

Religious doubt across generations: How age and uncertainty attitudes affect religiosity

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This chapter investigates **how age and uncertainty attitudes relate to religiosity and religious doubts in Muslims** across the world.

Introduction

Global economic and political uncertainty has been steadily rising over the past few decades and reached unprecedented levels in 2020.¹ At the same time, technology has rapidly changed how people interact with the world,² making many aspects of life more predictable. Through technology, we can accurately predict arrival times and the best routes to take, plan our days by knowing the daily weather forecast, and control the temperature in our homes. Thus, it seems that many people are currently living in a paradoxical world of daily predictability and long-term global uncertainty.

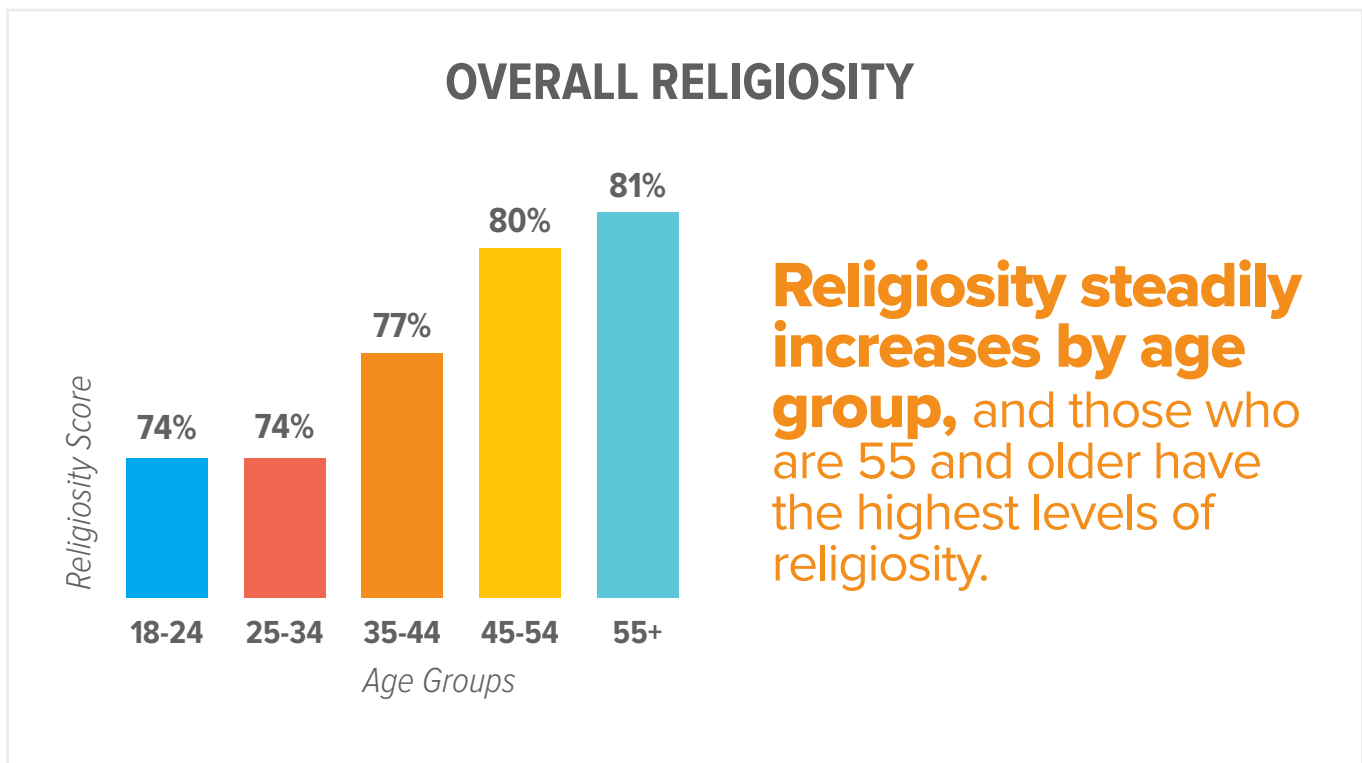
This chapter investigates how age and uncertainty attitudes relate to religiosity and religious doubts in Muslims across the world. Researchers have found that religiosity is decreasing by generation in the United States.³ Furthermore, younger people appear to be less tolerant of uncertainty in their lives compared to their elders.⁴ Do we see these same trends among Muslims? Is there a relationship between uncertainty attitudes and religiosity?

To answer these questions, the Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research engaged in a groundbreaking study of Muslim religiosity worldwide. We surveyed Muslims, asking them about their religiosity, religious doubts, and intolerance of uncertainty (refer to Appendix 1 for more details on the sample). In [Chapter 1](#), we examined the connection between religiosity and well-being.⁵ In this chapter, we explore the links among religious doubt, age, and uncertainty intolerance.

Age differences in overall religiosity

The youth of today are the leaders of tomorrow. Nothing can be more important to the *ummah* than nurturing their faith. However, today's youth face many economic, political, and intellectual challenges that may affect their religiosity. The increased global influence of capitalism, materialism, and secular liberal values present serious challenges to religious beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. How are Muslim youth doing in such a challenging world?

Muslim youth religiosity appears to be following the global religious trends of non-Muslim youth.^{6,7,8} Although Muslim youth appear far more religious than their non-Muslim counterparts, they have lower levels of religiosity than older Muslims. Religiosity steadily increases by age group, and those who are 55 and older have the highest levels of religiosity. Muslims aged 18-34 have an average religiosity score of 74%, whereas those 55 and older have an average religiosity score of 81%.

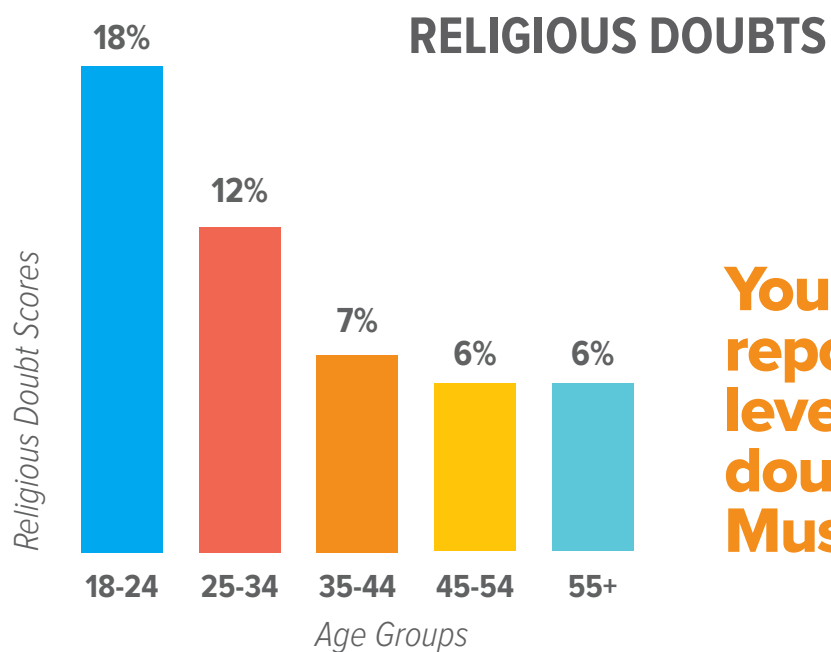


Religious doubts

It is common for people to have questions about religious beliefs and practices at some point in their lives. When these concerns are resolved, religious conviction may be maintained or strengthened. However, if their questions are not resolved adequately, people may experience religious doubts that affect them spiritually and psychologically, leading to feelings of anxiety, distress, frustration, and anger. Religious doubts refer to feelings of uncertainty towards, and a questioning of, religious teachings and beliefs.

We asked respondents how much religious doubt they experienced.⁹ For example, we asked participants to rate the extent they “Felt confused about my religious beliefs” and “Felt troubled by doubts or questions about Islam.” The average level of religious doubt in the sample was 12%, which corresponds to experiencing “not at all” or “a little” doubt over the past few months.

Younger Muslims reported higher levels of religious doubt than older Muslims. Muslims between 18-24 years old had an average doubt score of 18%, followed by 12% for Muslims 25-34 years old, and then religious doubt scores were stable from the age of 35 on (6%).



Younger Muslims reported higher levels of religious doubt than older Muslims.

Acknowledging these thoughts as undesirable and being patient until they dissipate is considered a praiseworthy act. Furthermore, asking religious scholars about these concerns is also advisable.

Religious doubts

We want to highlight that many people may experience some type of religious doubt, including highly religious people. In fact, even some of the companions of the Prophet ﷺ experienced unsettling religious thoughts at times. Once, some people came to the Prophet ﷺ and told him, “Sometimes we have these [negative] thoughts enter our minds that we consider too grave to express.” The Prophet ﷺ replied, “Do you really have these thoughts?” They said, “Yes.” Upon this he remarked, “That is pure faith.”¹⁰ In another narration, a man came to the Prophet and said, “Messenger of Allah! One of us has thoughts of such nature that he would rather be reduced to charcoal than speak about them.” The Prophet replied, “Allah is Most Great! Allah is Most Great! Allah is Most Great! Praise be to Allah Who has reduced the evil of the devil to only suggestions and whisperings.”¹¹

Thus, religious doubts may sometimes be experienced as fleeting thoughts that are not indicative of a deeper crisis. In such cases, simply acknowledging these thoughts as undesirable and being patient until they dissipate is considered a praiseworthy act. Furthermore, asking religious scholars about these concerns is also advisable.

What are some of the factors that may explain the lower religiosity and higher religious doubt that younger Muslims face? It is possible that as individuals grow older and gain more life experience, their religiosity increases and their doubts decrease. This may be because adolescents and young adults are still in the process of forming their identities and trying to figure out who they are and the role of Islam in their lives. They are in the process of answering these existential questions and resolving religious questions.

Therefore, it is important to think about potential root causes that may be related to these trends in religiosity and religious doubt.

Uncertainty intolerance and religious outcomes

As previously stated, we live in a time of daily predictability and global uncertainty. Predictability gives us a sense of security and the feeling that we have life under control. Has technology made us expect and demand more predictability in life? Has it made us less tolerant of uncertainty? Could it be that religiosity and religious doubt relate to how well we tolerate uncertainty in our lives?

We asked respondents how they respond to uncertainty in their lives (i.e., uncertainty intolerance). Uncertainty intolerance (UI) captures how a person negatively perceives, interprets, and responds to uncertain situations on a cognitive, emotional, and behavioral level. For example, we asked participants how much they agreed with the statement, “Uncertainty makes me uneasy, anxious, or stressed.”

People who have a low tolerance for uncertainty crave predictability in life and do not do well in uncertain situations. On the other hand, people who are highly tolerant of uncertainty are more resilient and able to successfully navigate through uncertainty.¹² From a religious perspective, there are many things that are meant to be uncertain in life, as certainty is only in the hands of Allah.¹³ In fact, Allah has placed some uncertainty and ambiguity in secondary matters of Islam as a way of testing our submission to Him. True submission to Allah includes submission in things that we fully understand and things that we are still trying to understand.

هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ وَأُخَرُ مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ ط فَامَّا
الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَابَهَ مِنْهُ ابْتِغَاءَ الْفِتْنَةِ وَابْتِغَاءَ تَأْوِيلِهِ ط وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ
إِلَّا اللَّهُ ط وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِي الْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ آمَنَّا بِهِ كُلٌّ مِّنْ عِنْدِ رَبِّنَا ط وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّا أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ

It is He who has sent down to you, [O Muhammad], the Book; in it are verses that are clear—they are the foundation of the Book—and others that are not entirely clear. As for those in whose hearts is deviation [from truth], they will follow that which is not entirely clear, seeking discord and seeking an interpretation [suitable to them]. And no one knows its [true] interpretation except Allah. But those firm in knowledge say, “We believe in it. All [of it] is from our Lord.” And no one will be reminded except those of understanding.

[QUR’AN 3:7]

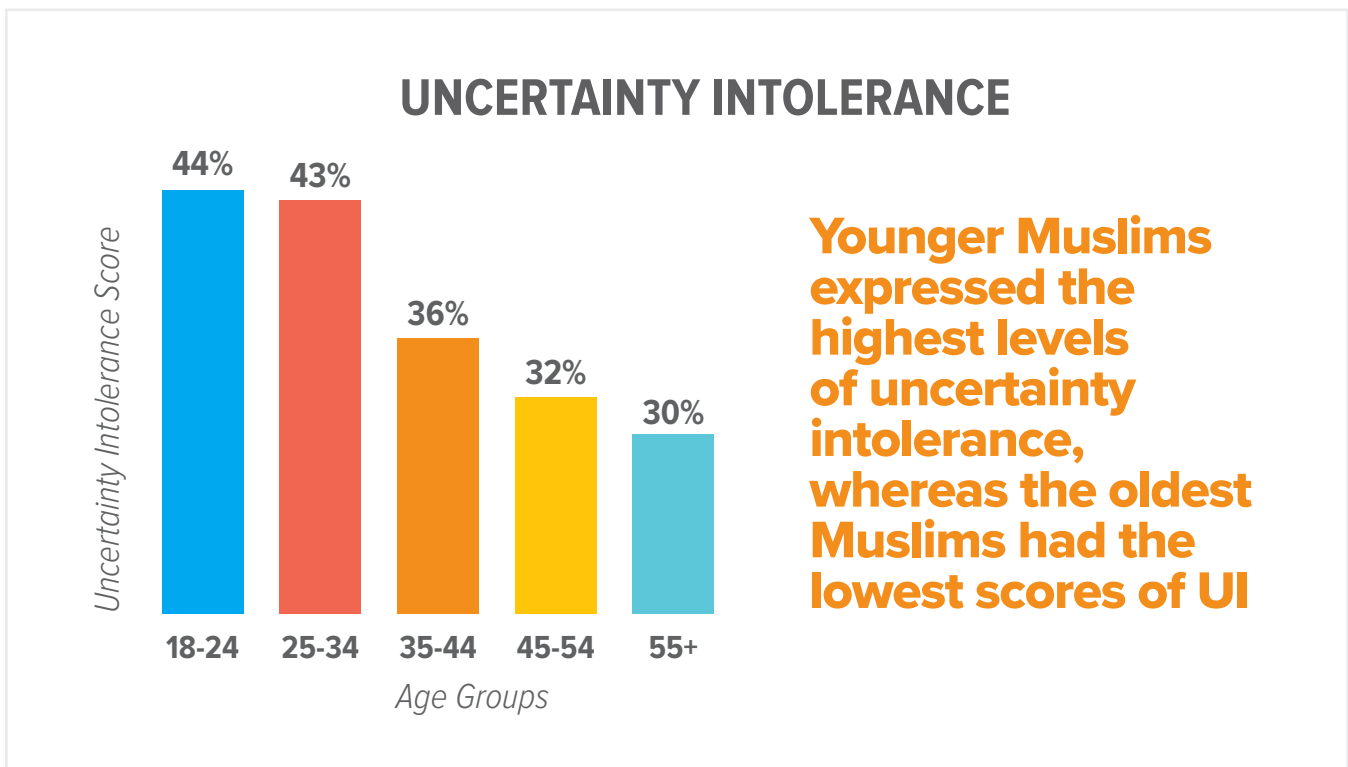
This verse reminds us that Allah has purposely placed uncertainty in the meanings of some verses and praised those who tolerate uncertainty in religious matters. Therefore, a strong believer who trusts Allah is likely to be more resilient when encountering uncertainty. So what did we find about uncertainty beliefs and their relationship to religious outcomes?

Uncertainty intolerance and religious outcomes

We asked respondents three questions to gauge their level of uncertainty intolerance (see Appendix 2). For each question, individuals could select one of five categories ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” to reflect how strongly they agreed with these three statements. The average UI score for the sample was 39%, which corresponds to “somewhat disagreeing,” which means that the average Muslim from our sample did not have a strong dislike of or discomfort with uncertainty.

A deeper dive into age differences revealed interesting insights. Younger Muslims expressed the highest levels of uncertainty intolerance (44%), whereas the oldest Muslims had the lowest scores of UI (30%). It seems as we age, we are able to better cope with the uncertainties of life, likely due to acquiring more knowledge and life experiences.^{14,15}

What might explain the lower levels of religiosity and higher levels of religious doubt in younger Muslims? We believe that uncertainty intolerance might be one factor worth investigating further.



Categories of uncertainty intolerance

Similar to the analysis we conducted in Chapter 1, we categorized people's discomfort with uncertainty into three levels: low, medium, and high.

Refer to the UI question below. A person could select any value from zero (strongly disagree) to four (strongly agree).

My mind can't be relaxed if I don't know what will happen tomorrow.

0	1	2	3	4
Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree

Scores of 0 and 1 were classified as low uncertainty intolerance, medium category if the response was 2, and high if the response was 3 or 4.

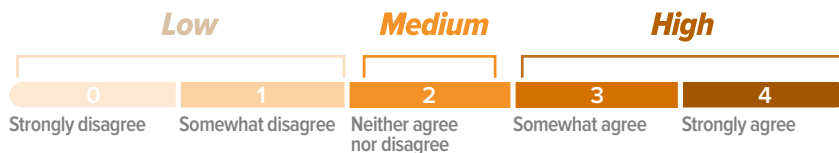
My mind can't be relaxed if I don't know what will happen tomorrow.

<i>Low</i>		<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>	
0	1	2	3	4
Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree

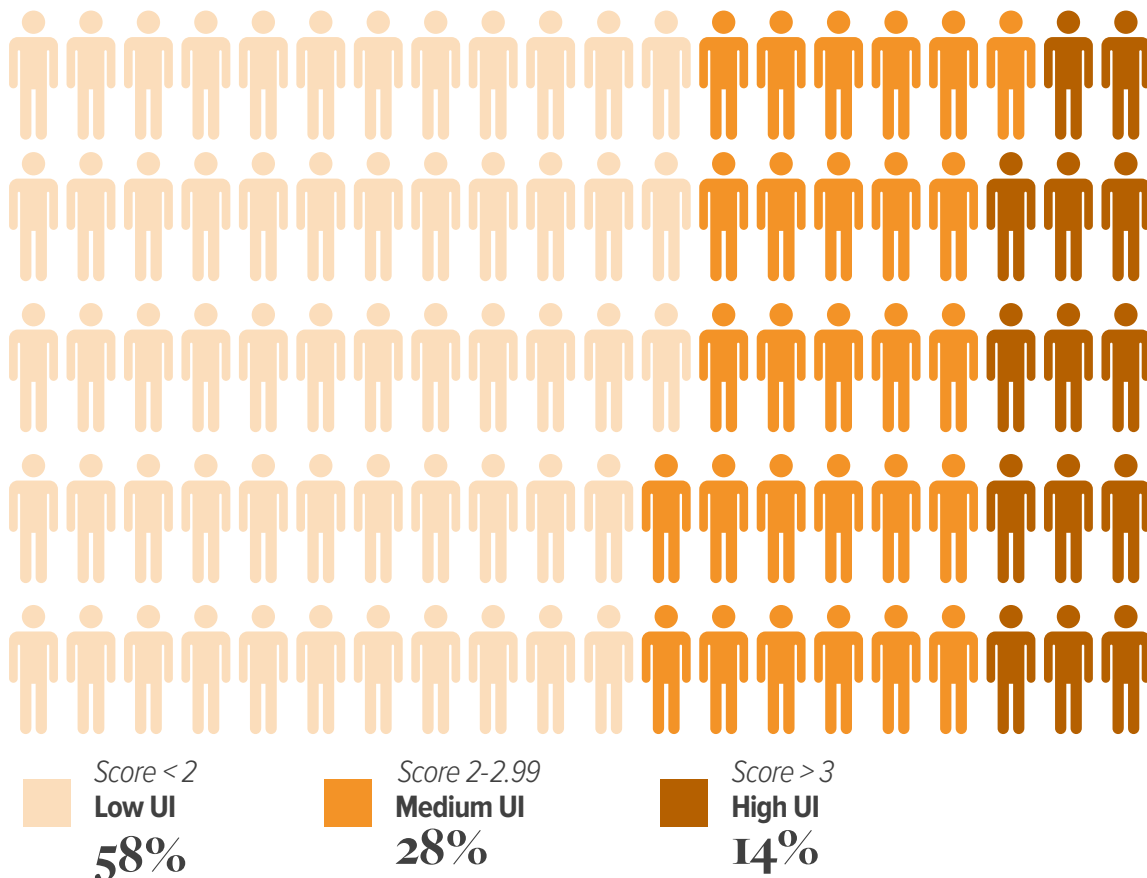
Levels of uncertainty intolerance

We also categorized each individual's *overall average* UI as low, medium, or high.

- Low UI refers to an average score of less than 2
- Medium UI refers to an average score between 2 and 2.99
- High UI refers to an average score that is 3 or above



Approximately 14% of participants were in the high UI group, 28% in the medium UI group, and finally, 58% in the low UI group.



The majority of Muslims in our sample have low UI. This means that **the majority of Muslims report tolerating uncertainty without much discomfort.** This is an indicator of their resiliency in the face of the unexpected. However, approximately 2 in 5 people report medium to high levels of UI. How does uncertainty intolerance relate to religious outcomes?

Uncertainty intolerance relates to religiosity

Using the three categories of low, medium, and high UI groups, we investigated how UI related to religiosity. We found that individuals who reported being unable to tolerate uncertainty (i.e., higher levels of UI) tended to have lower religiosity scores.

We can refer to the same personas from Chapter 1. Imagine a young Muslim woman by the name of Anam. Anam is in the low UI group (i.e., she can tolerate uncertainty well). Therefore, she has the highest religiosity score of 78%.

Umair, on the other hand, is in the medium UI group (i.e., he somewhat struggles with tolerating uncertainty). As a result, his religiosity score will likely be lower than Anam's.

Finally, Sarah is in the high UI group (i.e., she is unable to tolerate uncertainty). As a result, her religiosity score is likely to be the lowest.

In other words, the more that **one is able to tolerate uncertainty in life, the higher their religiosity score is likely to be.**

Having the right mindset towards uncertainty may influence religiosity positively. For example, accepting and embracing that Allah placed uncertainty in the world and in some of the verses of the Qur'an in His divine wisdom is the first step in learning how to deal with uncertainty. Additionally, increasing in religious knowledge and religious experiences may also provide individuals with an Islamic mindset and a set of religious coping skills to deal with the inevitable uncertainty of life. Hopefully, through a combination of life experiences and increased religious knowledge over time, people learn to better tolerate uncertainty and strengthen their religiosity.



Anam
High religiosity
Low UI
Religiosity score: **78%**



Umair
Medium religiosity
Medium UI
Religiosity score: **74%**



Sarah
Low religiosity
High UI
Religiosity score: **71%**

Uncertainty intolerance relates to religious doubts

Using the same three categories of low, medium, and high UI groups, we investigated how UI correlates with religious doubts.

We found that individuals with higher levels of UI also had higher levels of religious doubt. In other words, the more that someone struggles with uncertainty, the more religious doubt they may experience.

For instance, Anam, who is in the low UI group (i.e., she can tolerate uncertainty), has a low religious doubt score.

Umair, who is in the medium UI group, has a slightly higher religious doubt score.

Finally, Sarah, who is in the high UI group (i.e., she does not tolerate uncertainty well), has the highest religious doubt score.

Young Muslims, who on average have higher levels of uncertainty intolerance and religious doubt, may be concerned about these results. However, we may find solace and comfort in knowing that the existence of religious questions, concerns, and uncertainty about particular aspects of faith are not always bad. In fact, the Qur'an highlights that even Prophet Ibrāhīm

was curious about life after death and was looking for more spiritual reassurance from Allah.

And [mention] when Ibrāhīm said, “My Lord, show me how You give life to the dead.” [Allah] said, “Have you not believed?” He said, “Yes, but [I ask] only that my heart may be satisfied.”¹⁶

The Prophet ﷺ further elaborated, “We have more right to doubt than Ibrāhīm when he said, ‘My Lord! Show me how You give life to the dead.’ He said, ‘Do you not believe?’ He said, ‘Yes (I believe), but to be stronger in Faith.’”¹⁷

‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Abbās, the great companion, said that he did not find any verse in the Qur’an that gave him more hope than this one.¹⁸ He found so much hope in noticing that Allah was satisfied with Ibrāhīm’s response when he said, “Yes,” even though he was looking for more certainty.¹⁹

Thus, for any Muslim who has outstanding religious questions and concerns, it is important to remember that we will never know with full certainty so many details about the universe and the Qur’an. Accepting our human limitations and trusting (*tawakkul*) in Allah are essential for the development of our faith.²⁰



Anam
Low UI
Low Religious Doubt

Religious doubt score: **8%**



Umair
Medium UI
High Religious Doubt

Religious doubt score: **13%**



Sarah
High UI
High Religious Doubt

Religious doubt score: **23%**

Reacting to religious doubt

We found that the younger Muslims in our sample reported lower levels of religiosity and higher levels of religious doubt than older Muslims. However, younger Muslims are still learning about their faith and trying to make sense of the world. Therefore, we wanted to investigate how different age groups react to religious doubts. For example, seeking answers to religious questions may be a source of religious growth for some believers, whereas others may perceive the existence of religious questions as bothersome and undesirable. Thus, religious doubt can be framed positively as an opportunity for spiritual growth or negatively as shameful.

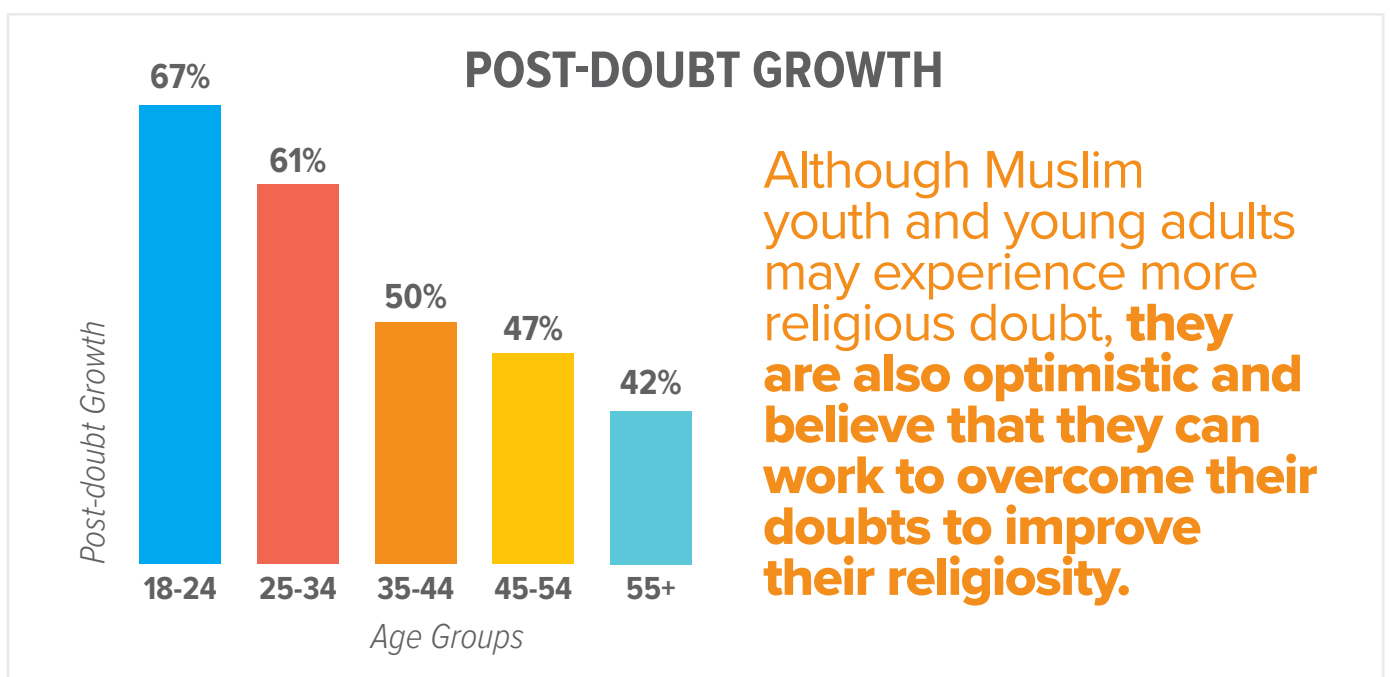
Therefore, we investigated perceptions of religious doubt as an opportunity for spiritual growth, which we refer to as *post-doubt growth*.

Post-doubt growth allows people to view experiences of religious doubt as opportunities for religious growth and maturation. Post-doubt growth may be an adaptive way of coping with religious doubts, especially for young people struggling to make sense of their faith in the modern world.

We asked respondents to endorse how much they agreed or disagreed with statements such as “Working through religious doubt helps me to better understand my faith” and “Doubt is necessary for religious and spiritual growth.”

The average value for endorsing post-doubt growth was 57%. This corresponds to the medium category (e.g., “Neither agree nor disagree”).

Muslims under the age of 25 endorsed the highest levels of post-doubt growth (67%). This means that **although Muslim youth and young adults may experience more religious doubt, they are also optimistic and believe that they can work to overcome their doubts to improve their religiosity.** On the contrary, the eldest group of Muslims endorse post-doubt growth at substantially lower levels (42%), likely a reflection of being settled in their beliefs and therefore finding doubts far more uncomfortable and aversive.



Key takeaways

1

Younger Muslims have lower levels of religiosity compared to older Muslims. This may be related to the developmental process whereby with age comes increased religious clarity or it may reflect generational differences in religious commitment.

2

Younger Muslims have higher levels of uncertainty intolerance. Uncertainty intolerance may decrease with age and life experiences and it may also be the result of generational differences in experiencing predictability in daily life and global uncertainty.

3

Due to higher levels of uncertainty intolerance among younger Muslims, older Muslims should be compassionate and empathetic when helping younger Muslims overcome religious doubts. In turn, younger Muslims should recognize the religious maturity of their elders and may benefit from seeking advice from them, especially as older Muslims have more life experiences that may aid them on their path to increased religiosity and overcoming religious doubts.

4

Higher levels of religiosity correspond to lower levels of uncertainty intolerance. This may be due to religion offering individuals adaptive ways to cope with life's uncertainties, such as learning to put one's trust in Allah and accept His decree. Tolerating uncertainty is also important in helping people accept ambiguity in religious issues.

5



How Muslims react to religious doubt may determine future religiosity. **Younger Muslims are more likely to view religious doubts as opportunities for growth and are optimistic they can overcome their religious and spiritual challenges.** Therefore, religious educators and parents should take advantage of this optimism to guide youth through their religious questions as a path to religious maturity and growth.

Conclusion

We find that younger Muslims have relatively lower levels of religiosity and higher levels of doubt compared to older Muslims. One of the possible causes of religious doubt appears to be a general discomfort with uncertainty in life. Younger Muslims expressed substantially higher levels of uncertainty intolerance than older Muslims. However, there is reason to be optimistic and hopeful. Younger Muslims see religious doubt as an opportunity for religious growth, which appears to be a healthy and adaptive mindset.

Our hope is that Muslim youth will become more religious with life experience and age. We believe that parents and religious educators play a central role in guiding the youth towards religious conviction and addressing the inevitable questions that will arise.

May Allah guide the youth of this *ummah*, nurture their conviction, and dismantle their doubts.

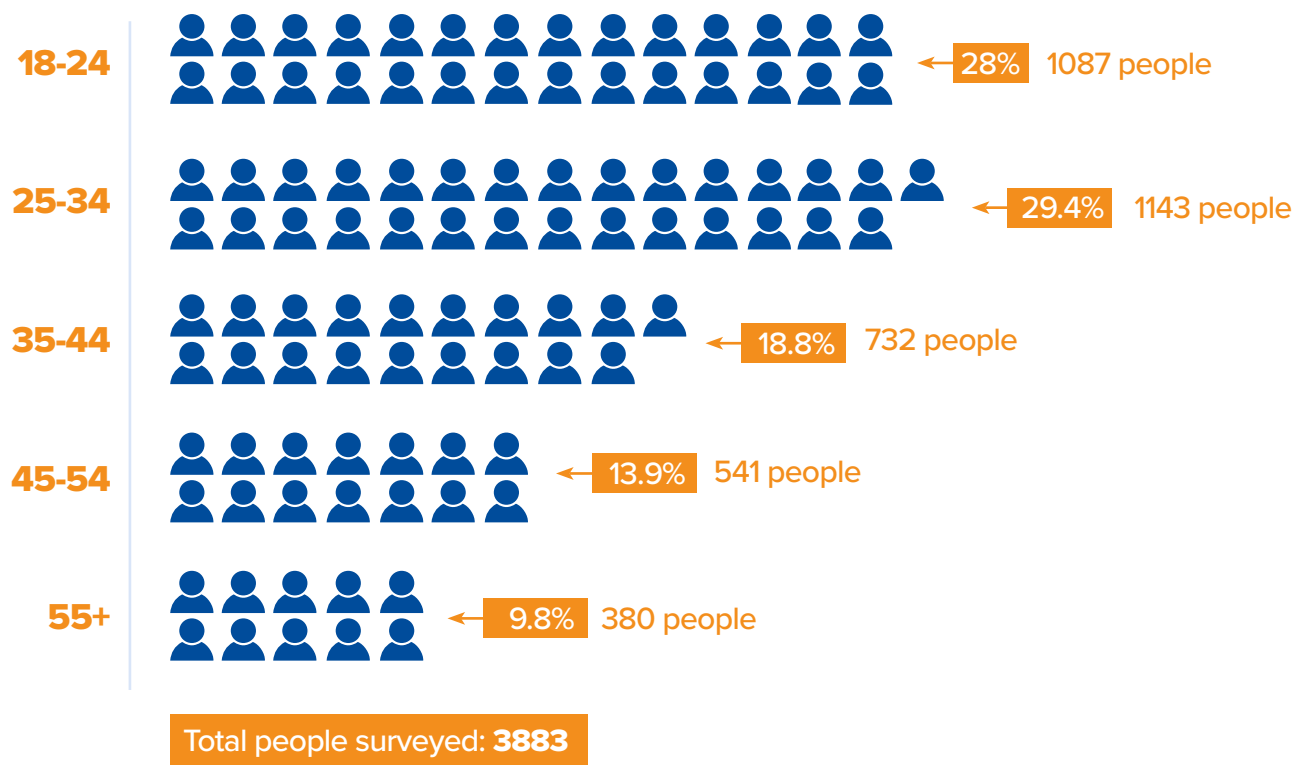
	Religiosity	Post-doubt growth	Uncertainty Intolerance	Religious Doubts
 Young Muslims	Lower	Higher	Higher	Higher
↓				
 Older Muslims	Higher	Lower	Lower	Lower

Appendix 1: Sample

A convenience sampling approach was used to collect data on Muslims with respect to religiosity and related variables.

For this chapter, 159 individuals (4.1% of sample) who completed the survey indicated their age as below 18. This category was merged into the 18-24 age group category. T-tests comparing the under-18 and 18-24-year-old groups revealed no statistical differences along the variables discussed in this chapter.

Percentage of age groups



Appendix 2

Religious Doubt

Adopted and slightly modified from: Exline, J. J., Pargament, K. I., Grubbs, J. B., & Yali, A. M. (2014). The Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale: Development and initial validation. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 6(3), 208–222. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0036465>

Over the past few months, to what extent have you had each of the experiences listed below:

1. Felt troubled by doubts or questions about Islam.



2. Struggled to figure out what I really believe about Islam.



3. Felt confused about my religious beliefs.



4. Worried about whether my beliefs about Islam were correct.



5. Felt angry at God.



Appendix 3

Uncertainty Intolerance

Adopted from: Buhr, K., & Dugas, M. K. (2002). The intolerance of uncertainty scale: Psychometric properties of the English version. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 40, 931-945.

1. My mind can't be relaxed if I don't know what will happen tomorrow.



2. Uncertainty makes me uneasy, anxious, or stressed.



3. Uncertainty makes life intolerable.



Appendix 4

Post-Doubt Growth

Adopted from: Krause, N., & Ellison, C. G. (2009). The doubting process: A longitudinal study of the precipitants and consequences of religious doubt. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 48(2), 293–312. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2009.01448.x>

1. Doubt is necessary for religious and spiritual growth.



2. Working through religious doubt helps me to better understand my faith.



3. Doubt is a necessary part of leading a religious life.



Endnotes

1 “World Uncertainty Index,” World Uncertainty Index, <https://worlduncertaintyindex.com/>.

2 Emily A. Vogels, “Millennials Stand Out for Their Technology Use, but Older Generations Also Embrace Digital Life,” Pew Research Center, September 23, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/09/us-generations-technology-use/>.

3 Allison Pond, Gregory Smith, and Scott Clement, “Religion among the Millennials,” Religion and Public Life Project, Pew Research Center, May 30, 2020, <https://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials/>.

4 Paul Basevitz, Dolores Pushkar, June Chaikelson, Michael Conway, and Connie Dalton, “Age-Related Differences in Worry and Related Processes,” *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 66, no. 4 (2008): 283–305.

5 Tamer Desouky and Osman Umarji, “A Holistic View of Muslim Religiosity: Introducing BASIC,” *Yaqeen*, September 15, 2021, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/data/reports/a-holistic-view-of-muslim-religiosity-introducing-basic>.

6 Vern L. Bengtson, Merrill Silverstein, Norella M. Putney, and Susan C. Harris, “Does Religiousness Increase with Age? Age Changes and Generational Differences Over 35 Years,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, no. 2 (2015): 363–79.

7 “The Age Gap in Religion Around the World,” Pew Research Center, June 13, 2018.

8 Stephanie Kramer and Dalia Fahmy, “Younger People Are Less Religious than Older Ones in Many Countries, Especially in the US and Europe,” Pew Research Center, 2018.

9 See Appendix 2 for the list of questions asked. The survey was conducted in January and February of 2021.

10 *Sahih Muslim*, no. 132a, <https://sunnah.com/muslim:132a>

11 *Sunan Abū Dāwūd*, no. 5112, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:5112>.

12 From a counseling perspective, the acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) approach proposes that suffering arises from attempting to control or eliminate undesirable experiences. These attempts to control can lead to the paradoxical effect of greater suffering. The aim of ACT is to increase psychological flexibility and, based on what the situation affords, to change or persist in behavior in the service of chosen values.

13 Osman Umarji and Hassan Elwan, “Embracing Uncertainty: How to Feel Emotionally Stable in a Pandemic,” *Yaqeen*, March 30, 2020, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/embracing-uncertainty-how-to-feel-emotionally-stable-in-a-pandemic>.

14 Umarji and Elwan, “Embracing Uncertainty.”

15 Roberto Nuevo, Julie Loebach Wetherell, Ignacio Montorio, Miguel A. Ruiz, and Isabel Cabrera, “Knowledge about Aging and Worry in Older Adults: Testing the Mediating Role of Intolerance of Uncertainty,” *Aging and Mental Health* 13, no. 1 (2009): 135–41.

16 Qur’an 2:260.

17 *Sahih al-Bukhārī*, no. 4537.

18 Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy al-Qur’ān (Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī)*, tafsīr of Surah al-Baqarah, verse 260.

19 ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm (Tafsīr Ibn Abī Ḥātim)*, Surah al-Baqarah, verse 260, narration no. 2694.

20 Roohi Tahir, “In Hardship and in Ease: How to Rely on God,” *Yaqeen*, April 2, 2020, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/in-hardship-and-in-ease-how-to-rely-on-god>.