

100329 - Calling scholars, teachers and elders “father”

the question

Is calling scholars “father” a kind of imitation of the Christian Arabs who call their priests “father” or of the foreigners who call their religious leader the pope (a title derived from the Greek word for father; cf. papa)?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

There is nothing wrong with addressing a scholar or elderly man as father, in the sense that his status is like that of a father in terms of respect, not in the sense of blood ties.

Abu Dawood (8), an-Nasaa’i (40) and Ibn Maajah (313) narrated that Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him) said: The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “I am to you like a father; I teach you.”

(Classed as hasan by al-Albaani in Saheeh Abi Dawood).

In the Qur’an, the word father is used to refer to someone other than a biological father, as in the verse (interpretation of the meaning):

“They said, ‘We shall worship your Ilaah (God — Allah) the Ilaah (God) of your fathers, Ibraaheem (Abraham), Ismaa’eel (Ishmael), Ishaq (Isaac), One Ilaah (God), and to Him we submit (in Islam)”

[al-Baqarah 2:133].

Ismaa ‘eel was one of his (Ya‘qoob’s) paternal uncles, not one of his (fore)fathers.

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In Fataawa Ibn as-Salaah (1/186) it says: Is it permissible according to the Holy Book and the saheeh hadeeths to call someone “father” other than the biological father?

He (may Allah have mercy on him) replied: Allah, may He be blessed and exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): “They said, ‘We shall worship your Ilaah (God — Allaah) the Ilaah (God) of your fathers, Ibraaheem (Abraham), Ismaa’eel (Ishmael)...” [al-Baqarah 2:133], and Ismaa’eel was one of his paternal uncles, not one of his (fore)fathers.

And Allah says (interpretation of the meaning): “And he raised his parents [abawayhi] to the throne” [Yoosuf 11:100], but his mother had died previously. (The scholars) said that what is meant is his maternal aunt. This is an example of the word abawayn (parents, lit. two fathers) being used to refer to someone other than a biological parent, which is a valid usage in Arabic.

Use of the word in this manner to refer to the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) or a scholar or an old man is acceptable in terms of linguistic usage and meaning. From the shar’i point of view, Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): “Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) is not the father of any of your men” [al-Ahzaab 33:40]. In the saheeh hadeeth, the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “I am to you like a father; I teach you.”

Hence some of our scholars are of the view that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) should not be called the father of the believers, even though his wives are the mothers of the believers, and the reason given for that is what we have mentioned. Based on this, it may be said that he is like a father, but it cannot be said that he is our father. However, other scholars regarded the latter as permissible too, and the one who stated this view wrote a lengthy argument to support it. But to be on the safe side and as a precaution it is better to avoid that. End quote.

Ash-Shaafa’i (may Allah have mercy on him) stated that it is permissible to call him the father of the believers, i.e., in terms of respect. See al-Durar al-Bahiyyah Sharh al-Bahjah al-Wardiyyah,

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Al-Qurtubi (may Allah have mercy on him) said: The correct view is that it is permissible to say that he is the father of the believers, i.e., in terms of respect. The verse (interpretation of the meaning): “Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) is not the father of any of your men” [al-Ahzaab 33:40] refers to biological fatherhood. End quote.

So there is nothing wrong with calling him (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) “father”, and it does not matter that the Christians use this word too, because resembling them is only forbidden with regard to matters that are unique to them, but this word is something common to all people, Arabs and others, and was also known before the time of the Christians, as Allah says concerning Ibraaheem (peace be upon him): “it is the religion of your father Ibraheem (Abraham) (Islamic Monotheism). It is He (Allah) Who has named you Muslims both before and in this (the Qur’an)” [al-Hajj 22:78 - interpretation of the meaning].

Allah, may He be exalted, called him the father of the believers.

Al-Qurtubi (may Allah have mercy on him) said in his Tafseer (12/91): Ibraaheem is the father of all the Arabs. It was also suggested that this is addressed to all the Muslims, even though not all of them are his descendants, because respect for Ibrahim is required from the Muslims as respect for the father is required from the son. End quote.

People still use this word in their speech; they may call a scholar, teacher or elder “father”, and one of these people may say to one who is younger than him, “O my son,” and so on.

Muslim narrated in his Saheeh (2151) that Anas ibn Maalik (may Allah be pleased with him) said: The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said to me, “O my son.”

An-Nawawi (may Allah have mercy on him) included this hadeeth in a chapter called: Permissibility of saying to someone other than one’s son, “O my son”; doing so is mustahabb.

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What is meant by son in this case is like what is meant by father, and it is no different. It does not mean biological son; rather what is meant is to show compassion and mercy, which is an acceptable usage, even if this word is used by (Christian) priests when speaking to their followers, because it is not something that is unique to them, as mentioned above.

Shaykh 'Abd ar-Rahmaan al-Barraak (may Allah preserve him) was asked: Nowadays it is common to use the word father to refer to Muslim religious scholars who are senior in age, knowledge and status; is it permissible to use this word, noting that the Christians use the word father to refer to their scholars who are senior in knowledge and status?

(He replied:) There is no report to indicate that the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), the Companions, the Taabi'een or early generations used the word father to refer to the scholars.

If anyone were to be given the title of father, no one would be more deserving of that than the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), of whom our Lord said (interpretation of the meaning): "Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) is not the father of any of your men, but he is the Messenger of Allah and the last (end) of the Prophets" [al-Ahzaab 33:40].

He replied:

We do not know of anyone among the scholars who was given the title of father; rather in some societies it is customary to describe an old man as father, whether he is a scholar or otherwise, so this word is used when addressing him, such as saying "O my father" or "O father", and when referring to him. There is nothing to suggest that this is an imitation of Christian usage, because the Christians use that word as a title for leaders of their religion. As for your saying that the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), despite his high status and virtue, and despite of the great rights that he has over his ummah is not a father, based on the verse in which Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): "Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) is

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not the father of any of your men” [al-Ahzaab 33:40], what is meant by fatherhood here is biological fatherhood. However fatherhood in the sense of status and respect is established in the case of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), as it says in some modes of recitation (interpretation of the meaning): “The Prophet is closer to the believers than their own selves, and his wives are their (believers’) mothers (as regards respect and marriage) and he is a father to them” [al-Ahzaab 33:6]. What is meant by fatherhood and motherhood here is in terms of status, respect and honour. The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “I am to you like a father,” however he is of even higher status than that, so his rights over his ummah are greater than the rights of parents and all other people, as he (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “No one of you truly believes until I am dearer to him than his son, his father and all of mankind.” Narrated by al-Bukhaari (14) and Muslim (44). And Allah knows best.

To sum up, there is nothing wrong with addressing a scholar or old man as father, and this is not regarded as imitating the Christians.

And Allah knows best.