



## The Concept Of Islamic Identity And Its Importance For Muslim Youth

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### Abstract

Muslim youth encounter numerous challenges in preserving and developing their Islamic identity, from peer pressure and assimilation to materialism, corrupt desires, religious doubt, loss of religion in society, and Islamophobia. This study aims to identify the key components of an Islamic identity from the Qur'an for the development and preservation of Muslim youth. Using an inductive approach to analyse the Qur'an, the study found that the Islamic identity is characterized by its fundamental belief system, a united link to a global ummah, and an all-encompassing influence on a Muslim's private and public life. These components specifically address the major threats faced by Muslim youth in preserving their Islamic identity, serving as an anchor in establishing and maintaining the faith of young Muslims. Failing to preserve this identity may result in consequences such as a loss of trust and engagement in oppression and sin. Identifying, understanding, and developing the Islamic identity is crucial for Muslim youth to preserve their faith, even during challenging times successfully.

### Introduction

As the Muslim *ummah* (global community) today faces challenges on both micro and macro levels, this characterization of an Islamic identity is crucial. Arguably, it is the subset population of the youth, especially as minorities, who face the greatest threats to their identities.<sup>1</sup> The external pressures faced by the Muslim community, specifically the youth in the formation and preservation of their Islamic identity, are tremendous. Notions of misguided anxieties towards Muslims are experienced by many. Of these the most prevalent are racism, Islamophobia, and peer pressure.<sup>2</sup> They experience varying challenges and degrees of difficulty in preserving their Islamic identity and practicing certain aspects of their religion.<sup>3</sup> This is reflected in the notion that one of the primary concerns of Muslim parents regarding their children is their religious identity. Therefore, there is a need now, more than ever, for guidance in developing and

<sup>1</sup>Abdullah A. Omar, "Islamic Identity in the Canadian Multicultural Context," *Cultural and Pedagogical Inquiry*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2012): 26.

<sup>2</sup> Jasmin Zine, "Muslim Youth in Canadian Schools: Education and the Politics of Religious Identity," *Anthropology Education Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 4 (2001): 404.

<sup>3</sup> Zine, 401.

preserving the Islamic identity of Muslim youth, especially as minorities.<sup>4</sup>

There has been an abundance of research on Muslim minorities residing in Western liberal democracies particularly after the events of 9/11. While the concept of identity construction along with the pressures and challenges faced by Muslim youth has been repeatedly addressed, little research has been done to build on this. In relation to the Islamic identity, this study aims to analyse it in the context of the most vital source of guidance for Muslims, the Qur'ān.

### ***Defining Identity***

The concept of identity has garnered significant interest through the years, but a single coherent definition has proven to be elusive. This is perhaps because it has been defined by a remarkable number of scholars working in a variety of social sciences and humanities disciplines. Each perspective provides new meanings and sets new boundaries. This should not be seen as a shortcoming, but it is a testament to the importance of this term and its encompassing influence in multiple academic disciplines. Within the array of research however, there is a single common denomination that lingers with all the varying definitions of identity. This binding theme is what is known as a sense of recognition.<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor, in his influential essay, *The Politics of Recognition*, establishes that our identity is, “partly shaped by recognition or its absence.”<sup>6</sup> We are defined by how we are recognized or misrecognized both as individuals and groups in societies. It is this concept of recognition that leads to distinctiveness which remains perhaps the most salient feature of the definition of identity.

Political Scientist James Fearon in his comprehensive discussion on identity attempts to provide a summary of the term. He breaks it down into two main fragments, social identity, and personal identity. The first fragment is marked by a social connection that is made up of a group of people with established rules surrounding its membership and specific defining characteristics of this group. The second fragment refers to distinguished characteristics that a person values and deems to be unchangeable. Although there is no compulsion in linking the two fragments they are implicitly intertwined whenever discussing identities. It is even possible that these two fragments intersect and overlap with the line between them often blurred. There is no doubt then that the concept of identity refers to both a social and personal belonging.<sup>7</sup>

We develop our identities throughout our life most often basing them on components that we deem valuable or good.<sup>8</sup> If this is true then it may be conflicting that something we do not have control over or deem to be insignificant can truly be a part of our personal or social identity. Identity could then finally be defined as, a set of attributes, beliefs, desires, or principles of action that a person deems to be valuable resulting in a sense of recognition or distinction on a personal or societal level.

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<sup>4</sup> Osman Umarji, “Will My Children Be Muslim? The Development of Religious Identity in Young People,” Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research (March 23, 2020). <<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/osman-umarji/will-my-children-be-muslim-the-development-of-religious-identity-in-young-people>> (accessed 25 April, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> James Fearon. “What Is Identity (As We Now Use the Word)?” (Stanford: Stanford University, 1999), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Taylor. “The Politics of Recognition” in *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, edited by A. Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 25.

<sup>7</sup> Fearon, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self...*, 92.

## **Defining Youth**

The concept of youth covers extensively diverse disciplines and frameworks that it is particularly challenging to define in an absolute manner. Sociology, biology, culture, religion, and politics can all play major roles in defining youth. Some have suggested that youth is simply a word and has been evolving as a concept throughout the years morphing into a social construct.<sup>9</sup> From a biological perspective, the stage of youth is preceded by childhood and begins with puberty until adulthood or even parenthood.<sup>10</sup> The concept of age then refers to a biological reality, but the experiences, meanings, and process of age is only understood in relation to history and culture.<sup>11</sup> The reality of age cannot be denied biologically, but it is still subject to historical and cultural processes in which deeper meaning is developed. Therefore, it is not sufficient to limit the definition of age to a purely biological context. The meanings associated with youth in any given society are derived from their social and economic positions as much as from their biological development.<sup>12</sup>

## **An Islamic Perspective of Youth**

The concept of youth is of great importance in the Islamic tradition. The Qur'ān itself gives validity to this stage portrayed through numerous examples. Prophet Ibrāhīm (AS), was given signs and a deep theological understanding at an early age as mentioned in the Qur'ān:

وَكَذَلِكَ نُرِي إِبْرَاهِيمَ مَلَكُوتَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَلَيَكُونَ مِنَ الْمُوقِنِينَ

“And thus did We show Abraham the realm of the heavens and the earth that he would be among the certain [in faith]”<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Prophet Yaḥyā (AS) is also addressed during his youth as Allāh (SWT) bestowed upon him wisdom in the following verse:

يَا يَحْيَى خُذِ الْكِتَابَ بِقُوَّةٍ سَوَّأْنَا تِجَارَةَ الْكُفْمِ صَبِيًّا

“O John, take the Scripture with determination.” And We gave him judgement [while yet] a boy”<sup>14</sup>

The significance of youth is not just limited to prophets in the Qur'ān. Maryam (AS), the mother of 'Īsā (AS) was also mentioned from an early age. Her devotion and worship of Allāh (SWT), specifically in her youth, led her to receive miraculous blessings from Allāh (SWT), eventually giving birth to one of the most honourable prophets that ever lived.<sup>15</sup>

The importance of youth is not specific to only the Qur'ān as similar significance is echoed in the prophetic narrations. It was narrated that the Prophet (PBUH) said,

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<sup>9</sup> Gill Jones, *Youth* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Erikson, 87.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Spence, “Concepts of youth” in *Working with Young People*, edited by Sheila Curran, Roger Harrison, and Donald Mackinnon (London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi. Open University in association with Sage, 2005), 46.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Spence,

<sup>13</sup> *Al-Qur'ān*, 6:175.

<sup>14</sup> *Al-Qur'ān*, 19:12.

<sup>15</sup> *Al-Qur'ān*, 3:37.

“The son of Adam will not be dismissed from his Lord on the Day of Resurrection until he is questioned about five issues: his life and how he lived it, his youth and how he used it, his wealth and how he earned it and he spent it, and how he acted on his knowledge.”<sup>16</sup>

Of all the stages that an individual goes through in life this is reported to be the one specific period of life which he will be questioned about. This shows that there is considerable importance placed on this stage of life in the Islamic tradition and interestingly the essence of this stage differs greatly in this context when compared to a Western narrative.

In the Western context youth is understood as a period of growth, exploration, and transition into something more meaningful, but the Islamic perspective is paradoxically opposite in nature. All the references to youth in the Qur’ān refer to individuals who had already in their own way solidified their identities and spent this critical period in the reflection and worship of Allāh (SWT). It is not seen as merely a transitional period rather; it is a period of action and effort as this is when an individual is perhaps at his physical and mental peak.

The exact period of youth has also been a subject of historical discussion between the classical scholars. Al-Qurṭubī commented on this debate and discussion. He summarizes that the period of childhood remains until the age of sixteen, followed by the period of youth until the age of thirty-two. Al-Zamaksharī wrote that youth begins from puberty until the age of thirty-two. Al-Nawawī relayed that his preferred opinion was that youth begins from puberty and lasts until the age of thirty. The Mālikī scholar Ibn Shās held the opinion that youth lasts until the age of forty. This opinion was also shared by Ibn Kathīr in his *tafsīr*.<sup>17</sup> These diverse opinions have some range of commonality as they all mark the general age of puberty as the starting point of youth while its end ranges from the mid-thirties until perhaps the age of forty at a maximum.<sup>18</sup>

### **Identity Formation**

Throughout our lives our identities are constantly developing and evolving. Perhaps the single most important stage contributing to the formation of a unique identity is that of adolescence at the end of childhood. This is the stage of the formation and development of an internal identity. The stage before this is childhood, where the individual is almost entirely dependent on parents. Childhood is when an individual has less direct control of what they choose to be. Adolescence is an influential part of the individual's life as they realize what they can do. It is still the beginning stage as the formation of the identity extends to young adulthood. This stage of youth (adolescence and early adulthood) is identified as the the primary and most influential stage for the development of an identity. The need then to explore and understand the Islamic identity at this specific stage is critical.<sup>19</sup>

As individuals progress through the stage of adolescence outside social influences alter their identity formation. These influences include friends, teachers, classmates, and cultural and religious factors. However, one of the most influential factors of the development of a young person's identity is parent socialization, as there is overwhelming evidence that parents influence

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<sup>16</sup> Muḥammad ibn ‘Īsā Tirmidhī. *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*. Taḥqīq Bashār Awād Ma’arūf. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1996). Ḥadīth no. 2416. Graded as authentic by al-Albāni.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn Kathīr, 4:158.

<sup>18</sup> Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Qurṭubī, *Al-Mufhim: Sharḥ Saḥīḥ Muslim*, (al-Miṣr: Dar al-Kutub, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968), 87.

a child's identity, behaviour, and beliefs through various methods.<sup>20</sup> Some of these include emulation and modelling, positive reinforcements, engaging in activities with the child, and the provision of personal and social experiences.<sup>21</sup> This is supported by Islamic tradition as well as the Prophet (PBUH), said,

“No child is born but that he is upon natural instinct. His parents make him a Jew, or a Christian, or Magian...”<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the influence of the parents in the formation of a religious identity cannot be overlooked even today.

It is important not to oversimplify this process and link everyone to only a single identity. It is a complex process in which multiple identities are developed and formed within an individual. For example, I may be a teacher, a father, a Muslim, a Canadian, and a basketball player. All these identities are constantly overlapping without any issue. Each has its own context and place to exert itself as they potentially co-exist without any problem. Some have argued against the coexistence of certain identities questioning which identity comes first, however, such questions are meaningless as they refer to different spheres of social and personal identities.<sup>23</sup> The example of someone being a dinner guest and a poet. When attending a poetry circle there is no use or need for the individual to bring out his identity as a vegetarian. Likewise in the context of being a dinner guest his identity as a vegetarian takes precedence over others. While this is a fair point it ignores the fact that there are times when identities do not always work in cohesion. There are times when they conflict and precedence must be given to some over others.<sup>24</sup> For example, if you are a dinner guest being served pork and you are a Muslim or a Jew, the supremacy of identities is vital. Your avoidance of consuming pork conflicts with your context of being a dinner guest being served pork. You are forced to make a choice and remain loyal to one over the other. Examples such as these in which youth are faced with conflicting choices based on multiple identities are common in the West. Young Muslims in America for example, constantly face pressure to drinking alcohol. Although some may frequent establishments that serve alcohol and are faced with pressure to drink, they have chosen not to, in order to preserve their Islamic identity.<sup>25</sup> These conflicts are critical especially within the context of a religious identity like the Islamic identity, which is extremely unique in nature. To understand these conflicts deeply, the unique nature of the Islamic identity must be explored, along with its distinctive components leading to the realization of its true essence.

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<sup>20</sup> Jacquelynne S. Eccles, Amy Arberton, Christy Miller Buchanan, Jacobs Janis, Constance Flanagan, and Rena Harold, “School and Family Effects on the Ontogeny of Children’s Interests, Self-Perceptions, and Activity Choices,” *Developmental Perspectives on Motivation*, vol. 40 (1993): 145.

<sup>21</sup> Doug Oman and Carl E. Thoresen, “Invited Essay: Spiritual Modeling: A Key to Spiritual and Religious Growth?,” *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, vol. 13, no. 3 (2003): 153.

<sup>22</sup> *Sahīḥ Muslim*, Ḥadīth no. 2658.

<sup>23</sup> Tariq Ramadan, *What I Believe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 37.

<sup>24</sup> Nigel Grant, “Some Problems of Identity and Education: A Comparative Examination of Multicultural Education,” *Comparative Education* vol. 33, no. 1 (1997): 14.

<sup>25</sup> Allison J. Severson, “Social Identity Construction of Muslim Women: A Case Study,” (Thesis, Iowa State University, 2011), 50.

## **Identity in the Qur'ān**

The Islamic identity is unlike any other personal, social, or even religious identity.<sup>26</sup> It requires an introductory definition followed by an exploration of its main components. The term has been briefly summarized as, a Muslim's faith and pride in believing in Islam, the freedom to practice its teachings on both a personal and societal level, and the implementation of preaching to the greater community.<sup>27</sup>

This introductory definition of identity is captured immaculately in the verse of the Qur'ān:

وَمَنْ أَحْسَنُ قَوْلًا مِّمَّنْ دَعَا إِلَى اللَّهِ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا وَقَالَ إِنَّنِي مِنَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ

“And who is better in speech than one who invites to Allah, engages in righteous behaviour, and proclaims, ‘Indeed, I am of the Muslims.’”<sup>28</sup>

This verse encompasses both personal and social identity because the Islamic identity includes both fragments of a complete identity. Ibn Kathīr suggests that this verse encompasses the true essence of a believer on a personal and social level.<sup>29</sup> On a personal level, the individual acts according to the commands of Islam and upholds all moral laws and regulations in his life. This consequently extends to a societal level as one invites others in society to these moral beliefs and actions.<sup>30</sup> Al-Qurṭubī extends that the end of the verse is a proclamation of an individual's faith reflecting the sense of recognition as a Muslim.<sup>31</sup> Although there are several verses of the Qur'ān that could be used to introduce the Islamic identity, this verse epitomizes the true essence of identity on both an individual and collective level.<sup>32</sup> The verse includes the personal belief of a Muslim, one's actions in terms of worship and upholding all the commands of Allāh (SWT) abstaining from prohibitions, the individual's communal invitation to others in society, and finally a confirmation of one's belonging to a specific group. It can be summarized closely in relation to the definition of identity as a concept. The verse reflects the belief in Allāh (SWT), along with actions that proceed it, that are deemed valuable by a Muslim, which lead to a sense of recognition or distinction on both a personal and societal level. It is these qualities that lend a sense of both personal and social recognition that is the essence of an individual's identity. As a result, this is the perfect introduction to the Islamic identity within the linguistic framework provided. However, to comprehend the uniqueness and depth of the Islamic identity, its main components must be explored.

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<sup>26</sup> Khalil Nourī al-'Alānī, *Al-Huwēya al-Islāmiya fī Zaman al-'Ulōm al-Thaqāfiya*, (al-Irāq: markez al-buḥōth wa al-dirāsāt al-Islāmiya, 2009), 45.

<sup>27</sup> M.Z. Mohamad et al., “Personal Identity from an Islamic Perspective” *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, vol. 10, no.10 (2020): 200.

<sup>28</sup> *Al-Qur'ān*, 41:33.

<sup>29</sup> Ismā'īl ibn 'Umar ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'azīm: Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, (Riyād: Dār al-Ṭaybah, 1999), 41:33.

<sup>30</sup> Sayed al-'Afānē, *Zahr al-Basātīn min Mawāqif al-'Ulamā' wa al-Rabāniyēn*, (Cairo, Dār al-'Afānē, 2014), 5:300.

<sup>31</sup> Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi' li-aḥkam al-Qur'ān*, (Bayrūt: al-Maktabah al-'Aşriyah, 2016), 41:33.

<sup>32</sup> Al-'Afānē, 300.

### ***Components of the Islamic Identity***

Many definitions of the Islamic identity go beyond singular expressions as they include various components of identity which seem to have common characteristics. Although it is an extremely diverse and comprehensive term, similarities may be found in relation to these components. The core concept of *aqīdah* (creed), which denotes the spiritual belief or faith of an individual, is often viewed as one of the most vital components of the Islamic identity.<sup>33</sup> It is perhaps the single most important component of the Islamic identity and has been described as what provides the Islamic identity with its distinction and uniqueness.<sup>34</sup> It has been classified as the priority of the Islamic identity. It is evident that a basic foundation of belief is what distinguishes any religious identity. Along with this core belief, the component of an Islamic *ummah* (global community) has also been given great importance when describing this term.<sup>35</sup>

This is strongly linked to the social component of the Islamic identity as the *ummah* signifies a sort of collective identity. It is the distinctive component that allows the Islamic identity to extend beyond an individualistic concept.<sup>36</sup> This provides a strong link that transcends ethnicity, race, gender, language, and nation.<sup>37</sup> It contributes to the uniqueness of the Islamic identity as it allows for the formation of a religious identity independent of a Muslim state.<sup>38</sup> The last distinctive component of the Islamic identity is its encompassing nature, which is often discussed when referring to Islam in itself as a systematic way of life rather than a traditional religion.<sup>39</sup> Identity as previously defined is based partially upon an individual's beliefs and practices, and in this sense Islam as a religion encompasses a vast array of belief and practices making it inherently inclusive. This is because it contains *aḥkām* (judgements, rulings, principles, commandments) on an array of personal and private issues in a Muslim's life.<sup>40</sup> This distinguishes the Islamic identity from many other personal and communal identities giving it influence in the both the personal and social life of a Muslim.<sup>41</sup> Thus, it can be summarized that the three main components of the Islamic identity are: the foundation of *aqīdah*, the concept of an *ummah*, and its comprehensive and encompassing nature.

### ***The Foundation of 'Aqīdah (Creed)***

The first component of the Islamic identity is that it is built upon a foundation of *aqīdah*, its core fundamental creed. This is signified by the two testimonies of faith, the *shahādātayn*. They are (a) To believe that nothing has the right to be worshiped exclusively except God (Allāh) and that (b) Muḥammad (PBUH) is the final messenger. This represents the purest form of Islamic identity as it is the basis of faith, practice and spirituality. Regardless of a Muslim's language, culture, physical characteristics, personality, and personal interests, they are all tied through the

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<sup>33</sup> Omar, 22.

<sup>34</sup> Al-‘Afānē, 300.

<sup>35</sup> Mohamad, 200.

<sup>36</sup> Omar, 22.

<sup>37</sup> Omar, 22.

<sup>38</sup> Hassan, 315.

<sup>39</sup> ‘Abd al-Karēm Zaydān, *’Usool al-D‘āwah*, (Bayrūt, M’uasisah al-Risālah, 2002), 52.

<sup>40</sup> Zaydān, 53.

<sup>41</sup> Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 79.



singular belief of these two testimonies. It is what allows one to be classified under a singular belief, Islam, and under one collective group, Muslims.<sup>42</sup> It is the essential link that binds and forms the core of this identity as the priority of the Islamic identity is the merging of the self with faith.<sup>43</sup> Without this component the Islamic identity cannot be established. Practice of rituals, associations with religious groups, and any other actions or worship is essentially meaningless if the foundation of *aqidah* is not present. It is through this foundation that all intentions and actions are based upon thereby making it the most essential component of the Islamic identity.<sup>44</sup>

### ***The Concept of an Ummah (Global Community)***

One of the main components of the Islamic identity is the sense of attachment and belonging to an *ummah*. This term literally means a community or group linked by a certain set of beliefs.<sup>45</sup>

Its fundamental source of emphasis is in the Qur'ān itself in the following verse:

وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ وَيَكُونَ الرَّسُولُ عَلَيْكُمْ شَهِيدًا

“And thus we have made you a just community that you will be witnesses over the people and the Messenger will be a witness over you.”<sup>46</sup>

Ibn Kathīr explains the meaning of this verse based on narrations of the Prophet (PBUH), Allāh (SWT) has selected this *ummah*, or the greater unified Muslim community, to be the most just, eminent, and honourable nation there is.<sup>47</sup> This lofty status is to be reached not just through faith but the practical implementations of the rules, principles, and methodologies of Islam. Its goal is not to eradicate diversity between cultures, ethnicity, or groups of Muslims but its primary aim is to achieve unity within diversity. Every individual can keep their personal and cultural identities and still be tied to a unified group with a sense of shared identity as dictated by the core beliefs of Islam. It is a connection not bound by geographic location<sup>48</sup>.

This association with a global community results in an individual refusing to limit themselves to exclusively be influenced by the society around them. It is a link that allows one to transcend beyond their immediate physical world. Comfort is found in the fact that even if the society that surrounds a Muslim does not approve or validate their Islamic identity, there is still a link to something more profound. Perhaps this is the key as to why more frequently Muslim youth, especially in the West, fail to see a connection to specific ethnic groups or nation states. Instead, they solidify their Islamic identity based on this global community while concurrently maintaining local healthy communal ties around them.<sup>49</sup> This is important as it shows that it is not a component that is meant to alienate the individual from their immediate society. The local community is essential for any Muslim regardless of whom that community consists of. The purpose of the

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<sup>42</sup> Al-‘Alānī, 47.

<sup>43</sup> Mohamad, 200.

<sup>44</sup> Tariq Ramadan

<sup>45</sup> Omar, 23.

<sup>46</sup> *Al-Qur’ān*, 2:143.

<sup>47</sup> Ibn Kathīr, 2:143.

<sup>48</sup> Omar, 23.

<sup>49</sup> H. A. Hellyer, “Muslims and Multiculturalism in the European Union,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* vol. 26, no. 3 (2006): 336.



*ummah* then is to unite transnationally but not at the cost of local unity. It truly then is an embodiment of unity within diversity.

### ***An Encompassing Entity***

The last component is perhaps the most defining. The Islamic identity is all encompassing. It enters an individual's spiritual, social, and personal life.<sup>50</sup> This component is exemplified by the following verse:

قُلْ إِنَّ صَلَاتِي وَنُسُكِي وَمَحْيَايَ وَمَمَاتِي لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

Say, "Indeed, my prayer, my rites of sacrifice, my living and my dying are for Allah, Lord of the worlds."<sup>51</sup>

It begins with defining the purpose and goal of a Muslim's life in the worship of Allāh (SWT) in all its forms. It is not only limited to worship as the rulings or commands of Islam extend far beyond that. This extension relates to the moral values of an individual and the manners of a Muslim both positive and negative, like the obligation to speak the truth and the prohibition of lying. Not only does it mandate a Muslim's relation with Allāh (SWT) but also his or her relationship with the created world. This includes the Muslim's family life and relationships like marriage and divorce, economic transactions, rulings pertaining to judgements and testimony, politics and state policies, crimes and punishments, and finally, dealings with other members of societies and religions.<sup>52</sup>

The testimony that forms the Islamic identity is not just for the spiritual aspect of a person's life, but it dictates and has an influence on the social aspect of a believer's life as well, regardless of which sect they belong to and regardless of their attitude of practice that they adopt.<sup>53</sup> If a person's purpose and goal in life is identified by their Islamic identity then it is automatically first in the hierarchy of identities in their life. The way a Muslim prays, fasts, worships, eats, drinks, treats his friends and neighbours, and even his physical appearance is influenced by his Islamic identity. The Islamic identity is unique in its nature and can be primarily defined then by these three main characteristics. Only once the complex and influential nature of the Islamic identity has been recognized can a discussion of conflicting identities begin.

### ***Conflicting Identities***

It may be possible that sometimes different personal or social identities of an individual will sometimes conflict. This could especially be true in relation to the Islamic identity due to its inclusive and encompassing nature. For example, an individual's cultural identity as being French could conflict with their identity as a Muslim in a public school in France wearing the *hijāb*. Theoretically, because the Islamic identity encompasses a modest dress code for both men and women, a choice must be made. Precedence may be given to French national and cultural identity by giving up wearing the *hijāb* in public school, or the Islamic identity could be preferred by defying such a law. In theory, any potential conflict or contradiction between any other identity and the Islamic one should result in the latter taking precedence. Omar argues however that defining identity like this, in terms of uniqueness, could lead to situations in which people's identities are "reduced to a singular element."<sup>54</sup> This would then oppose other essential

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<sup>50</sup> Ramadan, *Western Muslims...*, 79.

<sup>51</sup> *Al-Qur'ān*, 6:162.

<sup>52</sup> Zaydān, 52.

<sup>53</sup> Ramadan, *Western Muslims...*, 79.

<sup>54</sup> Omar, 22.

components of the individual's identity. However, it may be conflicting to dictate how identities are defined when the reality opposes a rejection of such a notion.

It is quite possible that Muslim youth will be forced to face choices in a society in which identities could conflict with each other. If it is impossible to sustain multiple given identities at one specific time, a choice must be made. This can be seen in numerous examples of Muslim youth in facing this exact conflict. These are not speculative conflicts of identity. They are real-life dilemmas and pressures faced by Muslim youth, especially in the West.<sup>55</sup>

Many commentators simply dismiss that these potential conflicts reduce identities, and this is detrimental, but perhaps the opposite is true. This should not take away from its value. In fact, it is these very same conflicts that arguably provide new meanings to identities. At that moment of conflict, an individual's identity could be profoundly reduced to a singular unique element, and at least at that moment, provide an answer to the ageless question, "Who am I truly?"

### ***The Importance of an Islamic Identity***

These conflicts of identities that Muslim youth may encounter reflect the pressures they face in society. Preserving the Islamic faith is a struggle, both spiritual and practical, for many Muslim youth. They face an array of threats to maintain their religious faith on a daily basis through social pressures such as peer pressure, discrimination, gender identity, racism, and Islamophobia.<sup>56</sup>

The Islamic identity has been found to actually aid many Muslim youth in preserving their faith and providing them with certainty when dealing with societal pressure and challenges of integration.<sup>57</sup> In a 1998 study of Muslim youth in the U.K., religious identity was found to be an "anchor" which kept Muslim youth grounded and provided them with a sense of certainty and reassurance.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, in a study of Muslim youth in Toronto, the Islamic identity was also classified as an anchor which provided them with a sense of tranquillity and assurance especially when dealing with conflicting identity politics.<sup>59</sup> Religious identification serves as a framework to resist various social pressures thereby allowing the individual to maintain their distinct beliefs and lifestyles. If Muslims are to hold firm to their Islamic beliefs and practices, then any type of support mechanism that allows them to do so and resist outside threats is of great value. It appears their religious identity can be that exact mechanism, and this is where the importance and value of the Islamic identity lies. If the religious identity of Muslim youth is threatened, it could further hinder their ability to remain steadfast upon Islam. Simply put, the importance of the Islamic identity lies in its ability to both bind a Muslim to his or her faith and then to serve as a support system in the face of any potential threats to this faith.

It is important to distinguish between religious theory and ideology and practical reality when discussing the Islamic identity. That is not to claim that the two are incompatible but rather to observe how much of the theory is being practiced by Muslim youth as minorities in the West. Theoretically, the Islamic identity, as previously discussed, holds itself to be of primary importance and to a large degree defines an individual as who they are. However, it should be explored if that is true among the youth today. In a study of Muslim youth in Sweden an

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<sup>55</sup> Severson, 51.

<sup>56</sup> Zine, 401.

<sup>57</sup> Zine, 401.

<sup>58</sup> Jessica Jacobson, *Islam in Transition: Religion and Identity among British Pakistani Youth* (London: Routledge, 1998), 104.

<sup>59</sup> Rima Berns-McGown, *Muslims in the Diaspora*, (University of Toronto Press, 1999), 98.

overwhelming majority (70%) of Muslim respondents confirmed that their religious identity “shows who they are” as a person. This could be attributed to conform to any religious identity perhaps because of the authoritative nature of religion in general, but this is not the case. When Christian respondents were asked the same questions remarkably only a minority (30%) affirmed that their religious identity “shows who they are as a person.”<sup>60</sup> There could be something distinctive about the Islamic identity playing a greater role in life as compared to other religious identities. In another study of Muslim youth in America, a large percentage of youth (about 53% of those interviewed) deemed their religious Islamic identity as a hindrance to pursuing their dreams. This could also signify its inherent importance in the formation of an individual's complete identity because if it were not of great importance, then it could not hinder. In the same study a lesser percentage (about 30%) of youth deemed their religious Islamic identity to be empowering.<sup>61</sup> This is neither a discussion nor a comparison of various studies of Muslim youth, rather a signifier to the important role that the Islamic identity plays in Muslim's life.

### ***Consequences of a Weak Islamic Identity***

Cause is not without effect. The preceding causes that lead to the weakening of the Islamic identity must also have subsequent consequences. One cannot simply compromise or lose part of their Islamic identity without ensuing ramifications. The weakness of the Islamic identity can result in two main categories of implied detrimental consequences: theological implications relating to belief or creed, and practical implications relating to manners and actions.

### ***Corruption of Faith and Creed***

There is no doubt then that the greater danger resides in the corruption of the essence of belief or faith of a young Muslim. The true nature of a Muslim begins with faith in the heart. The heart then forms the basis for a foundation of the identity of a Muslim as that is where the origin of true faith lies.<sup>62</sup> It is where faith internally exists, and it is what commands the limbs to act. Once the root becomes pure and sound so follows the body. Therefore, a weakened Islamic identity results in a weakened spiritual heart. This can be further understood through the metaphor of the body and its diseases. The diseases of the body cause it to be weakened which could consequently result in the failure of its parts. This includes failure of perception, movement, or general weakness. Likewise, the weakened Islamic identity leads to failures in the heart of a Muslim. These include a degeneration of the spiritual heart causing it to fail in its perception resulting in doubts until it perceives the truth incorrectly or cannot perceive it at all.<sup>63</sup> As the individual grows in ignorance this leads to a lack of knowledge of Allāh (SWT) and the correct understanding of Islam. It is this heart that is led to be weak in the knowledge of an individual's creed and Lord. Once the young Muslim's identity has been weakened it leads to further ignorance. This is where theological doubts can enter the heart of the young Muslim and his *aqīdah* (creed) can get corrupted. As explored earlier, this remains a major pathway of doubt among Muslims and why they turn away from Islam. To connect this with the causes and effects of a weak Islamic identity is profound as it keys in on a systematic flow that explains this process of just how identity is affected and the grave consequences of these detrimental effects.

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<sup>60</sup> Jenny Berglund, “Islamic Identity and Its Role in the Lives of Young Swedish Muslims,” *Contemporary Islam*, vol. 7, no. 2 (August 2012): 210.

<sup>61</sup> Omar Suleiman, “Exploring the Faith and Identity Crisis of American Muslim Youth,” *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, Vol. 4, no. 1, (Spring 2017): 9.

<sup>62</sup> Aḥmad ibn Taymiyyah, *Diseases of the Hearts and their Cures* (Birmingham, United Kingdom: Dār al-Sunnah, 2000), 48.

<sup>63</sup> Aḥmad ibn Taymiyyah., 49.

## ***Engagement in Oppression and Sin***

The second consequence relates to ill manners, sin, and corruption of a Muslim's actions. Ibn Taymiyyah summarizes this as he explains that the weakness of the heart revolves around the two basic matters of the corruption of knowledge and intent.<sup>64</sup> The corruption of knowledge results in anger and the corruption of intent results in misguidance.<sup>65</sup> If the Islamic identity is not preserved then it may lead to the corruption of knowledge which could further lead to a weakness of faith in the heart. This weakness or corruption could then lead to an increase of illicit desires and sins.

If the Islamic identity is in a weak state and not preserved and belief is subsequently weakened, then this may result in engaging in corrupt actions. All corrupt actions are types of sins in Islam and the scholars of Islam have classified them into four distinct types or categories. The first type is known as *malikiyyah*, which are sins committed when a person takes qualities of lordship for himself such as pride, subjugation and even enslavement of others. The second type is known as *shayṭāniyyah*, which occurs in resembling Satan in evil acts like envy, cheating, and deception. The third type is known as *sab'iyyah*, which are sins of transgression like misplaced anger, killing, and taking advantage of the weak and incapable. The fourth type is *bayhimiyyah*, or sins of desire to satisfy the lusts such as adultery, theft, miserliness, and impatience.<sup>66</sup> Although all four types can be committed by an individual with a weak Islamic identity it is particularly the fourth type that is most relevant, especially to the Muslim youth. This is because many are simply incapable of committing the first three categories of sin, especially when young. The fourth type, sins of desire, are what many Muslim youth are falling into as this is a common theme observed throughout the discussed research. Drinking alcohol, illicit relationships, pornography, and the consumption of drugs are just some examples discussed that fall under this category.

The results or consequences of not preserving the Islamic identity are grave. The scholars have traditionally classified *īmān* (faith) as being made up of three distinct branches. The first is belief in the heart, followed by saying of the tongue and finally actions of the limbs.<sup>67</sup> This definition of faith really divides it into two main categories being belief and action. The Islamic identity relates closely to both as it is what a Muslim deems to be of value and importance and then how one puts these values into action. The consequences of a weak Islamic identity are also related to both aspects of faith and action. These include doubts pertaining to religion, a lack of faith, and engaging in sin, corruption, and oppression, and simply put have the potential to separate Muslim youth completely from their religion.

## ***Conclusion***

The concept of identity is central to an individual's unique sense of being. It resonates on both a personal and collective level shaping our distinct selves in both contexts. It provides a sense of recognition and is sometimes just as relevant to what we are not, as what or who we are truly. The process of developing an identity is fluid in nature as both personal and collective identities are constantly evolving. Perhaps the most important stage of identity development is that of adolescence and young adulthood. This is when we as individuals, seem to be finding ourselves based on what we deem to be valuable in life as we set our moral inclinations. The Qur'ān, through many verses, signifies the importance of an Islamic identity and its development and preservation.

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<sup>64</sup> Aḥmad ibn Taymiyyah., 42.

<sup>65</sup> Aḥmad ibn Taymiyyah. 43

<sup>66</sup> 'Abdu al-Razzāq 'Abdu al-Muḥṣin al-Badr, *Asbāb Ziyādah al-Imān wa Nuqsānih (Causes Behind the Increase and Decrease of Imān)* (Riyadh: Dār al-Qalam wa al-Kitāb, 2006), 133.

<sup>67</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah, 138.

The unique nature of the Islamic identity is exemplified through its three main components: the foundation of the Islamic creed, its strong connection to the establishment of a global community, and its panoptic nature relating to all realms of a Muslim's life. The importance of the Islamic identity can further be seen in its profound impact and role that it plays. Several studies have shown that it is one of the most vital components of a young Muslim's overall identity living as a minority in the West. It enables the young Muslim to be attached to the Islamic faith within a global community of the Muslim *ummah*. It also serves as an anchor for many Muslim youth when dealing with the substantial pressures of a liberal and secular society in which they face many threats in maintaining their identities. The Islamic identity is truly then an oasis that provides life in an environment increasingly devoid of spirituality. It is an enlightening metaphysical construct in a world primarily focused on the physical. It gives meaning, hope, and stability to those who seek a deeper journey in life, through their religious identity.

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