

Like many faiths, American Muslim parents are keen to ensure their child(ren) gets a good religious education. Some prefer the full time Monday through Friday religious schools whereas others prefer the Christian model 'Sunday' school, which provides children with the basic religious foundation for a few hours on a Sunday.

The problem for parents is the type of religious education they will be exposing their children to.

In the Los Angeles area I sent my daughter to the local Sunday school. It seemed somewhat 'progressive'. Kids were not segregated; girls were not forced to wear the hijab. It seemed pretty normal. But it never fails, with each pick-up, there is always a religious lesson I have to undo.

Teaching Islam through fear of God and hell is a familiar theme. Here are two examples.

At age 5 my daughter's teacher taught her that "you will go to hell if you hurt someone". Yes, it is all very vague. Later that afternoon she had playfully pushed a boy down and hurt him. And I will never forget this, late at night after suffering from guilt; she declared 'I don't want to be Muslim anymore because I don't want to go to hell'. Fortunately as parents we were able to defuse that trauma.

Age 7 her teacher taught "if you eat pork you go to hell". My daughter knew better and rebutted that, actually if there's nothing else to eat and if it was a matter of life, then yes, you may eat pork. In return the teacher humiliated my daughter in front of her classmates, insisting she, the teacher was right.

In both instances there were missed opportunities in teaching about the loving and compassionate Creator. Instead of the emphasis of hell 'if you were to hurt someone' why not emphasize compassion and good deeds for our fellow human beings. Instead of teaching kids consuming pork is a direct ticket to hell, how about teaching that God values life so much that it is permissible to break the rule if it is to preserve your life.

Instead of the beauty in Islam, it was the ugly that was taught.

Religious schools naturally teach their doctrine. In the case of our experiences the very practice of the women praying behind the man, or that it is always a man leading prayer, ingrains our children that it is the men who have spiritual superiority over women, boys over girls. Coincidentally, the hadith articulates this mindset succinctly by describing the woman as being equivalent to an ass, and that your prayers will not be accepted by God if the prayer is led by a woman.

Religious schools tend to teach the superiority of Islam over others, because Islam is 'complete'. Clean lines are drawn on what makes a good and a bad Muslim, a 'real' Muslim and a 'false' Muslim. Too often it is this indoctrination that is being used to justify the threats toward Muslims they don't agree with, and in many cases the killing of Muslims by Muslims we see abroad.

The ugly teachings of Islam is rearing its head to a much more extreme level. There is a major Islamic book publisher (please see image) who is introducing the concept that traditional scholars have considered jihad the 6th pillar of Islam for 5th and 6th grade children. This theology is the realm of the ultra conservative brand of Islam, which can be benign but in reality is the soil from which intolerance, hatred and acute arrogance blooms.

Here are two examples of emails I've received:

From a stranger - "...May Allah SWT reward you with all kinds of Diseases... it is not un-Islamic to wish someone ill and to pray Allah SWT to take away anyone who is misleading people and spreading lies against Islam. The Islamic scholars in Eithopia and they contact the Imam of the Hajj in Saudi Arabia and ask that they pray with them and to ask Allah SWT to take away the person who was spreading lies against Islam... the person was sick in 7 days and within 3 or 4 weeks he was dead."

This is from a well known American Muslim Salafi who claims to churn out thousands of like minded students- declaring that progressive Muslims don't adhere to the pillars of Islam, that we dismiss the Quran, or that we are not scholarly, or that our methodology is 'kafir'. He concludes - "I would venture to say that mine is indeed closer to the spirit of submission than that of 'progressive' Islam".

I am proud to identify myself as a progressive Muslim and to have co-founded a progressive Muslim movement in America which by all accounts has gone international.

In response to the experiences of many parents, we have developed a progressive Sunday school curriculum:

The goal is provide a solid Islamic education that is not antithetical to western society. Instead of learning how decadent the west is and how Islam is so different and distinct from the world they live in, our children will learn that Islam helped to guide the Renaissance, which sparked modern western thought. They will learn that Islam is malleable and ever changing and not a monolithic set of rules that cannot be broken. They will learn to pray together without regard to gender, class, sectarian affiliation, race or sexual preference in an environment free of judgment and full of genuine acceptance. They will learn that women have a role in every aspect of Islam. In essence, our children will learn to practice an Islam free of the intolerance that passes for orthodoxy, the gender inequality masked by the dual guises of protection and love for women, and the violence against humanity some call piety. Our children will learn to be Muslims who are at once pious, progressive, and free thinkers;

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