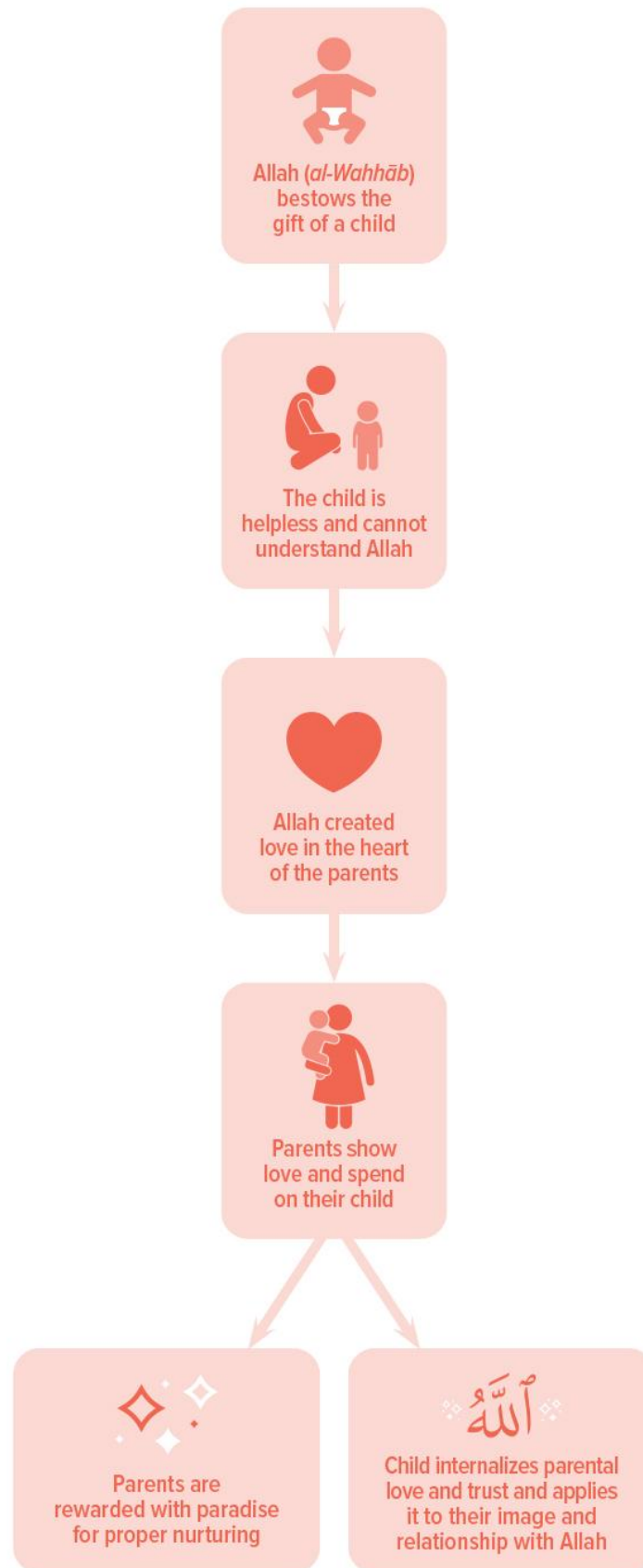
Furthermore, through the parents nurturing their child and spending on him from the wealth Allah gave them, they gain tremendous satisfaction in this life and reward in the afterlife.⁴⁹

FIGURE 4:
Attachment According to Evolutionary and Islamic Paradigms



⁴⁹ Abu Mas'ud reported: The Prophet ﷺ said, "If a Muslim spends on his family seeking reward from Allah, it is charity for him." *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5351; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1002.

FIGURE 5:
Wisdom of Parental Love for Children



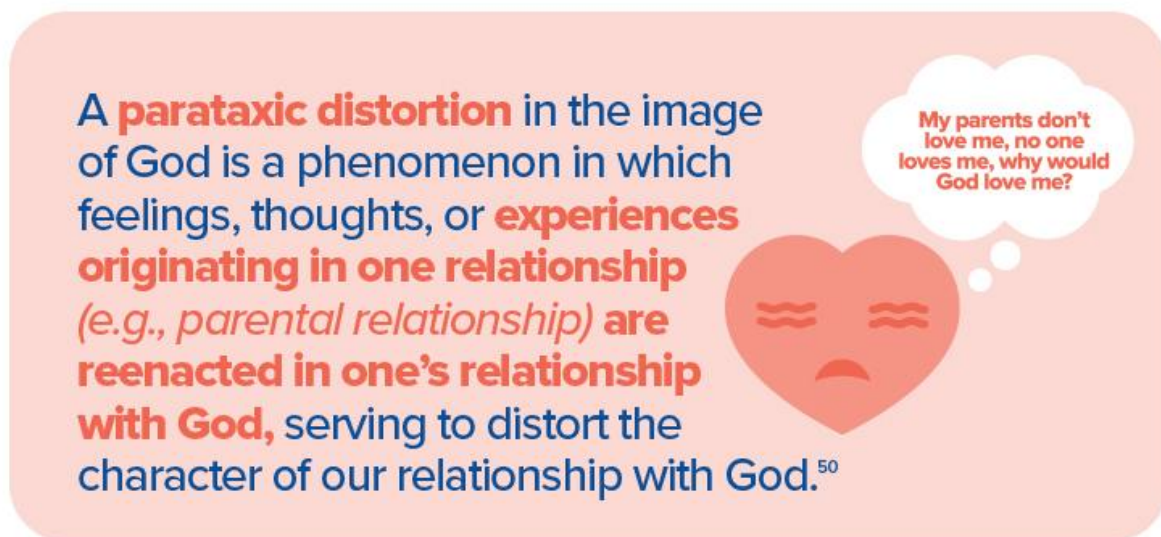
Parataxic distortions in the image of God

Although most children develop a secure attachment to their parents, many do not.

⁵⁰ Children insecurely attached to their parents may develop an unhealthy internal working model and consequently develop an insecure attachment to Allah. This is because a person's initial relationship with God often resembles their relationship with their parents. It is indeed a travesty if a person imagines God as cruel and distant because they had parents who they perceived as cruel and distant.

A distortion in the image of God based on a false internal working model has been referred to as a parataxic distortion.⁵¹ A parataxic distortion in the image of God refers to a negative attitude towards God based on imagining Him as similar to people from past experiences. In other words, a parataxic distortion in the image of God is a phenomenon in which feelings, thoughts, or experiences originating in one relationship (e.g., the parent-child relationship) are reenacted in one's relationship with God, serving to distort the character of our relationship with God.

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⁵⁰ B. Rose Huber, "Four in 10 Infants Lack Strong Parental Attachments," Princeton University, March 27, 2014, <https://www.princeton.edu/news/2014/03/27/four-10-infants-lack-strong-parental-attachments>.

⁵¹ Heinrichs, "Our Father Which Art in Heaven."

⁵² Heinrichs, "Our Father Which Art in Heaven."

We are our children's first teachers about who Allah is. We transmit our image of God to them in both words and deeds. They learn cognitively what we explicitly teach them about Allah and affectively from how we behave and relate to them. In other words, we teach them about God in both propositional and relational language. Parataxic distortions in the image of God emerge when what we teach our children propositionally is discordant with what we teach them relationally.⁵³

Parents, God image, and life struggles

Prior research on non-Muslims has investigated the connection between a child's upbringing and their God image and attachment. This body of literature has found links between parental God image and youth God image, youth attachment to parents and attachment to God, and parenting practices and youth God image. Parents with a loving God image are more likely to raise children who perceive both their parents and God as loving, whereas parents who imagine God as distant have children who likely think the same.⁵⁴ Regarding attachment styles, adults who retrospectively report insecure attachments to their parents report greater strain in their relationships with God and difficulties in forming a positive God image and attachment.⁵⁵ As for parenting practices, adults who report their parents as sensitive and loving in childhood are more likely to view God as supportive and loving, whereas adults who remember their parents as distant are more likely to view God as distant.⁵⁶

⁵³ Heinrichs, "Our Father Which Art in Heaven."

⁵⁴ 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."

⁵⁵ Beth Fletcher Brokaw and Keith J. Edwards, "The Relationship of God Image to Level of Object Relations Development," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 22, no. 4 (1994): 352–71; William G. Justice and Warren Lambert, "A Comparative Study of the Language People Use to Describe the Personalities of God and Their Earthly Parents," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 40, no. 2 (1986): 166–72.

⁵⁶ 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.

Collectively, this body of research suggests that parents' God image influences their parenting and the subsequent God image and attachment of their children. In a comprehensive study of 363 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 imagined God as more loving and caring.⁵⁷

Unfortunately, research has found that distorted God images and insecure attachments to Him often beget more religious doubts, worse mental health, and more negative self-concepts. For example, adults who reported an avoidant parental attachment imagined God as more distant and cruel, which was associated with persistent religious doubt.⁵⁸ Similarly, another study found that perceiving God as cruel and distant is related to lower self-worth and self-esteem.⁵⁹ In a study of Orthodox Jews, anxious parental attachments in adulthood were related to sudden religious conversion and apostasy from Judaism.⁶⁰

Empirical study of Muslims

Thus far, we have laid out the theoretical framework that guides our empirical research on Muslims. Our ambition is to create assessments and interventions that rehabilitate distorted images of God and insecure attachments to Him. It is our belief that human thriving is fundamentally tied to having a healthy God image and

⁵⁷ De Roos, Iedema, and Miedema, "Influence of Maternal Denomination."

⁵⁸ Beata Zarzycka, "Parental Attachment Styles and Religious and Spiritual Struggle: A Mediating Effect of God Image," *Journal of Family Issues* 40, no. 5 (2019): 575–93.

⁵⁹ Leslie J. Francis, Harry M. Gibson, and Mandy Robbins, "God Images and Self-Worth among Adolescents in Scotland," *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 4, no. 2 (2001): 103–8; Peter Benson and Bernard Spilka, "God Image as a Function of Self-Esteem and Locus of Control," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1973): 297–310.

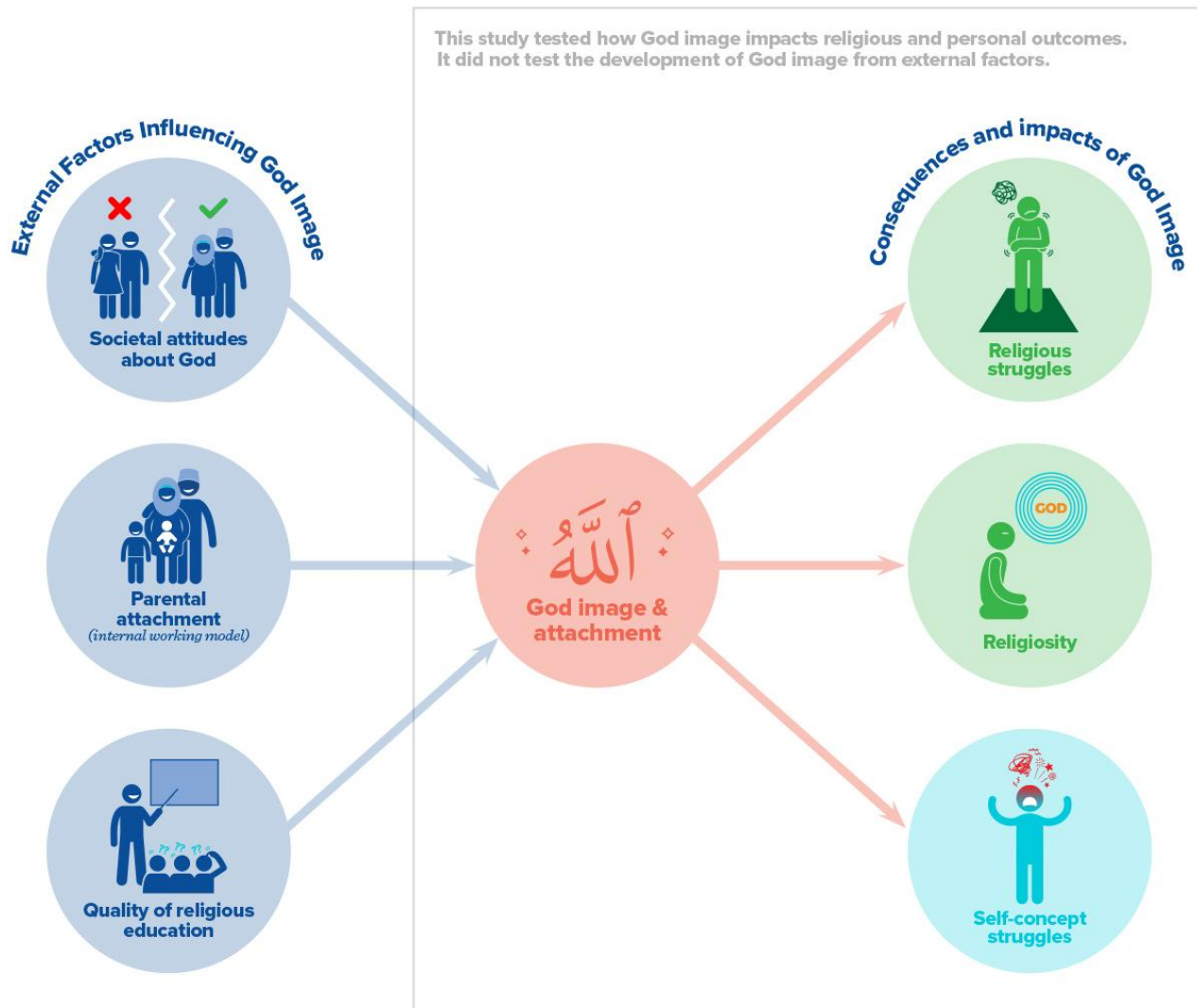
⁶⁰ Yaakov Greenwald, Mario Mikulincer, Pehr Granqvist, and Phillip R. Shaver, "Apostasy and Conversion: Attachment Orientations and Individual Differences in the Process of Religious Change," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 13, no. 4 (2021): 425.

attachment. After years of preliminary work, we have created our own survey based on prior research and the Islamic tradition.⁶¹

We hypothesize the following theoretical model (Figure 6) explaining the relationship between parents (or primary attachment figures), God image and attachment, and religious and self-related problems. We believe that a child's upbringing, including the explicit ideas they were taught about God and the implicit feelings they develop towards Him as a result of their parental relationship and attachment style, will create a particular God image and attachment. Ultimately, one's God image, if distorted, will result in religious struggles and a more negative self-concept.

⁶¹ We proceeded to validate our measure of God image and attachment using confirmatory factor analysis. From a large pool of items, the items with the highest factor loadings were retained to create our final measures. These analyses can be found in Appendix B.

FIGURE 6:
Theoretical Model of God Image & Attachment Foundations and Consequences



The present study focused on the boxed part of the model.⁶² It aimed to understand the types of God images and attachments, and how God images predict religious and self-concept struggles. Our sample included 241 Muslim participants from

⁶² Our God image and attachment survey was ninety questions long. Therefore, due to space considerations, parental questions were not included. Our future studies will inshaAllah investigate the parental component in more detail.

across North America.⁶³ Approximately 33% of the participants were between 16 and 25 years old, 30% were 26-35, 33% were 36-45, and 4% were older than 55. Approximately 64% of participants were female and 75% were raised in a Western country. Almost two in three participants (65%) reported praying five times a day and reading the Qur'an multiple times a week.

The primary questions we addressed were the following:

1. What are the various types of God images that people have? How are God images related to religiosity?
2. What are the various types of attachments to God that people have? How are attachments to God related to religiosity?
3. To what extent does one's God image relate to religious struggles (e.g., doubts and objecting to God) and self-concept struggles (e.g., self-esteem and shame)?

We hypothesized that positive God images would be related to more secure attachments to God, whereas negative God images would predict more insecure (anxious/avoidant) attachments. We hypothesized that negative God images would predict more religious and self-concept struggles.

Measures

God image. Prior research has conceptualized different dimensions of God image, including God as loving, distant, cruel, or coplike. From an Islamic perspective, Allah has more than 99 beautiful names and attributes, all of which we wanted to integrate but could not. However, since there is considerable overlap between many of His attributes, we focused on measuring those that we believe capture key aspects of a person's God image.⁶⁴ We also included a coplike dimension of God

⁶³ The survey was created in Qualtrics and data was collected between December 27, 2021 and April 2, 2022. Participants were solicited via emails to random members of Yaqeen's North American listserv.

⁶⁴ Our measure is not exhaustive and cannot fully capture God image. Future survey work intends to expand the dimensions of God image measured.

image due to its prevalence in cultural notions of God. See Appendix A for a complete list of survey items used. In this study, we analyzed the following four aspects of God image:

1. Forgiveness and Grace (*al-Ghafūr*)
2. Aiding and Helpful (*al-Mu'īn*)
3. Caring and Compassion (*al-Raḥīm*)
4. Strict and Coplike

Attachment to God. We measured people's anxiety and avoidance vis-à-vis God to capture their overall attachment style. Anxious items asked how worried the respondent felt about damaging their relationship with God, how much they craved signs of His love, and how anxious they were about their relationship with Him. Avoidant items asked about need to be close to God, experience of intense emotions with God, and preoccupation with religious thoughts.

Religious struggles. Seven questions were formulated to capture religious struggles. Such struggles were measured by (1) frequency and severity of doubts, (2) troubles with God's commands and worldly decrees, and (3) insistence on understanding God's decisions.⁶⁵

Self-concept struggles. Five questions captured different dimensions of self-concept struggles. These dimensions included internalized shame (i.e., feelings of inadequacy and deficiency)⁶⁶ and global self-esteem.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ The seven items demonstrated good internal reliability ($\alpha = .88$).

⁶⁶ David R. Cook, "Measuring Shame: The Internalized Shame Scale," *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (1988): 197–215. The three shame items demonstrated good internal reliability ($\alpha = .88$).

⁶⁷ Michelle A. Harris, M. Brent Donnellan, and Kali H. Trzesniewski, "The Lifespan Self-Esteem Scale: Initial Validation of a New Measure of Global Self-Esteem," *Journal of Personality Assessment* 100, no. 1 (2018): 84–95. The two self-esteem items demonstrated good internal reliability ($\alpha = .88$).

Religiosity. Ten items from our BASIC religiosity measure⁶⁸ captured five dimensions of religiosity, including beliefs, attitudes, spiritual practice, spiritual connection to God, and connection to religious institutions.⁶⁹

Analytic approach

To address our first two research questions about types of God images and attachments to God, we used cluster analysis and correlations.⁷⁰ Clustering allows us to see the pattern of God images and attachments that naturally emerge in our sample. To address our third question, we used t-tests to compare attachment styles with religious and self-concept struggles.

Results

The Muslims in our sample generally had positive images of Allah. The average score for imagining Allah as “Caring and Compassionate” (4.12 out 5) and His “Forgiveness and Grace” (3.95) were relatively high. The average score for imagining Allah as “Aiding and Helping” was moderate (3.25) and as “Strict and Coplike” was quite low (1.59). However, these averages do not provide a complete picture of the diverse perceptions of Allah that people in our sample hold.

Cluster analysis provided a more holistic representation of our sample’s range of God images. We identified four types of God image, and have described each one

⁶⁸ Tamer Desouky and Osman Umarji, “A Holistic View of Muslim Religiosity: Introducing BASIC,” *Yaqeen*, September 15, 2021,

<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/data/reports/a-holistic-view-of-muslim-religiosity-introducing-basic>.

⁶⁹ The ten items demonstrated good internal reliability ($\alpha = .80$).

⁷⁰ We first ran a hierarchical agglomerative clustering algorithm (Ward’s method) to determine the best cluster solution. K-means clustering was subsequently performed to fine-tune cluster homogeneity by reassigning cases to the optimal cluster.

in detail below.⁷¹ See Figure 7 and Table 1 for details. See Appendix B for descriptive statistics and correlations.

Profile 1: Highly benevolent image of God

Nearly half of the sample (48.6%) imagined God as very compassionate, very forgiving, very aiding and helpful, and not at all coplike. This profile is of a loving and benevolent Creator, actively involved in helping people throughout their lives, easily forgiving of mistakes, and generous with His mercy.

Profile 2: Slightly benevolent image of God

More than one in four people (25.7%) imagined God as quite forgiving, somewhat compassionate, and very helpful, but also a bit coplike. This group perceived Allah as generally good-willed, especially in helping people in life, but also a little strict in enforcing His rules. However, His benevolence is seen as exceeding His strictness, as He is relatively quick to forgive and somewhat compassionate.

Profile 3: Lukewarm and unconcerned image of God

Approximately one in seven people (17.4%) imagined God as neither very benevolent nor very malevolent. He was perceived as just a bit forgiving and helpful, but not very strict or coplike either. This group appears to imagine Allah as a neutral observer detached from His creation. Thus, He is not seen as particularly loving but neither is He seen as harsh or cruel.

⁷¹ Our analysis sample initially included 257 people. There were 13 cases that were missing too much data, so these cases were dropped. We performed the nearest neighbor imputation on five people who were missing scores on one dimension of God image. We finally removed three outliers whose scores deviated substantially from the sample. The four cluster solution explained 60.4 percent of the variance in God image profiles.

Profile 4: Cruel image of God

One in 12 people (8.3%) imagined Allah as cold-hearted and callous. He was perceived as not being helpful, compassionate, or forgiving, but as strict and demanding. For this group, Allah is a cosmic cop, eager to punish sinners and difficult to please.

Overall, three in four people (profiles 1 and 2) had positive God images. On the other hand, one in four people (profiles 3 and 4) did not hold a positive God image. God image was also positively correlated with holistic religiosity ($r=.42$).⁷² Similarly, the highly benevolent God image profile belonged to the most religious, followed by the slightly benevolent profile. In other words, those who viewed God more benevolently held stronger Islamic beliefs and attitudes, maintained more spiritual practices, felt a greater connection to God and to their communities, and volunteered and contributed more to religious causes.

Our second question pertained to God attachment styles. The average endorsement of an anxious attachment was moderate (2.92 out of 5) and of an avoidant attachment was low (1.86 out of 5). The cluster analysis revealed five profiles that best described the quality of attachments to God.⁷³ We describe each attachment style below, including how God images relate to these attachment styles. See Table 2 and Figures 8 and 9 for details.

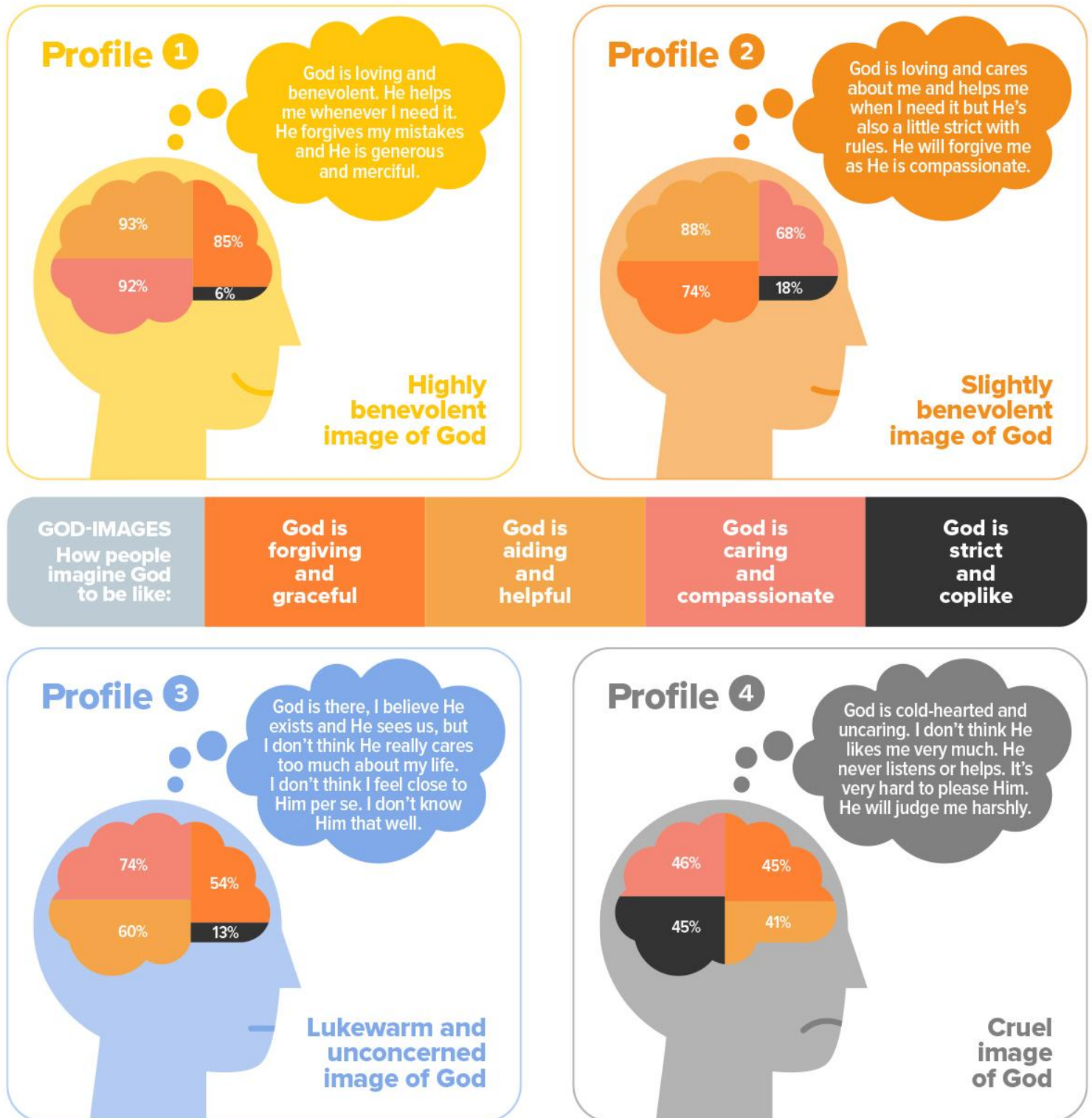
⁷² A total God image score was taken by averaging together the four dimensions. Unfortunately, due to a mistake of not including religiosity measures in our initial sample, we only measured religiosity for 93 of our participants. Nonetheless, the correlations and t-tests were statistically significant ($p<.05$).

⁷³ Our analysis sample included 236 people who completed attachment items. There were no outliers to remove. The five cluster solution explained 76.8 percent of the variance in God attachment profiles.

TABLE 1:
God Image Profiles

PROFILE	NAME	GOD IS FORGIVING & GRACEFUL <i>(al-Ghafūr)</i>	GOD IS AIDING & HELPFUL <i>(al-Muʿīn)</i>	GOD IS CARING & COMPASSIONATE <i>(al-Raḥīm)</i>	GOD IS STRICT & COPLIKE	N	%
1	Highly benevolent image of God	4.39	4.71	4.67	1.24	117	48.5%
2	Slightly benevolent image of God	3.97	4.53	3.72	1.73	62	25.7%
3	Lukewarm and unconcerned image of God	3.34	3.41	3.98	1.50	42	17.4%
4	Cruel image of God	2.79	2.65	2.85	2.80	20	8.3%

FIGURE 7:
Visual Representation of God Image Profiles



This illustration is a visual adaptation to represent the 'God-image profiles' concept via simplified storytelling. For actual study data refer to the Appendix at the end of this paper.

Profile 1: Secure God attachment

Nearly one in five people (19.1%) had a secure God attachment. People with this profile have a positive self-image and God-image. They generally perceived Allah as loving, intimate, helpful, forgiving, compassionate, and were not worried that God would abandon them or withhold His love from them.

Profile 2: Slightly anxious God attachment

Nearly one in three people (32.2%) had a slightly anxious God attachment. Their God-image was positive, but their self-image was slightly less positive than the self-images of those with a secure attachment. They report worrying about their relationship with God, even if only slightly, because they sometimes feel inadequate and can be hard on themselves when they make mistakes. However, their positive view of God is much stronger than any insecurities they may have about themselves.

Profile 3: Avoidant God attachment

More than one in six people (17.4%) had an avoidant God attachment. Such individuals imagine God as forgiving, but not very compassionate, intimate, or appreciative.⁷⁴ People with this profile tend to not desire intimacy with God and don't experience positive emotions when thinking about Him.

Profile 4: Disorganized God attachment

Just over 15% of respondents had a disorganized God attachment. People with this profile are highly anxious and slightly avoidant in their relationship with God. They perceive Allah as strict and not very helpful, appreciative, or merciful. They

⁷⁴ The God image survey captured people's perceptions of Allah as "al-Shakur" (the Appreciative). We are noting, briefly, that people with an avoidant attachment tended to see Allah as not being very appreciative. Future research will discuss the impacts of perceiving Allah as appreciative (or not) in far more detail.

also have a negative self-image. In summary, people in this group are very fearful of Allah and avoid intimacy with Him.

Profile 5: Highly anxious God attachment

About one in six people (16.1%) had a highly anxious God attachment. Such people tend to view God as neither very forgiving nor helpful, although He is merciful, intimate, and only moderately strict. Their deep desire for intimacy with God is complicated by extreme anxiety and worry regarding their relationship with Him. Individuals in this group think highly of God but poorly of themselves, thus wondering if they are good enough for God to love.

TABLE 2:
God Attachment Profiles

PROFILE	NAME	ANXIOUS	AVOIDANT	N	%
1	Secure attachment	1.83	1.50	45	19.1%
2	Slightly anxious attachment	2.90	1.64	76	32.3%
3	Avoidant attachment	2.23	2.62	41	17.4%
4	Disorganized attachment	3.90	2.52	36	15.3%
5	Highly anxious attachment	4.08	1.31	38	16.1%

FIGURE 8:
Visual Representation of God Attachment Profiles

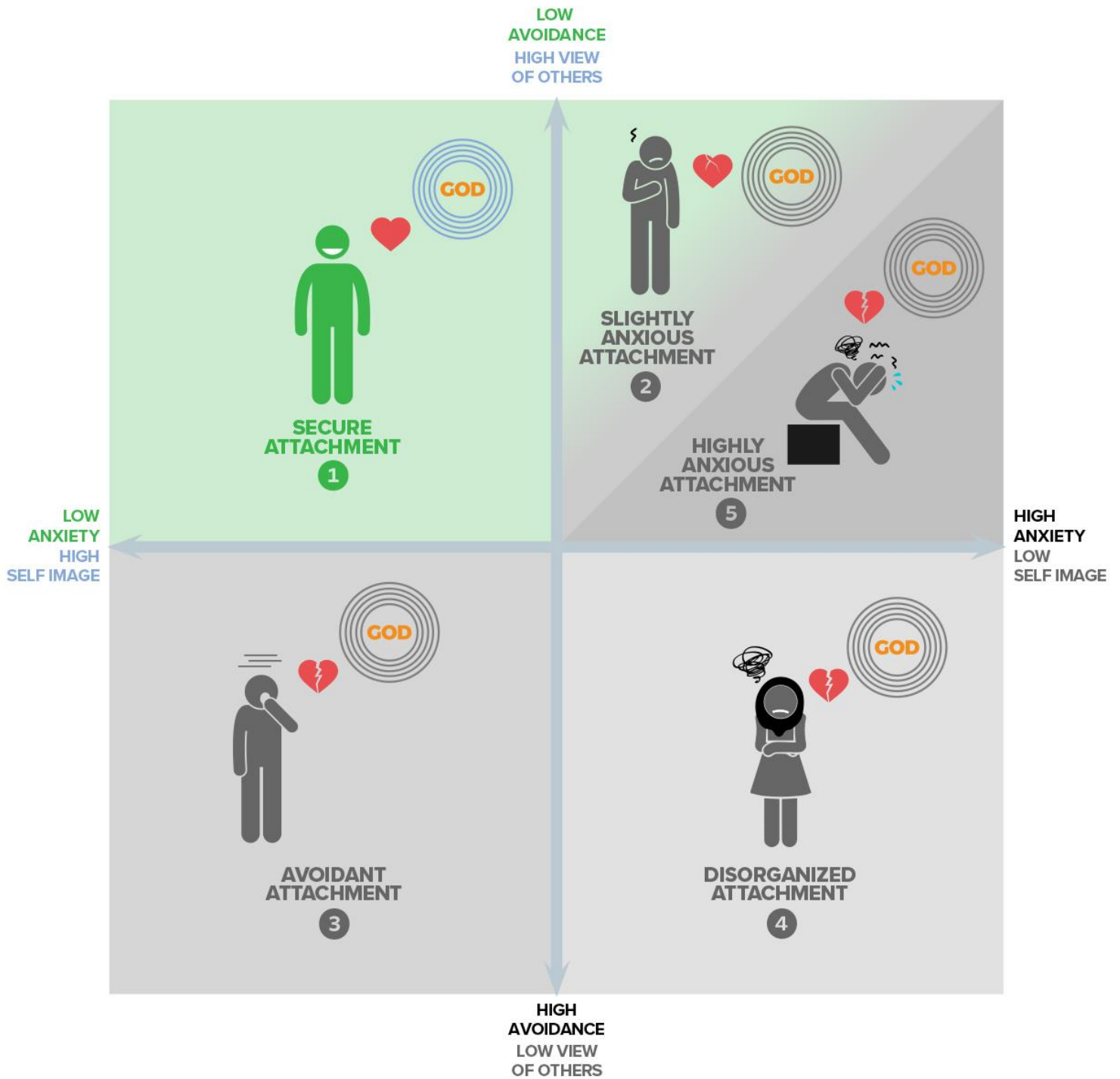
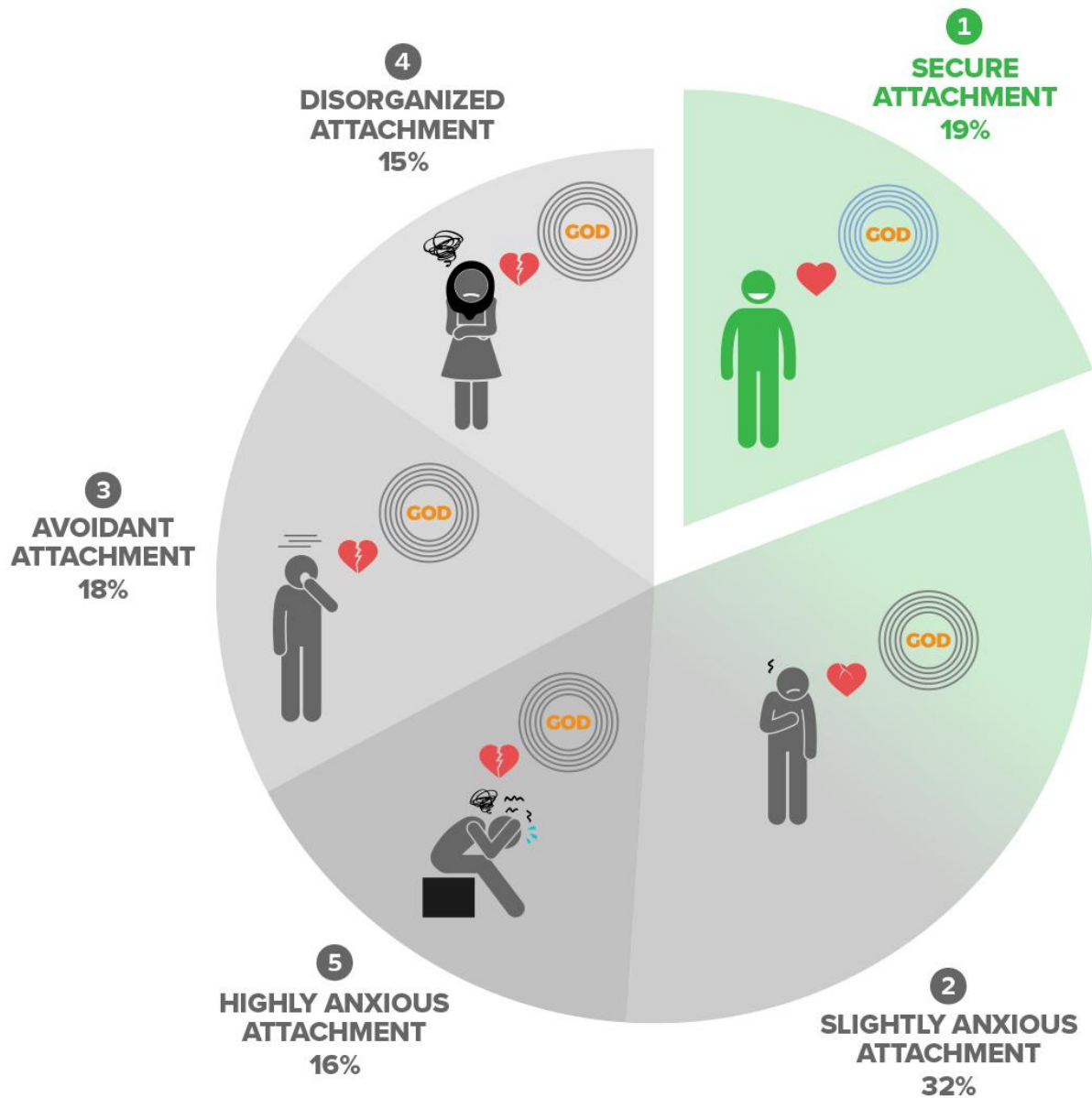


FIGURE 9:
Proportion of People in Each Attachment Profile



Avoidant attachment was negatively correlated with religiosity ($r = -.47$). Indeed, people with avoidant and disorganized attachments had the lowest levels of religiosity (Profiles 3 and 4). Those with secure and anxious attachments did not significantly differ in religiosity.

Our third question was about how God images relate to religious and self-concept struggles.⁷⁵ Total God image score was negatively associated with religious ($r=-.68$) and self-concept struggles ($r=-.56$).⁷⁶ In other words, people who held more benevolent God images tended to report far fewer religious doubts and greater self-worth and self-esteem. A highly benevolent God image was associated with the least amount of religious struggles, while those with a slightly benevolent God image had comparatively more religious struggles ($t=-4.28$, $p<.001$). The lukewarm/unconcerned God image was associated with moderate levels of religious struggles. Finally, the cruel God image profile was associated with the highest levels of religious struggles. Those who imagine God as callous and strict report experiencing more religious doubts and objecting more to God's commands and worldly decrees.

The same patterns were observed between God image profiles and struggles with a sense of self. People with highly benevolent God images reported few sense-of-self struggles, indicating that they generally had positive self-images. People with slightly benevolent God images reported experiencing a moderate degree of sense-of-self struggles, which was quite a bit more than the highly benevolent profile ($t=-4.03$, $p<.001$). People with a lukewarm/unconcerned God image reported even more self-concept struggles than those with the slightly benevolent profile. Lastly, people with a cruel God image reported the greatest self-concept struggles, indicating that they experienced very low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy and self-criticism. See Table 3 and Figure 10 for details.

⁷⁵ The ANOVA was significant for both self-concept struggles and religious doubts.

⁷⁶ $p<.001$

TABLE 3:
God Image and Religious and Self-concept Struggles

PROFILE	NAME	RELIGIOUS STRUGGLES	SELF-CONCEPT STRUGGLES
1	Highly benevolent image of God	1.38	2.17
2	Slightly benevolent image of God	1.71	2.74
3	Lukewarm and unconcerned image of God	1.96	3.38
4	Cruel image of God	2.91	3.98

Note. Scores range from 1 (low) to 5 (high). Higher scores indicate more struggles.

FIGURE 10:
God Image and Religious and Sense of Self Struggles



Discussion

This paper introduced a theory of God image and attachment. Our survey analysis highlighted four typologies of God image and five God attachment styles. Benevolent God images were associated with higher religiosity, whereas avoidant and disorganized attachments were associated with lower religiosity. We also found that more distorted God images (i.e., imaging Allah as lukewarm/unconcerned or as cruel) were associated with more maladaptive attachment styles and more religious and self-concept struggles.

Nearly three in four Muslims in our sample reported a benevolent God image. However, our sample was likely more holistically religious than the general North American Muslim population.⁷⁷ Therefore, it is probable that more than one in four Muslims in North America do not have a positive God image. We also found that about half of the sample had either a secure attachment (19%) or a slightly anxious attachment (32%).

This means that there were many people with a positive God image who did not have a secure attachment. This discrepancy may indicate that God attachments need to be conceptualized in terms different from classical attachment theory. Additionally, from a purely religious perspective, we believe that having a slightly anxious attachment to God is not necessarily debilitating. Although individuals with the slightly anxious profile had moderate levels of sense-of-self struggles, their religiosity didn't differ much from the secure group. Furthermore, they reported relatively few religious struggles. We believe that as long as one's God image is positive enough to compensate for one's slightly self-deprecating self-concept, one can enjoy a healthy religious life. That being said, helping such people improve their self-concept through greater self-compassion and increased

⁷⁷ We say this based on the aggregate religiosity scores reported by the sample. To compare with the general Muslim public, we can look at frequency of prayer as just one dimension of religiosity. In our sample, 65 percent of people reported praying five times a day, whereas Pew Research in 2017 found that approximately 42 percent of Muslims reported praying five times a day. See <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/07/26/religious-beliefs-and-practices/>.

recognition of their God-given dignity may help them become more secure over time.

Although we theorize that childhood relationships with parents and religious educators are central in developing an initial God image and attachment style, there is plenty of hope that people can rehabilitate their God image and attachment style in adulthood. In fact, we believe that rehabilitating our image of and relationship with God is not only possible, but is one of the best ways to heal our relationships with others and our previous attachment-related wounds.



Rehabilitating our image of and relationship with God **is not only possible, but is one of the best ways to heal our relationships with others** and our previous attachment-related wounds.

Prior research has shown that people with insecure attachments with their parents can find a compensatory secure attachment with God.⁷⁸ Through reconstructing a proper God image and developing a secure attachment to Allah, people can create a new blueprint (i.e., updated internal working model) for building meaningful relationships. One of the recommended ways to accomplish this is through forming an experiential relationship with a righteous teacher (i.e., *ṣuḥba*, or righteous companionship).

⁷⁸ Kirkpatrick, “God as a Substitute Attachment Figure”; Pehr Granqvist and Berit Hagekull, “Religiousness and Perceived Childhood Attachment: Profiling Socialized Correspondence and Emotional Compensation,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1999): 254–73.

Attaching to the Prophet ﷺ and the righteous scholars

The Prophet ﷺ was sent to a people with a severely distorted image of God.⁷⁹ Through his intimate bond with his followers he was able to help them reform their image of Allah and attach to Him. *Al-Rahmān* sent Muhammad as a mercy to guide people to Allah's mercy.

The Prophet ﷺ was the living embodiment of the scripture. Although Allah could have simply sent down a book from the heavens, He chose to reveal His message gradually over 23 years to the Prophet ﷺ to relationally transmit its message to us in words, emotions, and actions. Using object relations language,⁸⁰ we may conceive of the Prophet ﷺ as a “human object” to attach to and love, in order to understand Allah's love and concern for us. Allah explicitly tells us that following the Prophet is the path to gaining His love. Conceptually, having a strong attachment to the Prophet is part of following him.

‘Say, [O Muhammad], “If you love Allah, then follow me, and Allah will love you and forgive your sins. And Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.”’⁸¹

The Prophet ﷺ was the ultimate attachment figure for his companions. Whatever “bad objects” his companions had experienced prior to Islam, they were able to relinquish the effects of these objects by experiencing the messenger of Allah as a “good object.” He inculcated an intimate bond with his companions that made them feel secure, safe, and loved. Through developing a healthy attachment to the Prophet ﷺ, the companions were able to strengthen their connection to Allah. Thus, the Prophet ﷺ taught his companions the proper God image through correcting their cognitive beliefs about Allah and showing them how to emotionally experience His benevolence.

⁷⁹ “In no way have they estimated Allah in His true estimation.” This statement is found three times in the Qur'an regarding the various issues in which people misestimate Allah's perfection. See Qur'an 6:91, 22:74, 39:67.

⁸⁰ Object relations theory in psychoanalytic psychology is the process of developing a psyche in relation to others in the childhood environment.

⁸¹ Qur'an 3:31.

We find a clear example of this benevolent and caring interaction in a hadith where a man came to the messenger of Allah ﷺ while he was with a group of companions. He said, “O Messenger of Allah, I am doomed!” The Prophet ﷺ asked him what was wrong. He replied, “I was intimate with my wife while I was fasting.” The Prophet ﷺ asked him, “Can you afford to free a slave?” He replied, “No.” The Prophet ﷺ asked him, “Can you fast for two successive months?” He replied, “No.” The Prophet ﷺ asked him, “Can you afford to feed sixty poor persons?” He replied, “No.” The Prophet ﷺ waited silently, and soon a big basket of dates was brought to him. The Prophet ﷺ asked, “Where is the questioner?” He replied, “I am here.” The Prophet ﷺ said to him, “Take this [basket of dates] and give it in charity.” The man said, “Should I give it to a person poorer than I am? By Allah, there is no family between the two mountains [of Medina] who is poorer than mine.” The Prophet smiled until his molars were visible and said, “Feed your family with it.”⁸²

This narration demonstrates how the companions shared a secure bond with the Prophet ﷺ. They were able to come to him with their problems, confident that they would not be shamed or chastised. He was a secure base for them—they could explore the world and come back to him for support and comfort when needed. In this beautiful encounter, the Prophet ﷺ was able to see that one of his beloved companions was distressed for having committed this sin in Ramadan. The Prophet ﷺ did not add insult to injury. He did not rebuke his companion for not being able to expiate his sin. Rather, the Prophet ﷺ recognized his predicament, smiled at him, and gifted him the dates in the end. Through such experiences the companions learned about Allah. They learned about Allah’s mercy through seeing the Prophet ﷺ treat them with mercy.

In another event on the Day of an-Nahr,⁸³ the Prophet’s handsome cousin, Al-Faḍl ibn ‘Abbās, was sitting behind him on his camel. The Prophet ﷺ was answering people’s questions when a beautiful woman came to ask a question. Al-Faḍl, astounded by her beauty, started staring at her. The Prophet ﷺ turned back and noticed Al-Faḍl was gazing at her, so he ﷺ put his hand back and turned

⁸² *Sahih al-Bukhari*, no. 1936.

⁸³ The 10th of Dhul Hijjah.

Al-Faḍl's face away from the beautiful woman.⁸⁴ This hadith again demonstrates the Prophet's gentleness in dealing with his people. Through such beautiful interactions with his companions, the Prophet ﷺ modeled the qualities of patience and gentleness—the qualities of *as-Ṣabūr* and *al-Laṭīf*.

Although the Prophet ﷺ is not amongst us today, we can still find righteous scholars to teach us about Allah and improve our God image. The Prophet ﷺ said, “The superiority of the scholars over the devout worshiper is like that of the moon, on the night when it is full, over the rest of the stars. The scholars are the heirs of the Prophets, and the Prophets leave neither dinar nor dirham, leaving only knowledge, and he who takes it takes an abundant portion.”⁸⁵ The scholars must emulate the prophetic method of teaching the believers the names and attributes of Allah both intellectually and relationally by acting in accordance with His attributes. Therefore the connection between teacher and student must be personal and based on companionship (*ṣuḥba*).

This is why many scholars of the past have said it is from the blessings of Allah upon a young person that he accompanies a person of the *sunna* to guide him by it.⁸⁶ Individuals are thus encouraged to seek out companionship with righteous scholars whose knowledge, character, and behavior will teach them about Allah intellectually and relationally. To learn relationally about Allah through companionship means to learn from those whose character is molded by intimate knowledge of the attributes of Allah. Imam Mālik ibn Anas's mother understood this well when she told her son, “Go to Shaykh Rabī'ah and learn from his manners before his knowledge.”⁸⁷

⁸⁴ *Sahih al-Bukhari*, no. 6228.

⁸⁵ *Sunan Abi Dawud*, no. 3641; *Jami' at-Tirmidhi*, no. 2682.

⁸⁶ Al-Zuhri, hadith 418.

⁸⁷ Qādī 'Iyād, *Tartīb al-madārik wa taqrīb al-masālik* (Morocco: Maṭba'at Faḍālah, 1970), 1:130.



The impact of the righteous conduct of one person on one thousand people is more impactful than the words of one thousand people on one person.

Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya used to repeatedly speak about how his teacher, Ibn Taymiyya, influenced him through their personal interactions. For example, he experientially learned about Allah's aid and support for the believers (*al-Mu'īn*) through Ibn Taymiyya's habit of rushing to fulfill the needs of the people and his explanation that this support for others was a means of gaining Allah's support.⁸⁸ In yet another powerful story, he mentioned how scholars would say, "I wish I could treat my friends as well as Ibn Taymiyya treats his enemies." He went on to explain how one day he happily went to inform Ibn Taymiyya that one of his adversaries had passed away. Ibn Taymiyya reprimanded Ibn al-Qayyim for his cheeriness and immediately went to give condolences to the family, offering his assistance⁸⁹ and making *du'ā'* for the deceased.⁹⁰ Accompanying scholars with such righteous character is essential on our path to attaching to Allah. In a famous statement of wisdom, it has been said that the impact of the righteous conduct of one person on one thousand people is more impactful than the words of one thousand people on one person.

Parents and religious educators

In addition to scholars, parents and other religious teachers have tremendous potential in shaping the God image of youth. Parents should be aware that the quality of their relationship with their children is essential in developing proper religious values and a healthy God image. Religious educators should pay close

⁸⁸ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Rawḍat al-muhibbīn*.

⁸⁹ The full statement mentioned by Ibn al-Qayyim was that Ibn Taymiyya said to his family, "I am for you in his place, and do not let there be an affair of yours in which you are in need of assistance except that I will assist you in it."

⁹⁰ Ibn Qayyim, *Madārij as-sālikīn* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 2003), 2:328.

attention to potential distortions in the God images of their students and communities at large. They need to assess both distortions in people's propositional beliefs about Allah and in their affective experiential perceptions of Him. Rehabilitation of people's God images will likely fail if the only strategy employed is intellectual dialogue.⁹¹ Proper *tarbiya* encompasses the nurturing of both our intellectual and emotional sides. In other words, helping those with distorted God images requires reaching them on an emotional level so they can heal from prior difficulties that contributed to their unhealthy God images.⁹²

Unless Allah's benevolence and love is translated to people in a relational way that feels authentic and personal, the message will often fall on deaf ears. This requires religious educators to understand (on an experiential level) how Allah revealed Himself in the Qur'an and how the Prophet ﷺ taught us about Allah relationally. The word *tarbiya* comes from the same root as *rabb*, implying that proper nurturing is a Godly behavior in which parents and religious educators must engage.



Unless Allah's benevolence and love is translated to people in a relational way that feels authentic and personal, the message will often fall on deaf ears.

The biggest predictor of success in any type of therapy is not the type of counseling theory or intervention used, rather, it is the quality of the relationship between the therapist and client.⁹³ We believe this equally applies in the therapeutic

⁹¹ Jacqueline D. Rasar, Fernando L. Garzon, Frederick Volk, Carmella A. O'Hare, and Glendon L. Moriarty, "The Efficacy of a Manualized Group Treatment Protocol for Changing God Image, Attachment to God, Religious Coping, and Love of God, Others, and Self," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 41, no. 4 (2013): 267–80.

⁹² Michael J. Thomas, Glendon L. Moriarty, Edward B. Davis, and Elizabeth L. Anderson, "The Effects of a Manualized Group-Psychotherapy Intervention on Client God Images and Attachment to God: A Pilot Study," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 39, no. 1 (2011): 44–58.

⁹³ Mark A. Hubble, Barry L. Duncan, and Scott D. Miller, *The Heart and Soul of Change: What Works in Therapy* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1999).

process undertaken by scholars and religious educators when rehabilitating their students' distorted images of God.

Concluding thoughts

We have presented a theoretical framework of God image and attachment and an empirical study testing this framework. While our study could not capture all 99 of God's beautiful names and attributes, we suggest four major domains summarize His perfection:⁹⁴ (1) Beauty, (2) Majesty, (3) Lordship, and (4) Essence. The figure below shows how Allah's names relate to each domain. Although this study was primarily focused on the domains of Beauty and Lordship, a believer should have a balanced image of Allah that includes intimate knowledge and experience of all His names and attributes (i.e., a well-rounded circle). A fully balanced God image protects a believer from the extremes of despair due to focusing on God's punishment or a false sense of security due to focusing on His forgiveness.⁹⁵ True believers neither despair of the mercy of Allah⁹⁶ nor feel immune to the consequences of their sins.⁹⁷

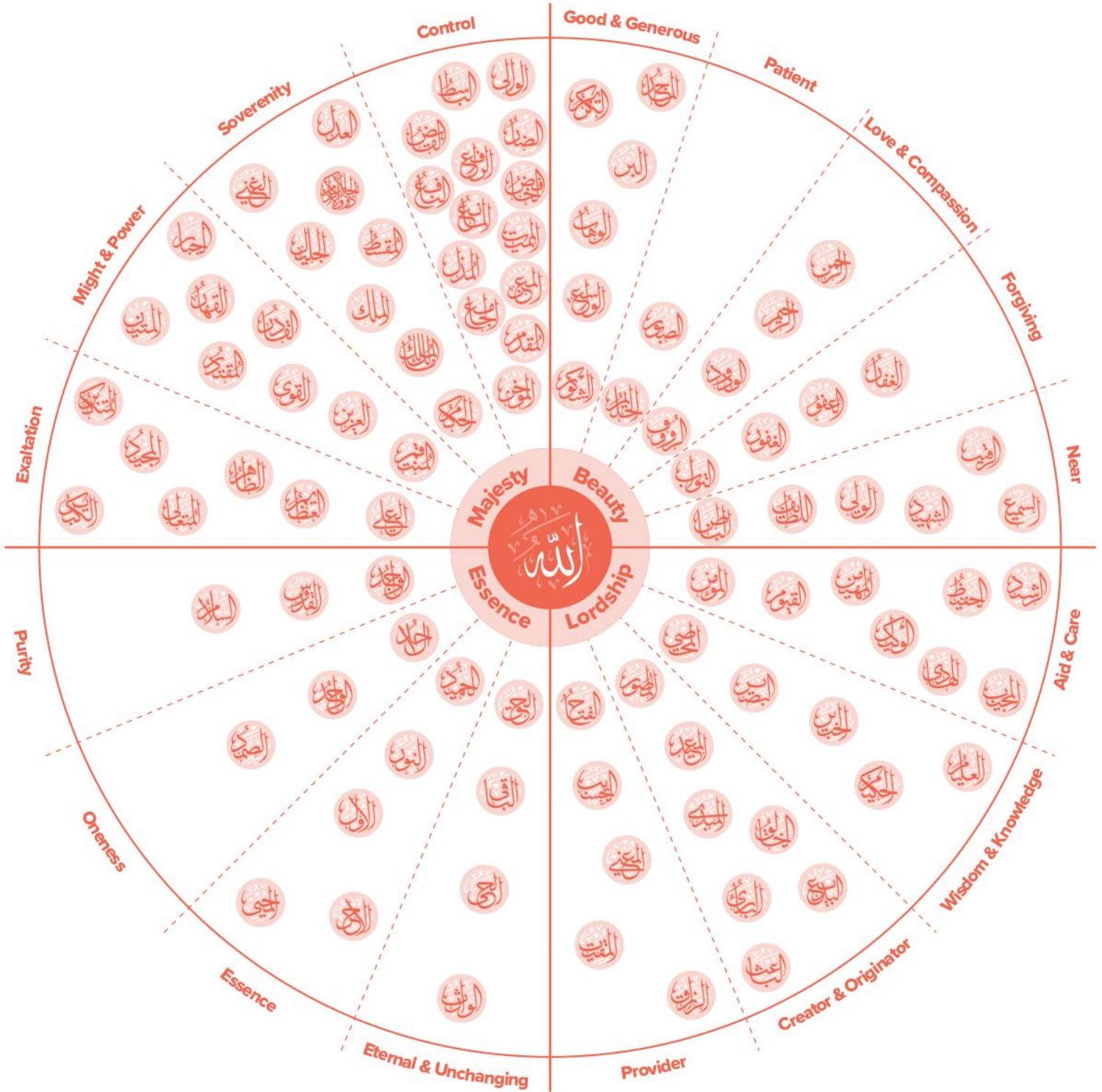
⁹⁴ This is based on our own conceptual work and classical works in Islamic theology that refer to Allah's names of beauty (*jamāl*) and names of majesty (*jalāl*).

⁹⁵ This has been referred to as *الأمن من مكر الله*. This refers to a false state of security that Allah will never punish, thus leading one to engage in sins and not fear the consequences.

⁹⁶ Qur'an 12:87.

⁹⁷ Qur'an 7:99.

FIGURE 11:
Four Domains of Allah's Names & Attributes



A fulfilling and enjoyable life is one in which we know who God is and experience His beauty in our lives. A benevolent God image allows us to see His wisdom and mercy even in adversity, which in turn promotes mental and spiritual thriving. A distorted God image impairs one's ability to perceive adversity through a positive lens, which leads to personal and religious problems. Knowing God intellectually is not sufficient for human thriving as we have an innate need to connect with Him emotionally. Here are some key takeaways that can help us to better understand and relate to Allah.

- 1) We should be aware that our God image has been shaped by complex life experiences. We may have had poor relationships in childhood despite holding the right beliefs about Allah, and those in turn may have warped our image of God. Consider using the questionnaire (see Appendix A) to assess your God image and attachment.
- 2) Psychospiritual struggles, such as religious doubts and objections to divine decrees, may stem from a distorted God image and insecure attachment. We recommend assessing an individual's God image and attachment before providing any rational/cognitive answers to spiritual struggles.
- 3) Imams and religious counselors should try to "connect before you correct." They may also utilize the God image questionnaire to assess people, as their malformed God image may be at the root of their struggles. Exemplifying the attributes of Allah in a relational way may be more beneficial for healing than addressing any given problem intellectually.
- 4) Individuals should establish a relationship of *ṣuḥba* (companionship) with a religious educator with whom they can spend quality time cognitively and experientially learning about Allah.
- 5) Parenting styles that embody and reflect prophetic character can contribute significantly to how children relate to and experience God later in life. Parenting behaviors can also affect children's psychospiritual resilience.

In our upcoming papers, we plan to present case studies of assessing and rehabilitating distorted God images, the effects of specific parenting practices and beliefs on children's God image, and how to treat distortions in particular domains

of God image. It is our hope that through continued research on this topic we may raise awareness of its importance to Muslim life, and provide solutions to those seeking to improve their image of God and strengthen their attachment to Him.

Appendix A

Survey Questions used in the study

God image Questions asked on a scale of one to five, such as (1) Does not describe my feelings to (5) Clearly describes my feelings.

Forgiveness and Grace (*al-Ghafūr*)

- I will be punished by God in some way before I ever make it to heaven.
- 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.
- When I fail or sin, I think God is going to abandon or punish me.
- When I sin, I tend to withdraw from God.
- I worry that because of my sins my relationship with God will not be restored.
- God frequently forgives sins, even when people forget to repent.

Aiding and Helpful (*al-Mu'īn*)

- I feel it's hard for me to please God and I wish God was helping me more.
- 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.
- When it comes to stopping bad habits, I wish that Allah helped me more to stop.

Caring and Compassion (*al-Rahīm*)

- I feel God's compassionate love filling my heart.
- I tend to feel that God is more stern (demanding) than compassionate.
- I feel that God has always been reaching out to me.
- How often do you feel God's deep care for you?

Strict and Coplike

- I tend to feel that God is like a "cop" enforcing rules with rewards and punishments.

- I tend to feel that God is like a judge who is stern with His punishment.
- 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.

God attachment questions asked on a scale of one to five, such as (1) Does not describe my feelings to (5) Clearly describes my feelings.

Anxious attachment

- How often do you worry about damaging your relationship with God?
- I fear God does not accept me when I do something wrong.
- I crave signs to assure me that God loves me (e.g., that I am special).
- I feel anxious and worried about my relationship with God.

Avoidant attachment

- I just don't feel a deep need to be close to God.
- It's uncommon for me to cry when sharing with God.
- How often do you experience intense emotions in your relationship with God?
- How excited do you feel when learning about God?
- Religious thoughts don't generally occupy my mind.

Religiosity (BASIC short form)

Religiosity questions asked on a scale of one to five.

- How many times a day do you pray (on average)?
- How often do you read the Quran?
- How relevant is the Quran in your day to day life?
- How relevant is the life of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ (e.g., sunnah and seerah) in your day-to-day life?
- When things happen to me that I don't like, I understand that there may be much good in it.
- Even when I can't control events in my life, I am content with what has been decreed.
- How focused on Allah do you feel in prayer?
- How often do you feel a sense of peace and connection with Allah during prayer?
- How attached do you feel to your local Muslim community?

- I consider being present in my community an important aspect of my faith.

Religious Struggles (Average of doubt and submission scales)

Religious struggles questions asked on a scale of one to five.

- How frequently do you experience religious doubts? (Doubt)
- Sometimes, religious doubts shake my faith. (Doubt)
- When I face hardships, I feel troubled by doubts about my religious beliefs. (Doubt)
- I cannot find peace with God's commands until I am convinced of their wisdom/benefit.
- I find myself insisting to know why God did/does something.
- I am troubled by the fact that God lets bad things happen to good people.
- I am troubled by some of God's commands and rulings.

Sense-of-Self Struggles (Average of shame and self-esteem scales)

Sense-of-self struggles questions asked on a scale of one to five.

- I feel like I am never quite good enough.
- I scold myself and put myself down (especially when I slip).
- I feel intensely inadequate and full of self-doubt.
- How do you feel about the kind of person you are?
- When you think of yourself, how do you feel?

Appendix B

TABLE 4:
Descriptive Statistics of All Study Variables

	MEAN	SD	MIN	MAX
GI_Forgiving & Grace	3.96	0.70	1.5	5
GI_Aiding & Helping	3.25	0.81	1	4.6
GI_Caring & Compassionate	4.12	0.80	1	5
GI_Strict & Coplike	1.58	0.73	1	5
GI_anxious	2.92	0.91	1	5
GI_avoidant	1.86	0.62	1	4.2
Religiosity	3.46	0.72	1.6	4.9
Religious Struggles	1.74	0.79	1	5
Self-Concept Struggles	2.69	1.07	1	5

Note: GI = God image; GA = God attachment

TABLE 5:
Correlations Between All Study Variables

	GI_Forgiving & GRACE	GI_AIDING & HELPING	GI_CARING & COMPASSIONATE	GI_STRICT & COPLIKE	GA_anxious	GA_avoidant	RELIGIOSITY	RELIGIOUS STRUGGLES	SELF STRUGGLES
GI_Forgiving & Grace	1.00								
GI_Aiding & Helping	0.64***	1.00							
GI_Caring & Compassionate	0.46***	0.51***	1.00						
GI_Strict & Coplike	-0.43***	-0.49***	0.49***	1.00					
GI_anxious	-0.60***	-0.52***	-0.27***	0.20***	1.00				
GI_avoidant	-0.23***	-0.25***	-0.45***	0.33***	-0.03	1.00			
Religiosity	-0.29**	0.43***	0.47***	-0.10	-0.19	-0.47***	1.00		
Religious Struggles	-0.44***	-0.59***	-0.52***	0.63***	0.38***	0.25***	-0.23***	1.00	
Self-Concept Struggles	-0.54***	-0.51***	-0.45***	0.27***	0.54***	0.16*	-0.54***	0.39***	1.00

Note: GI = God image; GA = God attachment; * p<0.05 **p<0.01 *** p<0.001