

# RELIGIOSITY AMONG AUTISTIC CHILDREN: The Formation of Religious Practices and Islamic Spiritual Experiences

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**Abstract:** Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), despite their developmental limitations, remain spiritual subjects who can be introduced to religious life. This study investigates the nature of autistic children's spiritual experiences, the significance of nurturing religiosity, and the strategies used to cultivate religious practices. Employing a phenomenological design, the research was conducted in North Sumatra with six informants: three autistic children and their parents. Data were collected through in-depth interviews. The findings reveal diverse patterns of religiosity: some children display difficulties grasping the abstract concept of God, while others develop heteronomous faith shaped largely by parental instruction and environmental exposure. Religious practices are typically performed through routine imitation rather than internalized theological comprehension. However, sustained parental guidance and supportive environments appear to foster more complex forms of religiosity. Importantly, religiosity functions not only as spiritual formation but also as a psychosocial resource that promotes self-regulation, emotional stability, and reduced anxiety. Effective strategies include habituation, modeling, repetition, and active engagement within supportive and inclusive communities.

**Keywords:** religiosity, autistic children, religious practice, Islamic Spirituality

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## Introduction

The term *autism* was first introduced by the Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler in 1906 to describe a distinctive pattern of inward-oriented thinking observed in certain psychiatric conditions.<sup>1</sup> In contemporary scholarship, however, autism is understood not as a single disease but as a complex neurodevelopmental condition that encompasses a spectrum of behavioral and developmental differences, commonly referred to as ASD.<sup>2</sup> Children diagnosed with ASD typically experience persistent challenges in social interaction and communication. These challenges often manifest in difficulties initiating or maintaining social relationships, delays or atypical patterns in language development, and limited responsiveness to social or environmental stimuli.<sup>3</sup> From an affective perspective, some children with autism may display difficulties in emotional regulation and volitional control, which can influence their capacity to respond adaptively to changing social contexts.<sup>4</sup> These characteristics sometimes result in behavioral expressions that appear idiosyncratic or unconventional in both thought and action.<sup>5</sup> It is also important to note that cognitive abilities among individuals with autism vary widely. While some individuals demonstrate typical or even exceptional intellectual functioning, others may experience co-occurring intellectual disabilities.<sup>6</sup>

Autism has become a significant global concern due to the increasing prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) worldwide. The number of children identified with autism continues to rise each year, with current estimates indicating that approximately one in every 100 children is diagnosed with ASD, and prevalence estimates have shown a steady increase over time.<sup>7</sup> The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that about 1% of eight-year-old children in the United States met the diagnostic criteria for ASD in 2020.<sup>8</sup> Epidemiological studies consistently demonstrate that ASD occurs more frequently in boys than in girls.<sup>9</sup> Data from the World Health Organization further indicate that approximately one in 160 individuals worldwide is affected by autism, suggesting that more than 7.6 million children are born with autism each year, many of whom experience varying degrees of developmental disability. This condition contributes to roughly 0.3% of the global burden of disease.<sup>10</sup> In Indonesia, precise national statistics on autism remain limited; however, available estimates suggest that the number of individuals diagnosed with autism increases by around 500 cases annually, with approximately 5,530 reported cases of autism-related developmental conditions recorded between 2020 and 2021.<sup>11</sup> Within contemporary discussions at the intersection of psychology, cognition, and religion, some scholars have explored the relationship between autism and religious belief,<sup>12</sup> and certain perspectives argue that individuals with autism may be more inclined toward non-religious or atheistic interpretations of the world due to distinctive cognitive processing patterns.<sup>13</sup> This line of inquiry has been associated with the so-called “atheist theory of autism,”<sup>14</sup> which proposes that limitations in social-cognitive processes—particularly those related to Theory of Mind (ToM)—may influence

how autistic individuals conceptualize intentional agents, including divine entities.<sup>15</sup> Theory of Mind refers to the capacity to attribute intentions, goals, and emotions to other agents, including supernatural beings. For some individuals on the autism spectrum, the concept of God may appear difficult to comprehend because it involves abstract, non-observable agency rather than concrete or mechanical processes. This perspective aligns with arguments that religious belief often relies on a teleological mode of reasoning—a tendency to interpret events as purposeful or meaningful—which may not always develop in typical ways among autistic individuals.<sup>16</sup> As a result, some scholars have described autism as potentially associated with a form of “natural atheism.” Nevertheless, other researchers emphasize that many autistic individuals actively participate in religious practices through socialization, family influence, or personal spiritual interpretations that may differ from those commonly observed among neurotypical populations.

In Islam, every human being is believed to be created in a state of *fithrah*, an innate disposition that inclines individuals toward recognizing and worshipping Allah SWT. Within Islamic theological discourse, a longstanding debate concerns whether children with autism bear the same religious obligations to know God and perform acts of worship, given the developmental limitations they may experience.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, it is widely acknowledged that many autistic individuals demonstrate notable cognitive abilities, including high levels of intelligence and distinctive strengths that enable them to excel competitively alongside their peers.<sup>18</sup> Contemporary discussions in Islamic theology, particularly within the framework of Kalam, revisit this issue by emphasizing the principles of divine justice, mercy, and wisdom in relation to the diversity of human conditions, including developmental disabilities. Within this perspective, theological reflection seeks to understand how religious responsibility should be interpreted in light of varying cognitive and psychological capacities. One influential strand of thought emerges from the intellectual tradition associated with Abu Mansur al-Maturidi and the Maturidi school of theology. This tradition underscores the rationality embedded within the created order and highlights the expansive nature of divine grace in evaluating human accountability. From this standpoint, religious obligations are understood in relation to an individual’s capability and level of understanding. Such an approach provides a theological foundation for accommodating the religious education and spiritual development of autistic children through reasonable and context-sensitive practices.<sup>19</sup> Thus, children with autism can be regarded as possessing meaningful religious capacities that may be nurtured through supportive educational environments, compassionate guidance, and adaptive forms of religious instruction that align with their developmental needs.

Discussions of religion are closely intertwined with the concepts of religiosity and spirituality. Religiosity generally refers to the multidimensional aspects of religious belief, practice, and institutional involvement that shape an individual’s engagement with a particular faith tradition.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, spirituality emphasizes personal experiences

of transcendence, the search for meaning in life, and a sense of connection with a reality beyond the self. Although spirituality often remains associated with religious values and moral orientations, it does not always depend on formal religious affiliation or institutionalized belief systems.<sup>21</sup> In recent years, there has been a growing body of scholarship examining the interaction between religiosity, spirituality, and neurodevelopmental conditions, particularly Autism Spectrum Disorder. This line of inquiry explores how individuals with diverse cognitive and neurological profiles experience, interpret, and practice religious or spiritual beliefs within their everyday lives. Research in psychology, neuroscience, and religious studies increasingly recognizes that neurodiversity can shape distinctive pathways through which individuals construct meaning, interpret transcendence, and engage with religious practices.<sup>22</sup> More broadly, Neurodevelopmental disorders are widely acknowledged as a major contributor to childhood morbidity and represent a significant component of the global burden of disease.<sup>23</sup> These conditions, which include autism and related developmental differences, affect cognitive, social, and behavioral functioning across the lifespan. As a result, contemporary research has begun to pay closer attention to the ways in which spiritual and religious frameworks may influence coping strategies, psychological well-being, and social support among individuals with neurodevelopmental conditions and their families.

A growing body of research indicates that religiosity plays a significant role in shaping parental responses to raising children with developmental conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder<sup>24</sup> providing parents with moral guidance, emotional reassurance, and a framework for interpreting life challenges, thereby encouraging greater patience and acceptance toward their children. For many families, religiosity also functions as an important coping mechanism that helps mitigate psychological stress associated with caregiving responsibilities.<sup>25</sup> This role is particularly salient for mothers, who frequently assume the primary burden of daily caregiving and emotional support within the family.<sup>26</sup> Empirical studies further suggest that religiosity can strengthen the resilience of Islam-affiliated parents raising autistic children. Religious commitment may foster a sense of purpose, hope, and spiritual endurance when facing the complex demands of parenting a child with special developmental needs. At the same time, comparative research indicates that parents from other religious traditions, including Christianity, may also demonstrate strong capacities to meet the emotional, educational, and developmental needs of their autistic children through faith-based support systems and community engagement. Some studies additionally report that parents who maintain a strong belief in God often transmit this sense of faith and trust to their children, including those on the autism spectrum. Within Muslim families in particular, parental belief in divine guidance may encourage supportive parenting attitudes that emphasize patience, acceptance, and optimism regarding the child's developmental potential. Such perspectives can positively influence the child's social

and emotional development, as parental trust, confidence, and spiritual outlook often shape the broader environment in which children grow and learn.<sup>27</sup>

A number of studies doubt that children with Autism Spectrum Disorder can understand religion because of the distinctive characteristics of their communication,<sup>28</sup> thought patterns,<sup>29</sup> and behavior.<sup>30</sup> However, this assumption can be reconsidered when religiosity is approached from a perspective that takes into account the developmental limitations and particular learning conditions experienced by autistic children.<sup>31</sup> Misunderstanding about autism often leads to autistic children being rejected or marginalized within religious communities, which in turn becomes an obstacle to the development of their religiosity. Limited awareness and inadequate social acceptance can prevent autistic individuals from participating fully in communal religious practices and spiritual life.<sup>32</sup> In Indonesia, support for individuals with autism remains limited, and social perceptions are still shaped by traditional cultural beliefs. In some communities, autism is interpreted as the result of inappropriate behavior during pregnancy, karmic consequences, or mystical and supernatural influences.<sup>33</sup>

Previous research indicates that scholarly attention to the formation of religiosity and spiritual experiences among children with Autism Spectrum Disorder remains relatively limited. Although studies on autism have expanded considerably in recent decades, the intersection between autism, religiosity, and spirituality has not yet received sufficient exploration within academic discourse. Consequently, this study seeks to examine the spirituality of autistic children by investigating how religious practices are formed and how these practices relate to their spiritual experiences. Specifically, this study addresses several key questions: How do autistic children experience spirituality? Why is the formation of religiosity important in the context of their developmental and social lives? And what strategies can be employed to cultivate religious practices that support the spiritual experiences of autistic children? By addressing these questions, the study aims to explore the processes through which religious understanding and spiritual awareness may develop among autistic individuals within supportive educational and social environments. This research is expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of the formation of religiosity among autistic children and to provide insights for the development of more inclusive approaches to religious education. In particular, the findings may offer practical recommendations for educators, parents, and religious communities seeking to design educational strategies that are both sensitive to neurodevelopmental diversity and responsive to the spiritual needs of children with autism.

## Method

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach by adopting Descriptive Phenomenological Psychology (DPP).<sup>34</sup> This method aims to uncover the essential

meanings of phenomena as experienced by individuals or groups in their lived realities.<sup>35</sup> Through this approach, the study explores how participants interpret everyday situations and experiences,<sup>36</sup> also focusing particularly on the psychological meanings embedded in their actual life experiences and subjective understandings.<sup>37</sup>

This study adopts the methodological framework of Clark Moustakas,<sup>38</sup> which emphasizes four core analytical processes: epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and the synthesis of meanings and essences.<sup>39</sup> These procedures guide the exploration of participants' lived experiences and facilitate the identification of the essential meanings embedded within those experiences. The present research focuses on the spiritual experiences of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, particularly examining the importance of religious formation and the strategies used to cultivate religious practices that shape their Islamic spiritual experiences. In addition, the study seeks to identify both supporting and inhibiting factors that influence the development of religiosity among autistic children. In the epoche stage, the researcher intentionally suspends prior assumptions, knowledge, and personal experiences in order to focus on the lived experiences of the research participants, namely autistic children who engage in the formation of religious practices related to Islamic spirituality. During the phenomenological reduction process, the researcher describes the meanings of participants' experiences using systematic and structured language. This stage involves bracketing, in which the researcher concentrates on key themes and guiding questions concerning religious practices and spiritual experiences, as well as horizontalization, which involves identifying and organizing significant statements from participants' narratives. Through imaginative variation, the researcher develops structural descriptions that interpret how these experiences occur. Finally, the synthesis of meanings and essences integrates textual and structural descriptions to articulate the fundamental essence of the phenomenon under investigation.

The selection of participants as data sources in this study employed a purposive sampling technique. This research involved six participants consisting of three children with ASD at level 2 severity and three parents of children with autism residing in Binjai and Medan, Indonesia. Purposive sampling was applied to ensure that the selected participants possessed direct experience relevant to the focus of this study, particularly concerning the formation of religiosity and the spiritual experiences of autistic children. The inclusion of both children and their parents was intended to provide complementary perspectives regarding the development of religious practices and the everyday contexts in which these experiences occur. Further details regarding the research informants are presented in the table below:

Table 1. Research Participants

<b>No</b>	<b>Informant</b>	<b>ASD Level</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Autistic Children</b>			
<b>1</b>	Child O	13 years old, Autism Spectrum Disorder Level 1 (requiring support)	The participant demonstrates strong abilities in mathematics and computing and is capable of engaging in two-way communication, although the interaction tends to be relatively flat.
<b>2</b>	Child N	10 years old, Autism Spectrum Disorder Level 2 (requiring substantial support)	The participant shows notable artistic ability but has not yet developed the capacity to engage in two-way communication.
<b>3</b>	Child NB	12 years old, Autism Spectrum Disorder Level 2 (requiring substantial support)	The participant demonstrates skills in computer graphic design and is capable of two-way communication, although the communicative style tends to be stiff and affectively flat.
<b>Parents</b>			
<b>4</b>	Mrs. AN	–	Mother of Child O
<b>5</b>	Mr. MS	–	Father of Child N
<b>6</b>	Mrs. NB	–	Mother of Child NB

The data collection method employed in this study was in-depth interviewing. The interview guide was designed using open-ended and semi-structured questions, allowing participants to express their experiences and perspectives in a more flexible and comprehensive manner. This approach enables the researcher to obtain rich and detailed information while allowing participants to determine the direction of their responses. Open-ended questions provide opportunities for participants to elaborate on their experiences from multiple dimensions, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation, particularly the spiritual and religious experiences of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Data analysis was conducted using a phenomenological approach. To ensure the quality and trustworthiness of the data, this study adopted a naturalistic research paradigm that emphasizes four principal criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility refers to the extent to which the research findings accurately represent the realities experienced by participants. This was achieved through sustained engagement in the field, in-depth observation, triangulation of data sources and methods, and participant validation through member checking. Transferability concerns the potential applicability of research findings to other contexts; therefore, the researcher provides detailed and contextual descriptions that enable readers to evaluate the relevance of the findings to similar settings.

Dependability emphasizes consistency throughout the research process. This was maintained by developing an audit trail that documents each stage of the research procedure and the decisions taken during the study, allowing the process to be reviewed and traced. Meanwhile, confirmability ensures that the findings are derived from empirical data rather than the researcher's personal assumptions or biases. This criterion was addressed through reflexive practices and the maintenance of systematic documentation throughout the research process. Through the application of these four criteria, the study aims to produce findings that are academically rigorous, trustworthy, and valuable for both scholarly inquiry and practical application.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Spiritual Experiences and Religious Practices among Autistic Children**

#### **Spiritual Experiences of Autistic Children**

Research findings indicate that the spiritual experiences of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder vary considerably and are often highly individualized. Each child demonstrates distinctive ways of interpreting religious ideas and engaging with spiritual concepts. In the case of Mr. O, for instance, the participant expressed disbelief in the existence of God. Interview data revealed that Mr. O questioned the existence of God because he could not perceive divine presence through his five senses. For him, knowledge is closely associated with observable and tangible reality. Many religious systems, however, involve abstract concepts that require interpretive and symbolic modes of thought,<sup>40</sup> in this context, the idea of God may be interpreted through a cognitive model that prioritizes empirical verification, leading to the perception that the existence of God cannot be confirmed. Thus, the concept of divine existence may be cognitively interpreted as uncertain or even nonexistent.<sup>41</sup> The formation of such beliefs can be related to the development of Theory of Mind (ToM)<sup>42</sup> which refers to the capacity to attribute mental states, intentions, and beliefs to others. According to research conducted by Robert N. McCauley and colleagues, variations or limitations in theory of mind—sometimes described as “mindblindness”—may influence how individuals with autism interpret religious concepts. These cognitive differences can affect the understanding of religious beliefs and practices, and in some cases may contribute to a greater tendency toward non-religious or atheistic interpretations among certain autistic individuals.<sup>43</sup>

Interviews with Mr. O's parents further confirmed that he is an autistic child diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, a profile within Autism Spectrum Disorder that is often associated with relatively high intellectual functioning. According to the parents' account, Mr. O demonstrates strong cognitive abilities and analytical reasoning, characteristics that influence how he interprets abstract religious concepts. Research conducted by Ines Testoni and colleagues suggests that non-religious or atheistic tendencies may appear among autistic individuals with high cognitive abilities, particularly those with Asperger-type profiles.

One factor contributing to this tendency relates to the abstract nature of the concept of divinity.<sup>44</sup> The idea of God is typically understood through symbolic, metaphysical, and non-empirical representations. For some autistic children who rely heavily on concrete and observable forms of reasoning, such abstract constructs may be difficult to conceptualize. Consequently, belief in entities that cannot be perceived through the five senses may be challenging to internalize. In certain cases, even natural phenomena that are not directly visible—such as air or wind—can be difficult to conceptualize, which may further complicate the acceptance of the idea of a transcendent divine being. These observations correspond with research indicating that differences in Theory of Mind among individuals with autism may shape the way they interpret religious concepts. Rather than perceiving God as a personal or relational agent, autistic individuals with strong analytical tendencies may interpret the concept of divinity through mechanistic or rational frameworks.<sup>45</sup> Such cognitive orientations are particularly evident among autistic individuals with high intellectual functioning.<sup>46</sup>

A distinctive paradox emerged in the case of Mr. O. Although the autistic child did not believe in the existence of God, he continued to perform several religious practices regularly, including prayer and fasting. However, he was unable to recite the Qur'an. These practices were not grounded in personal theological belief but rather reflected routines formed through parental teaching and environmental influence. Over time, such practices became habitual rituals embedded in daily life. Mr. O also perceived that activities such as prayer and fasting contribute positively to emotional stability and physical well-being. This understanding was shaped through knowledge and social learning rather than doctrinal conviction. These findings suggest that among children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, religious practices may develop through habituation, environmental influence, and perceived personal benefits, even in the absence of explicit belief in God.

Ms. N demonstrated a different form of spiritual experience. Her monotheistic orientation appeared to be largely heteronomous, meaning that her belief in God was shaped primarily by external influences rather than personal reflection. Interviews with Ms. N revealed that she believed in God mainly because her parents instructed her to do so. These findings indicate that, for some autistic children, belief in God is closely tied to parental teachings and guidance rather than emerging from independent reflection or critical awareness. In this context, religious belief tends to function as an internalized doctrine derived from the family environment rather than as the outcome of a subjective spiritual experience. Similarly, religious practices such as worship are often performed as habitual routines. Ritual activities may therefore be carried out as part of daily patterns of behavior rather than as expressions of deeply internalized religious consciousness. This pattern also reflects behavioral tendencies commonly associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder, particularly the phenomenon often described as “insistence on sameness.” Such tendencies include a strong preference for routine, resistance to change, and adherence to formalized rituals.<sup>47</sup>

The findings from research conducted with the participant Ms. N confirm that the concept of God can be introduced and implemented among children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.<sup>48</sup> This suggests that the transmission of religious belief frequently occurs through cultural transmission and religious education within the family environment rather than through the child's independent critical reflection. In such contexts, parental influence plays a central role in shaping the religious orientation of autistic children. Furthermore, the preference for reliability, stability, and structured patterns—such as regular religious routines—can be particularly meaningful for autistic individuals. Structured practices provide predictability and psychological security, which align with their cognitive and behavioral tendencies toward order and routine. As a result, religious routines may become well internalized even without extensive conscious reflection on their theological meaning. This internalization process is typically supported by three important mechanisms: the role modeling of parents, a family environment that consistently demonstrates religious behavior, and the child's active participation in repeated religious practices.<sup>49</sup> For autistic children, a consistent temporal structure in worship activities can generate a sense of security and stability because it corresponds with their inclination toward orderly and predictable routines. Once such patterns are established, religious practices are often perceived not merely as optional behaviors but as obligations that should be performed at specific times. The preference for order observed among autistic children can therefore be utilized as a constructive foundation for cultivating positive religious habits.<sup>50</sup> Previous studies have also demonstrated that consistent routines may help reduce anxiety and improve overall well-being among autistic individuals.<sup>51</sup> Research conducted by Emma Reddish and colleagues further suggests that autistic cognition should not be viewed as a deficit but rather as a different cognitive orientation. Autistic individuals often interpret religion in more literal and ritualistic ways, which makes structured religious practices easier to adopt. Consequently, disciplined routines, consistent parental guidance, and supportive family and educational environments can become important foundations for the spiritual development of autistic children.

The concepts of divinity and religiosity appear significantly different in the case of Ms. NB. Her spiritual experiences are more complex and developed compared with those of the other participants. Interviews with Ms. NB revealed that she firmly believes in God and consistently performs obligatory acts of worship, which she understands as religious duties whose neglect would be considered sinful. In addition to these obligations, she also practices several voluntary forms of worship, including the Tahajud prayer and Dhuha prayer, observes voluntary fasting on Mondays and Thursdays, and has memorized portions of the Qur'an. The case of Ms. NB illustrates that children with Autism Spectrum Disorder can demonstrate strong faith and a relatively deep awareness of religious values. This is reflected in her understanding of moral concepts such as sin, her discipline in performing daily prayers, her commitment to both obligatory and voluntary fasting, and her ability not only to recite but also to memorize the Qur'an.<sup>52</sup> This phenomenon suggests

that the religious experiences of autistic children are not necessarily confined to the mechanical repetition of rituals. Rather, under supportive conditions, these practices can evolve into forms of genuine spiritual awareness and meaningful religious engagement.

Interviews with Ms. NB and her parents revealed that spiritual education had been introduced from an early stage within the family environment. In addition, the residential setting of an Islamic boarding school significantly supported the spiritual development of the autistic child. This context suggests that spiritual experiences are shaped by several important factors, including the role of the family in providing guidance and religious role models, the habituation of daily religious practices, and the child's direct involvement in ongoing religious learning activities. These findings indicate that the religiosity of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder has the potential to develop holistically across several domains: cognitive aspects, reflected in the understanding of religious teachings; affective dimensions, expressed through awareness and belief; and psychomotor aspects, demonstrated through the consistent practice of acts of worship. In this process, the role of parents and the surrounding religious environment becomes particularly crucial in supporting the child's spiritual development. Parents who consistently model religious practices—such as congregational prayer, reading the Qur'an, and involving children in religious study sessions—can facilitate the internalization of religious values among autistic children. Previous research further indicates that parental religiosity and spirituality may function as protective factors, helping families reduce parenting-related stress, address social stigma associated with autism, and strengthen overall family resilience.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, the findings of this study indicate that children with Autism Spectrum Disorder possess significant potential to develop meaningful spiritual experiences when supported by consistent role models, a conducive religious environment, and educational approaches that are responsive to their cognitive characteristics. These conditions create opportunities for autistic children to engage with religious values in ways that align with their developmental needs. Regular and structured religious activities can serve as an effective medium for nurturing the development of religious identity. Such routines provide predictability and stability, which are often beneficial for autistic individuals who tend to prefer structured patterns of behavior. In addition, sustained emotional support from parents and the broader community plays a crucial role in strengthening children's spiritual well-being. Through supportive relationships and inclusive religious environments, autistic children can cultivate forms of religiosity that are both meaningful and developmentally appropriate.

### **The Importance of Religious Development**

These findings highlight the urgency of fostering religiosity among children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The study identifies fundamental reasons for the importance

of developing religiosity in autistic children, which can be broadly categorized into two principal dimensions: the normative theological dimension and the practical psychosocial dimension. Interviews with three parents of autistic children revealed that their primary motivation for introducing religious teachings was grounded in faith and a sense of spiritual responsibility rooted in Islam. This indicates that the formation of religiosity is strongly shaped by theological considerations.<sup>54</sup> For these parents, religion represents a central pillar of life for Muslims. Consequently, guiding children to practice acts of worship according to their abilities is not merely a personal choice but rather a moral and spiritual obligation for which they believe they will ultimately be accountable before God.<sup>55</sup> This perspective reflects a deep religious awareness among parents that the cultivation of monotheistic belief (*tauḥīd*) in children, including those with developmental disabilities, remains an important mandate that must be fulfilled.<sup>56</sup> Within this framework, the formation of religiosity in autistic children is perceived as both a fulfillment of theological responsibility and an effort to reinforce the family's Islamic identity. By introducing religious values, practices, and moral teachings from an early age, parents seek to ensure that their children remain connected to the spiritual foundations that shape family life and religious commitment.<sup>57</sup>

Second, from a practical psychosocial perspective, the findings reveal that religiosity can play an important role in the emotional well-being of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. This perspective is reflected in interviews with the parents of Mr. MS, who reported that their autistic child appeared noticeably calmer and behaved as if he felt protected by a greater force when experiencing anxiety. This observation suggests that religious activities may serve an adaptive function in the child's developmental process. In this sense, religious teachings are not understood solely as ritual obligations but also as mechanisms that support emotional regulation and psychological comfort when the child encounters distress or uncertainty.<sup>58</sup> A similar perspective emerged from an interview with Mrs. AN, who explained that the family initially hoped their child would practice religious teachings despite her developmental limitations. However, they later discovered that these activities had a positive influence on the child's emotional stability, particularly through prayer. According to Mrs. AN, prayer created a beneficial routine that helped the child feel more secure and organized in her daily life. These findings indicate that structured religious routines—such as obligatory prayers, Dhuha prayer, and memorizing the Qur'an—not only organize children's daily activities but may also help reduce the frequency of tantrums by familiarizing them with predictable patterns of behavior. In this context, religious practices perform a dual function: they operate as spiritual rituals while simultaneously serving as therapeutic mechanisms that support emotional stability, behavioral regulation, and the establishment of constructive routines within both family settings and faith-based educational environments.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of adopting a humanistic approach in engaging children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in religious life. Despite the child's cognitive and behavioral limitations, parents continue to involve them in religious activities by adapting practices to the child's developmental capacities. This approach demonstrates

that religious engagement can be inclusive, allowing spiritual values to be introduced without requiring complex theological reasoning or abstract intellectual comprehension. In many cases, the religious experiences of autistic children are shaped less by reflective belief and more by processes of doctrinal transmission, habituation, and the consistent role modeling provided by parents and the surrounding environment.<sup>59</sup> This observation challenges assumptions derived from Emotional Intelligence theory<sup>60</sup> which often posits that religiosity develops primarily through emotional awareness and reflective belief.<sup>61</sup> Among autistic children, religious participation may emerge even when emotional processing or explicit belief structures differ from those of neurotypical individuals. Nevertheless, involving autistic children in structured religious routines can produce meaningful psychosocial and emotional benefits. Spiritual activities may support improved self-regulation and reduce anxiety, particularly when reinforced by the religiosity of parents, caregivers, and the broader social environment.<sup>62</sup> Regular spiritual practices can also strengthen the structure of daily life for autistic children, who often benefit from consistent and predictable activity patterns that reduce stress. Furthermore, the findings suggest that within families raising children with special needs, religion functions not only as a form of worship but also as an important coping mechanism that helps parents navigate the emotional and practical challenges of caregiving.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, the urgency of fostering religiosity among children with Autism Spectrum Disorder can be understood not only within a normative doctrinal framework but also across therapeutic, educational, and humanistic dimensions. When religious routines are implemented consistently, children may develop a more structured daily life, experience a stronger sense of psychological security, and gradually internalize spiritual values, even when their cognitive understanding of theological concepts remains limited. Within this perspective, religious practices function not merely as ritual obligations but also as meaningful social and developmental supports. Regular participation in structured religious activities can help create stability and predictability in daily routines, conditions that are often beneficial for autistic individuals who tend to respond positively to organized and consistent environments. Through repeated engagement in such practices, children may develop familiarity with religious behaviors and gradually incorporate them into their personal routines. Therefore, fostering religiosity in autistic children should not be viewed solely as an expression of parental theological responsibility. It may also serve as a constructive strategy for supporting children's psychosocial development and overall quality of life. By integrating spiritual guidance with supportive educational and family environments, parents and communities can help create inclusive pathways through which autistic children are able to experience religious life in ways that are meaningful, accessible, and developmentally appropriate.

### **Strategies for Developing Religious Practices in Islamic Spiritual Experience**

Understanding strategies for establishing religious practices that can foster meaningful Islamic spiritual experiences among children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

is particularly significant. The findings of this study indicate that the formation of religious practices in autistic children requires approaches that differ from those commonly applied to neurotypical children. Parents emphasized that the development of emotional stability and behavioral control constitutes an essential prerequisite before the systematic introduction of religious teachings. According to the participants, effective self-regulation enables autistic children to engage more productively in structured religious activities. For this reason, behavioral therapy and sustained parental mentoring often function as important initial stages in the developmental process. These interventions help children gradually develop the capacity to manage emotions, regulate behavior, and adapt to structured routines. Once a more stable emotional and behavioral condition is achieved, the process of introducing and habituating religious practices—such as prayer and other forms of worship—can be implemented more effectively and consistently. In this way, religious education for autistic children becomes a gradual and adaptive process that integrates therapeutic support with spiritual guidance, allowing religious routines to develop in a manner that is both sustainable and responsive to the child's developmental needs.<sup>64</sup>

The primary strategies employed by parents include habituation, role modeling, consistency, and collaborative involvement with their children in religious practices. Activities such as congregational prayer at home, repeated prayer routines, and the integration of children into Islamic-based religious education emphasize routine and continuous reinforcement. Parents also stress the importance of serving as positive role models in religious practices so that children can learn through imitation. This approach is particularly relevant for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, who often acquire new behaviors more effectively through observable modeling than through complex verbal instruction.

Several supporting factors strengthen this process. These include spousal support, parents' religious background, the presence of an inclusive social environment, and sustained patience in accompanying the child's development. Support from the immediate family, along with a community that understands the child's condition, can reduce social pressure and enable autistic children to participate more comfortably in religious activities. In addition, parents' prior religious experiences play an important role in enabling them to transmit religious values more consistently and meaningfully within the family context.<sup>65</sup>

On the other hand, several obstacles arise from both internal and external factors in the process of fostering religiosity among children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Internal challenges include the child's tendency to experience tantrums, behavioral rigidity, and difficulties in social interaction and communication. These characteristics may complicate the process of introducing structured religious practices. External obstacles also play a significant role, including delays among parents in recognizing early signs of autism,<sup>66</sup> as well as limited understanding within the surrounding social environment

regarding the child’s developmental condition.<sup>67</sup> In addition, emotional challenges experienced by parents—such as fatigue, frustration, and feelings of discouragement—can affect their ability to maintain consistency in religious parenting practices.<sup>68</sup> Sustaining structured routines and continuous guidance requires considerable emotional resilience and patience from caregivers. Overall, these findings indicate that the formation of religious practices in autistic children is not an immediate or straightforward process, but rather a gradual and long-term developmental effort. It requires therapeutic support, concrete role modeling, consistent routines, and a supportive social environment. Despite these challenges, the obstacles can be mitigated through a strong foundation of parental faith, sustained patience, and active involvement of family members. Through such support, autistic children may gradually internalize religious values in ways that correspond to their developmental capacities and individual learning needs.

The results of this study can be summarized as shown in the following table:

No	Studied Aspects	Theme	Child O	Child N	Child NB
1	Spiritual Experiences and Religious Practices among Autistic Children	Belief and Awareness of the Existence of God	Does not believe in the existence of God due to limitations in understanding abstract concepts.	Believes in the existence of God mainly because of parental encouragement rather than personal awareness.	Believes in the existence of God; initially influenced by parents and the surrounding environment, which later develops into personal awareness.
		Implementation of Religious Activities	Although not believing in God, the child still participates in religious activities due to parental influence and acquired religious knowledge.	Performs religious activities such as prayer, fasting, and reading the Qur’an through imitation and parental encouragement.	Consistently performs religious practices, including obligatory and voluntary acts such as additional prayers, voluntary fasting, and memorizing the Qur’an, supported by parental

<p><b>2</b> The Importance of Religious Formation</p>	<p>The Importance of Introducing the Concept of Divinity</p>	<p>Parents recognize that their child is Muslim and should perform religious obligations according to their abilities.</p>	<p>Religion functions as a means of emotional regulation, helping reduce anxiety in the child.</p>	<p>modeling and environmental influence. Parents' religious commitment motivates them to cultivate religiosity as a way to strengthen faith and reduce the</p>
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## Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the spiritual experiences of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) demonstrate diverse characteristics shaped by cognitive, emotional, familial, and social environmental factors. The spiritual experiences of autistic children are not uniform. In some cases, limitations in understanding abstract concepts lead to difficulties in believing in the existence of God and may even create tendencies toward atheistic interpretations. This condition corresponds with the framework of Theory of Mind (ToM), which suggests that limitations in attributing intentional states may influence how individuals with autism interpret the concept of the divine. In other cases, children's faith tends to be heteronomous, meaning that religious belief is largely formed through parental doctrine and family influence rather than through personal reflection. Nevertheless, autistic children who grow up in consistent and supportive religious environments may develop more complex forms of religiosity, including moral awareness, discipline in worship, and even the ability to memorize the Qur'an.

Religious practices such as prayer and fasting are often performed routinely due to processes of habituation, parental role modeling, and perceived psychological benefits rather than purely doctrinal belief. Parents therefore play a central role in shaping the spirituality of autistic children. Through consistent role modeling, repeated practice, and active involvement in religious activities, religious values can gradually be internalized even when abstract theological understanding remains limited. Structured worship routines provide autistic children with a sense of security and psychological stability, particularly because many of them prefer orderly and predictable patterns of activity. In addition, inclusive religious environments help reduce social stigma, strengthen family resilience, and create opportunities for autistic children to participate in religious life.

The findings also suggest that religion functions not only as a means of cultivating monotheistic belief but also as a therapeutic and psychosocial resource. Religious activities

contribute to self-regulation, emotional control, and anxiety reduction among autistic children. Consistent spiritual routines create a stable structure of daily life, nurture the development of religious identity, and enhance children's spiritual well-being and overall quality of life. Consequently, the urgency of fostering religiosity in autistic children can be understood through two interrelated dimensions: (a) the normative theological dimension, which emphasizes parents' responsibility to provide religious education according to their faith tradition, and (b) the practical psychosocial dimension, which views religion as an adaptive instrument that supports the developmental needs of autistic children.

This study further demonstrates that the formation of religiosity in autistic children is not an immediate outcome but rather a long-term developmental process requiring deliberate strategies. The roles of parents, educators, and therapists are crucial in providing consistent role models, maintaining structured routines, and adapting religious instruction to the child's cognitive capacities. Accordingly, effective strategies for cultivating religious practices among autistic children should integrate theological, psychological, educational, and humanistic perspectives.

Several recommendations emerge from this study. For parents, it is important to instill religious values through concrete role modeling, the establishment of consistent religious routines, and patient engagement when addressing behavioral challenges. Educators and therapists should develop adaptive methods of religious instruction suited to the learning needs of autistic children, particularly through repetition, visual support, and active participation. Communities are also encouraged to foster inclusive social environments that enable autistic children to participate in religious activities and develop meaningful spiritual experiences.

One limitation of this study lies in the selection of participants, as the subjects were autistic children from families with relatively high educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. Future research should explore the religiosity and spirituality of autistic children from families with more limited educational and economic resources. Further studies are also recommended to investigate how variations in intellectual ability, levels within the autism spectrum, and differences in cultural and religious contexts influence the development of religiosity among autistic children.

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