

Viewpoint

Re-Thinking the Age of Adolescence - An Islamic Perspective

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Abstract: This viewpoint discusses the age of adolescence from an Islamic perspective. It is argued that from the Islamic perspective, a split liminality does not exist between physical maturity on the one side and mental and emotional maturity on the other side, as can be found in our contemporary societies. The example of teaching prayers serves as an example to illustrate how we should teach our children to become holistically mature.

Keywords: Islam, adolescence, Islamic worldview, *mukallaf*, education, Muslim children

Introduction

I recently attended a talk by Dr. Adian Husaini, alumni of the Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), and the founder of a *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school in Indonesia) called At-Taqwa, in Depok, Indonesia. The talk was delivered during a program organised by the Indonesian students' association at IIUM. During this talk, Husaini mentioned that at his *pesantren* in Indonesia, they try to prepare their *santri* (students) as early as possible to become responsible members of society and of the Muslim community. According to him, young Muslims should

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be educated to take responsibilities for their actions in line with their biological ripening. This includes seeking knowledge from an early age, especially during the years following the entrance to the biological sign of adulthood. He mentioned critically that young adults are often treated as children and that this creates a schism inside the young adult. This in turn leads to unsocial behaviour and social issues, such as teenage pregnancies. This talk motivated me to reflect more about the issue of adolescence, especially from an Islamic perspective.

In this short article, I would like to share my thoughts on this interesting topic. This is a first exploration into this broad topic and more reading and researching is necessary to arrive at a final conclusion. However, I publish this short piece with the aim to generate discussion on the importance of how to educate, train, and treat our young Muslims. My main questions for discussion are: Does a time period, such as adolescence, between childhood and adulthood, exist in our Islamic tradition? How can we improve future generations by following the principle of teaching prayers to our children explained to us by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in a more general way? Furthermore, can we improve our Muslim societies and the social dilemmas we are facing, if we prepare our children in such a way that their biological, mental, and emotional ripening go hand in hand? I will begin by providing a short insight of the academic impetus that caused what I refer to as split liminality. Then, I will shortly discuss what it means to become *mukallaf* in Islam, continued with examples from Islamic history. Lastly, I argue that the example of teaching prayers should become the guideline in raising Muslim children to become young, responsible, and balanced adults. This article ends with concluding remarks concerning how we can put the discussions from this article into practice in our universities.

Split Liminality

Today, children become adults twice: first, as physical adults when they experience biological ripening, and second, as mental and emotional adults at a later age. In their laws, most countries in the world place this mental and emotional adulthood between the ages of 18 and 21 years. With this split liminality, as I refer to it, numerous social issues arise. The introduction of a new stage of childhood, where the child is biologically an adult but is still mentally a child can be traced back

to the studies by G. Stanley Hall and, more recently, to Elizabeth B. Hurlock.

The work of the American psychologist, G. Stanley Hall (1844-1924), has influenced contemporary thought on early adulthood and adolescence immensely. He was the author of *Adolescence* (1904) where he made the claim that mental growth proceeds through evolutionary stages. It was Hall who introduced the idea of a stage in-between, i.e. adolescence, where young people are physically grown-up but mentally and emotionally not stable and cannot be held responsible. Other non-Muslim authors have also found that the category of adolescence (or early adulthood) has not been present before the twentieth century (Demos & Demos, 1969). The idea of an additional category or an in-between stage, i.e. adolescence, was a response to certain social phenomenon in society, especially in the family institution that took place in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century, and was closely related to industrialisation. It was in 1900 when Hall and his students made adolescence the focus of psychological studies (Demos & Demos, 1969). With her book, *Developmental Psychology: a life-span approach*, Hurlock (1968) added significantly to this focus in psychology. She explicitly distinguishes adolescence as a developmental stage before maturity and adulthood. Regarding sexual maturity, Hurlock (1968) writes that adolescence has a definite and focalised sexuality (p. 455). This shows that an explicit split is made between sexual maturity and mental and emotional maturity. However, what happens when we make this distinction? Essentially, we have sexually active children (because according to Hurlock, adolescents are more developed children) that do not understand what they are doing. This is an extremely disturbing idea. Huseini (2018) also pointed out this problem by arguing, "So, all criminal offenders, including the most sadistic one, are still referred to as children because they are below the age of 18 years" (p. 124).

The idea of a physical adulthood that is not in line with the mental and emotional development is reflected in contemporary law concerning adulthood, especially when it comes to criminal actions. In most countries today, teenagers who commit crimes are treated differently to adults, regardless of how atrocious their crimes might be. Therefore, the question is, why do 'teenagers' behave in such a strange, unpredictable, and often illogical way? According to Adian Husaini, the reason is, firstly, because their parents did not prepare them properly

for the new phase of adulthood in their life. Secondly, their parents do not and/or cannot let go of their children and ‘release’ them into their adult life. They still want to treat their children as children because they need them to fill their own emotional gap (Winterhoff, 2008). That is why, in the words of a Muslim friend of mine, parents pamper their children until they are 30 years old. Children are not prepared mentally and emotionally for taking responsibility at the age when their bodies are becoming mature.

A very unfortunate development and reality of the phenomenon of split liminality that separates the outer (*zahir*) from the inner (*batin*) aspect of a human being in our societies, including Muslim majority countries, is the rise in premarital relationships and its related social issues. The splitting of physical maturity and mental and emotional maturity denotes the secularisation and de-spiritualisation of the human being. Allah created everything in balance. In Islam, becoming mukallaf is not a purely physical act but a holistic development of the child becoming an adult who is now responsible for all of their actions, thoughts, and feelings, as I will explain in more detail below.

Becoming *Mukallaf*

According to Islamic rulings and Islamic scholars, a child becomes responsible for their actions, referred to as *mukallaf*, when their body shows the first signs of adulthood. For a boy, that is his first seminal ejaculation, usually in the form of a wet dream, and for a girl, it is her first menstruation. As soon as they reach this point in their life, they are required to perform all the obligations Allah has made compulsory on the grown-up Muslim; that includes fasting during Ramadan and the five daily prayers. These young Muslims are now responsible for all of their actions. They will be rewarded for their good deeds and will earn sins for their bad deeds. It does not matter how old or young a Muslim reaches this point in life. He or she is required to perform the obligations because the physical signs are just an outer manifestation of the ripening of the whole human being.

This can be easily understood when looking at the example of the obligatory prayers. The performance of prayers is something that not only involves the body but the whole being. Ideally, a person should

perform their prayers not only through physical movements but should establish an emotional and mental connection to the Creator. The prayers involve movements, speech, emotions, as well as a spiritual connection. We have to ask, why has Allah made prayers compulsory when the first physical signs of a young Muslim's adulthood are visible? In his talk, Adian Husaini argued, and I agree with him, that Allah knew that with the physical signs, the invisible mental and emotional signs, should also have been developed to the stage of *mukallaf*, a person who can take complete responsibility for their actions. Therefore, the young Muslim should not only be an adult in their physical signs but should also be able to be at the stage of *mukallaf* mentally and emotionally. Adian Husaini further argued that this in-between stage that we know today where children have become physically adults but behave like children, is a stage not known to earlier generations.

Today, we have two artificially separated liminal experiences, as described above. The first is the liminal experience on the physical level where young peoples' bodies are the bodies of adults and demand the 'food' of adult bodies. The second is the the mental level, where young people today have often not reached this level. They act in unexplainable and often unpredictable ways. It seems that they experience some sort of dissonance between their bodies and their minds. What causes this dissonance? I assume that it is most likely the way these young people have been raised and have not been prepared to become mature in their mind and emotions. Since we see our young adults as children and we treat them as children, they will act as children. However, physically, they are adults. Their bodies produce 'adult hormones'. Thus, we, as parents have not equipped our young adults on how to deal with these changes and that might be the reason why "moodiness [...] reaches its peak during adolescence" (Hurlock, 1968, p. 223).

Examples from Islamic History

When we look to the past and to our Islamic history, we cannot find this gap between the physical, mental, and emotional development. Many of our great scholars were very young when they sought sacred knowledge and became scholars, according to our contemporary standards. In Islam, to become a scholar, one should not only have obtained the knowledge of the *din* but must also show that they inculcated this knowledge in

their everyday life and actions. In addition, the scholar must show exemplary behaviour (*akhlaq*).

Imam Shafi'i (born 150 H / 767 CE - 204 AH/ 820 AC), for example, had memorised the Qur'an by the age of seven (or nine). He was given permission to issue fatwas by the age of fifteen or eighteen. Many of our classical Islamic scholars were very young when they engaged in the thorough study of Islam. Imam Al-Buhkari (194 AH/ 810 AD - 256 AH/ 870 AD), for example, travelled to Mekkah at the age of sixteen to perform Hajj and stayed there for another six years to study. Furthermore, Imam Bukhari narrates that the Khalifah Umar ibn Abdul Aziz said that a child becomes an adult at the age of fifteen (Husaini, 2018, p. 125). These are just a few examples from the rich Islamic history.

Another prime example of the missing gap between the physical, mental, and emotional development is the mother of the believers and wife of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her). She was young (among the Islamic scholars, different opinions exist on her actual age) when she became the wife of Prophet Muhammad, and a great amount of time was spent as the wife of the Prophet, in the age of what we refer to as adolescence today. Did the blessed wife of Prophet Muhammad experience unexplainable mood swings and illogical emotions? There is no mention about any kind of these strange behaviours. Despite her young age, Aisha is referred to as the mother of the believers. She stood by the Prophet (PBUH), and showed exemplary wise and thoughtful behaviour. Were these Islamic scholars exceptions?

The Example of Teaching Prayer

As Muslim parents, we have clear guidelines in preparing our children to enter the stage of early adulthood. Our Prophet (PBUH) explained to us that we should teach our children to pray at the age of seven and we should make sure that they are praying regularly at the age of ten (Hadith Abu Dawud). If we understand prayer as an obligation that combines the physical (outer) as well as the mental and emotional (inner) aspects, we can derive a clear guideline concerning how to prepare our children for early adulthood. By the age of seven, the child should be taught to start taking responsibilities for their actions, not only with regards to prayer.

As prayer combines both the outer as well as inner aspects, we also have to train the inner world of our children. From the age of seven, we have to prepare them for becoming *mukallaf*. At the age of ten, our children should be prepared to be *mukallaf*. This means that they also have to be mentally and emotionally prepared to be responsible. They have to know the importance of seeking sacred knowledge of the *din*. They have to understand how to handle their bodies and emotions responsibly, the importance of spreading Islam (*dakwah*), and the responsibility of caring for the less fortunate. The well-known companion, Anas ibn Malik, came to the Prophet at the age of ten. His mother brought him to become the servant of the Prophet and to be trained and educated under him. At the age of twelve, Anas attended the battle of Badr and participated in eight invasions, later on. This shows that Anas was educated emotionally, mentally, and physically to be able to part-take in these kind of activities, which we would consider inappropriate for young Muslims today.

Concluding Remarks

Keeping the above discussion in mind, we should reflect on how we can implement treating the young Muslim adults in our societies. Should we re-think on how we can teach and treat our adult university students and take the Islamic worldview as our guideline? It is essential to understand that our university students are not children anymore, and we should not treat them as such. They should and can take responsibilities, and should be able to express their opinions, views, and arguments. They should be allowed to have different opinions and write a critical thesis as long as they continue to position their argument within our Islamic framework and etiquette. We have to engage them in active and interactive discussions in the classroom; encourage them to express their opinions and guide them to have fruitful and inspiring conversations, discussions, and writings.

According to our Islamic understanding as shortly outlined above, our university students are *mukallaf* for around five to seven years if undergraduate students, and much longer, if they are post-graduate students. In the eyes of Allah, they are responsible for everything they do and do not do. If Allah sees them as being adults, why should we treat them differently and impose rules and regulations on them that

belittle them to being children? We need to let go of our young adults and release them in the responsibilities Allah has imposed upon them. Allah holds our adult students accountable for their prayers and actions in general and expects them to understand what it means to be *mukallaf*. Why do we not do the same?

In conclusion, I have presented first thoughts on how we can re-think the age of adolescence, keeping our Islamic worldview in mind. Further research is inevitable and future discussions are welcomed.

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