

**Religion as a Social Institution: Its Role in Shaping Community Life in Pakhtun Society**

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**ABSTRACT**

*In Pakistan, religion is a key determinant of social institutions, ethical beliefs, and community life, as it is deeply intertwined with people's daily practices. This study will discuss religion as a social institution and its role in the life of the community in District Malakand. A qualitative research method was used where 30 respondents were sampled through purposive sampling, and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The thematic analysis of collected data was done using six steps developed by Braun and Clarke, where key patterns and themes could be identified concerning the moral, social, and regulatory functions of religion. These results indicate four broad themes: religion and moral values, religion and community cohesion, religion as a social regulation mechanism, and religion and social change. The participants emphasized that religious instructions help to drive good ethical practices, build honesty, integrity, and empathy, and form social standards in families and communities. Religious activities encourage socialization, collaboration, and collective accountability, increasing the sense of community. The other informal regulatory system is religion, which supports moral standards by elders and religious leaders, which enforces social order. Moreover, religion shows dynamism, which offers direction in managing the current issues, in addition to inspiring group actions towards building society and promoting societal well-being. The research found that religion is still a complex and powerful institution in District Malakand, as it determines the behavior of individuals, social behavioral norms, and social relationships. Some of the recommendations based on the findings can be to strengthen the community programs by religious institutions, moral education, use religious leadership, collective action, and the integration between the tradition and the current social needs. The insights add to the apprehension of the continued relevance of religion in ensuring social unity and moral behaviors in the local communities.*

**Keywords:** religion, moral values, community cohesion, social regulation, social change

## INTRODUCTION

Religion has always been one of the strongest and most persistent social institutions in the history of humankind. In addition to its spiritual and theological aspects, religion is important in the organization of social life, as it offers common beliefs, moral values, norms, and practices to help regulate the behavior of an individual and to determine the interaction between individuals and groups (Kasa, 2025). Sociologists consider religion as a social institution since it carries out some fundamental roles, which include sustaining social order, enhancing social cohesion, creating and defining identity, and controlling immoral behavior in society. Religion plays a role in stabilizing and sustaining societal life through rituals, symbols, and collective belief (Khalil, 2025).

Religion, being a social institution, provides individuals with a model whereby they make sense of their experiences and how they fit in the society. The idea of what is right and what is wrong, what is duty and what is responsibility, is often stipulated in religious teachings and thus affects the daily interactions and relationships. In the community, worship, religious festivals, and rites of passage unite people and enhance the social bonds, creating a sense of belonging. Through these collective activities, common values and norms are strengthened, and this is what enables communal life to maintain itself (Sacks, 2025).

Classical sociological theorists have highlighted the social significance of religion in various aspects. Émile Durkheim considered religion as means of social attachment by stating that religious beliefs and practices strengthen the collective consciousness and integrate people into a moral society. Instead, Max Weber emphasized the impact of religion on social action and institutional development and showed how religious concepts can be used to affect economic action and social transformation (Dunbar, 2022). Karl Marx was a critical thinker and the one who considered religion as an instrument that can justify inequality and secure the status quo. These views, when combined, give a detailed picture of the complex social role that religion plays (Mokyr & Tabellini, 2024).

Religion has more than just a moral aspect in the life of the community; it also has social, cultural, and economic aspects. Religious organizations are also commonly used as educational, charitable, social, and conflict resolution institutions. Religious entities are also a source of welfare and emotional support in most societies, especially where formal state institutions are scarce. Another way in which religion helps preserve culture is through the conservation of traditions, customs, and common identities between generations (Jeniva & Tanyid, 2025).

But the involvement of religion in the life of the community is not an easy task and is even contradictory. As much as religion would foster unity, cooperation, and social responsibility, there are instances where religion would serve to foster exclusion, division, and conflict, especially in pluralistic societies. Social harmony may be threatened by the differences in belief, interpretation, and practice, and impose boundaries between groups. Nowadays, in a world that has been formed under the influence of modernization and globalization and the threat of changes in technology, the religious institutions are also evolving; they adjust their sphere of impact on community life (Stichweh, 2025).

### **Problem of Statement**

Religion has been one of the most popular social institutions that influences the moral values, social behavior, and relationships in the community. Religion is an important part of society as it dictates the behavior of individuals, controls the social norms, and brings the communities together in many societies, Pakistan being one of them. Even though it is a ubiquitous phenomenon, very little is understood about how religion affects the daily life of the community, especially at the local scale. In the inner areas of the District of Malakand, where the social life is closely connected with the religious practices, and the communities

are tightly knit, there exists little empirical studies of the way in which social relations, collaboration, and collective sense are defined by the religious institutions and rituals. This lack of knowledge complicates the conceptualization of the positive and negative sides of the social impact of religion, such as its possible impact on enhancing oneness, controlling the moral code, and solving societal problems. Thus, specific research should be conducted on religion as a social institution, and its role in the life of the community in this respect, and the presented insights could be used in both sociological knowledge and community development efforts.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To explore the role of religion in shaping social norms and moral values.
2. To examine how religious practices influence community cohesion and relationships.
3. To analyze religion's function as a mechanism of social regulation.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The available sociological literature sheds a lot of light on religion as a social institution and its impact on the life of the community. Classical and contemporary scholars have investigated the ways in which religion can influence social norms, regulate behavior, create collective identity, and react to social change. Critical of the major scholarly debates of the institutional nature of religion, its various functions in sorting relationships among communities, its diverse functions of moral and social control, and how it interacts with overall social change processes, this literature review will be developed. Combining these views, the review provides a theoretical basis for viewing the current importance of religion in social life.

#### **Religion: A Social Institution**

Religion has been a well-known aspect of sociological literature as one of the fundamental social institutions that organize human societies. Religion is an institution made up of beliefs, practices, rituals, and moral codes of conduct that give meaning and order to social life. Scholars contend that religion satisfies the most basic needs as it provides answers to existential questions, justification of the social norms, and facilitation of shared values (Ben & Duke, 2025). These functions enable religion to influence the behavior of individuals and the organization of groups. Classical sociological theories form the basis of the institutional role of religion. Durkheim considered religion to be a collective phenomenon that strengthens social solidarity and the feeling of consciousness. To him, religious symbols and rituals equate to society, and they are used to reinforce unity within a group. By engaging in religious activities, one is likely to rejoin the moral community, thus enhancing social cohesion and stability (Žažar & Clausen, 2025).

Weber took another twist, he focused on how the idea of religion can influence the individual behavior of a person in relation to social action and the establishment of institutions. He was able to show that religious concepts could shape economic action, government, and social transformation trends. Out of this perception, religion is not only a stabilizing factor but a dynamic institution that can transform the social structures (Jeniva & Tanyid, 2025). Marx, in his turn, offered a critical version of the interpretation, as he believed that religion may be utilized as an ideological instrument that justifies inequality and supports the existing power structures. Modern scholars derive from these classical views by emphasizing the dynamic aspect of religion as a social institution. Contemporary societies are characterized by a variety of religious forms of organization, both formal and individualized spiritual practices. Irrespective of such changes, religion still offers guidance in morality, social identity, and continuity of an institution. The literature

underlines that religion cannot be perceived as an entity, but it has to be evaluated in relation to other social institutions like family, education, and politics (Malkov et al., 2023).

By and large, religion in the literature has been brought out as a complex and diverse institution. It influences, shapes social norms, and connects with social forces. Such an institutional view is critical to comprehend the role of religion in the life of the community and how it is still relevant in various social settings (Dunbar, 2022).

### **Religion and Community Life**

Religion has an important role to play in community life as it determines the depth of relationships, collaboration, and social groups. According to sociological studies, the existence of common religious beliefs and practices brings a feeling of community between members of society. The worship practices, festival events, and rituals make people cohesive and bind them socially and through a shared identity (Bowie, 2021). These interactions aid in developing a good interpersonal relationship, contributing to the cohesion of a community. Institutions of religion have a tendency to be significant social places in communities. In addition to the spiritual role, they offer a communication platform, mutual support, and problem-solving. Scholars observe that involvement in religious life is related to increased social participation, volunteering, and civic participation. Through these activities, religion serves to bring about social networks that increase trust and cooperation between people (Žažar & Clausen, 2025).

The relationships in the community are also influenced by religious values, including compassion, charity, and moral responsibility. The values make people stand by each other, especially when they are going through tough situations. Other studies put importance on the contribution of religious organizations to social services, emotional support, and assistance to vulnerable populations (Ben & Duke, 2025). These contributions would make informal systems of care stronger and promote a sense of shared responsibility. Nevertheless, the literature does not negate the role of religion in the life of the community as not always positive. Although religion has the capacity to establish deep internal connections, it can also bring about divisions between dissimilar groups of people having varying beliefs. This may reduce wider social integration, and in other instances, it may lead to tension or exclusion. According to scholars, the influence of religion on community life is more reliant on social context, interpretation, and institutional structure (Bowie, 2021).

These complexities notwithstanding, the majority of the studies unanimously hold that religion is still a strong force in determining how people relate with each other in the community. Religion has remained in the middle of organizing community life by offering a set of shared meanings, moral direction, and interaction (Jeniva & Tanyid, 2025).

### **Religion and Social Regulation**

Religion is a significant social control mechanism because it establishes moral norms and sets the behavioral course. According to the sociological literature, religious teachings affect norms concerning behavior, family life, gender roles, and social demands. These norms are involved in upholding social order by forming expectations regarding the expected behavior in societies. Compared to formal legal systems, religious regulation tends to work informally, e.g., by moral persuasion, social approval, and internalized beliefs. It is a moral obligation or a fear of social disapproval that makes people conform to the norms of religion. According to scholars, this internalization is what renders religion a very useful form of social control since people control their own actions according to common values (Stichweh, 2025).

Religious meanings tend to influence demands and anticipations of family roles and responsibilities in societies. The conventional meanings, as pointed out by many scholars, have preserved gender roles that are hierarchical (Bowie, 2021). Meanwhile, according to the other studies, religious meanings are debatable and can be reinterpreted, making them changeable and negotiable. Religion is also relevant to legitimize authority and social hierarchy. Respect for those in authority, leaders, or institutions can be strengthened by religious beliefs through the presentation of authority as one that is morally or divinely approved. This helps in maintaining social stability, but could also stop critical examination of the power structure. This has led to the regulation aspect of religion being perceived as stabilizing and limiting (Mokyr & Tabellini, 2024).

On the whole, the literature portrays religion as a strong source of moral power that influences behavior, strengthens norms, and leads to social order in communities (Jeniva & Tanyid, 2025).

### **Religion and Social Change**

In modern literature, there is a growing tendency to address the issue of religion and social change in connection with each other. Religious institutions and practices have changed due to processes like modernization, urbanization, education, migration, and changes in technology. Instead of contributing to the weakening of religion, according to various scholars, these changes have remodeled the experience and expression of religion. Research indicates that in most societies, religious participation has become diverse and individualized. Although traditional institutions will still be relevant, people can have a new experience with religion, both personal spirituality and online. It has changed the ways of interaction in a community and has questioned the conventional modes of religious authority (Khalil, 2025).

Globalization has also contributed to the religious life by ensuring the sharing of ideas and practices among societies. Being exposed to different interpretations has led to innovation, as well as tension in the religious communities (Stichweh, 2025). In the dress code, *Purdah* is considered a social and religious obligation (Imran and Iqbal, 2019). People following the religious injunctions in observing *Purdah* (veil), however, due to modernization, a shift has been observed in the styles of observing *Purdah*. Sacks (2025) pointed out that according to scholars, religion tends to adjust itself by redefining its role and strategies of operation. In spite of the current change, the literature provides that religion is still a major factor in identity, values, and social relationships. The resilience of it as a social institution is marked by its capacity to adapt. Instead of fading away, religion is still a powerful institution in the life of the community that will constantly be affected by the larger social influences.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research utilized a qualitative research method to investigate religion as a social institution and its impact on the life of the community in District Malakand, Pakistan. A qualitative method was deemed to be the most appropriate because it permits a comprehensive perception, understanding, and interpretation of the experiences of the participants. Purposive sampling was used to select 30 respondents, among them community elders, religious leaders, and adult residents of various socioeconomic backgrounds. Semi-structured interviews were employed as a tool of data collection because they are flexible and capable of producing rich qualitative data. The interviews were structured on open-ended questions aimed at probing the views of the participants on the role of religion in their societies. The semi-structured interviews allowed the respondents to present their opinions and views in their own words, but also allowed the researcher to dig deeper into an interesting or meaningful response. All the interviews took place within a 30-60-minute timeframe and in places that were most suitable to the participants.

The collected data were examined based on the six-step thematic analysis model described by Braun and Clarke (2006), which is a popular approach to defining, interpreting, and analyzing patterns in qualitative data. This was initiated by the familiarization process, in which transcripts were read several times to get the general picture of the information. The first codes were then created through highlighting of meaningful words, phrases, and ideas across the dataset. These codes were aggregated and analyzed to determine possible themes that identified how religion operates as a social institution and how it influences the life of the community. The themes were analyzed, narrowed, defined, and named so that they could be a true reflection of the opinions of the participants. Lastly, the analysis was structured into a logical storyline, with the direct quotes of the participants to explain and point out the conclusions.

Ethical considerations were also closely followed during the study. Informed consent was obtained, and the participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. They were told the objective of the research and that they could withdraw at any stage. Interviews were conducted in a manner that observed cultural and religious sensitivities in order to ensure that all were conducted in a conducive and respectful atmosphere.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Theme 1: Religion and Moral Values**

Religion became one of the important forces for building moral values and ethical behavior in society. The participants stressed the fact that religion gives an overview of what is considered right and wrong and instills the values that govern individual and group behavior.

*One of the respondents said that “the daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, and other regular religious practices assist in building self-discipline and moral responsibility. It was said that fasting was a process that not only teaches patience and self-control, but also develops compassion towards those with lower places in society. It was claimed that watching other people practicing religion inspired good works, prompted them to support those who were in need in the community, and discouraged criminality. These moral teachings, over time, had an internalization factor and were discovered to have a reflection in the conduct of the home, the workplace, and in society at large.”*

*As explained by another respondent, “moral values that are based on religion are strengthened at the level of family life and the community. Parents were instructed to educate children on the importance of being honest, generous, and respectful to others using religious stories and teachings. Religious meetings and charity activities that the mosques conducted in the community were seen to be convenient examples of ethical conduct. It was also found that moral behavior in others reinforced common moral norms and helped to reinforce ethical behavior as a preferred and acceptable social norm, which helps develop a socially ingrained sense of morality.”*

These descriptions give reason to believe that religion is a key determinant in the development of moral value and ethical conduct at both the individual and the collective level. It serves as a guiding model that helps in making moral decisions, and it also helps in making society a moral culture.

### **Theme 2: Religion and Community Cohesion.**

Religion has been cited as a significant power in enhancing community togetherness, promoting socializing, and a sense of belonging. The collective religious practices were characterized as forming trust and unity among members of the community.

As one of the respondents replied, *“The prayer times, Eids, and other religious activities that are done collectively, like Friday prayers, are also spaces of social interaction. These events were characterized as giving people a chance to not only worship together but also to experience, give advice, and even emotional and material encouragement. These interactions were said to enhance the relationship between people and foster their cohesion, especially when they are sick or facing financial strain, or other family problems.”*

Another respondent said that *“there is a strong support of social cohesion by these religious institutions through community-oriented programs in their mosques. Charity driving, educational classes, and support programs for vulnerable groups were said to be usual activities. Engagement of such initiatives was claimed to bring about cooperation, shared responsibility, and trust. Volunteer work, when done in large groups like helping poor families or hosting educational programs for children, was said to improve a sense of equality and shared responsibility and to instill a culture of solidarity in the community.”*

These views confirm the fact that religion helps in cohesiveness within the community as it offers matters on which to interact, work, and share responsibility. It brings people together based on their common practices and strengthens social networks that play a vital role in maintaining communities and their resilience.

### **Theme 3: Religion as a Social Control**

Religion was explained as a strong informal control system of social control that governs behavior and keeps social order. Religious doctrines were said to be the ones that put morality in place, which is reinforced by social guidance and expectations.

One of the respondents said that *“religious values give good business ethics, including truthfulness in business transactions, respecting the elderly, and proper behavior in social places. These values were explained as moral reference points that lead everyday behavior and minimize conflict in society. Religion was also termed as promoting self-control, in which people internalize the moral norms and control themselves without necessarily being supervised.”*

Another respondent believed that *“religious leaders and elders in the community have a significant role to play in the enforcement of these norms. Violations of established behavior were said to be resolved by moral reminders, advice, or informal conflict settlement. The members of the community were also reported to enforce norms by giving advice, encouraging, and providing moral reminders to make moral accountability and help to maintain social stability.”*

These narrations imply that religion is an efficient mechanism of social control as it incorporates both moral direction and social responsibility and encourages individuals to conform to common moral and cultural norms.

### **Theme 4: Religion and Social Change**

Religion was termed dynamic and able to facilitate communities in changing socially, and at the same time, retain traditional values. The members pointed out that religion was still applicable in solving modern social problems.

As one respondent stated, *“the youth use religious guidance when making their choices concerning education, career, and personal life. Religion was referred to as the moral compass that assists in harmonizing the modern lifestyle with ethical and cultural principles and assists in the interaction with a new social reality without losing the integrity, respect for the family, and social responsibility.”*

Another respondent reported that *“religion encourages social development through communal projects. The community development was explained to be caused by awareness campaigns, educational programs, welfare activities, and disaster relief activities organized by religious institutions. These were the activities that were given as examples of how religion brings positive social change, and yet social cohesion and moral values are not eroded.”*

These perceptions suggest that religion is an active and powerful phenomenon in modern society, and it determines personal actions and the actions of a group. It helps people to adapt to society, develop, and to maintain the ethical and social norms and social evolution.

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of this paper indicate that religion is actually a key social institution that will determine both individual behavior and community relations in District Malakand. Respondents continuously emphasized how religious ideology shapes morality and directs individuals towards ethical conduct, honesty, respect, and social responsibility. This is in tandem with the Durkheimian sociological opinion, which focuses on religion as a means of control of morality and shared consciousness (Mokyr & Tabellini, 2024). The analysis demonstrates that religious activities like prayers, fasting, and attendance at community rites are not necessarily spiritual activities but means of strengthening self-control, meticulousness, and acceptable conduct in society. The practices are useful in instilling moral norms such that individuals behave in a manner that is compatible with expectations of the society (Khalil, 2025).

Religion also became one of the important factors that facilitated community cohesion. Religious activities, such as the meetings at the mosques, Friday prayers, and festivals, can offer a structured means of socializing and giving support to each other. The participants also noted that these meetings produce trust, collaboration, and a feeling of belonging, which enhances the networks of folk. This cohesion is also enhanced by religious institutions by means of social welfare, which includes charity drives, education, and support of weak families. Such truths depict the cohesive role of religion and how it brings people together in terms of beliefs, goals, and responsibilities (Stichweh, 2025).

The influence of religion as a social regulation process is another important discovery. According to the participants, religious teachings provide a set of expectations concerning behavior, and the lack of formal control of the elders and religious leaders provides compliance with the expectations. Breaches of the anticipated behaviors are resolved socially, forming a system of responsibility that assists in the upkeep of sanity and peace within the society. This brings out the duality of religion as a moral guide and control system that is socially reinforced. It also substantiates the position of Parsons regarding the role of religion in social stability through giving moral advice and creating acceptable behavior (Khalil, 2025).

Lastly, the research study has found that religion is a dynamic institution that can bring about change in social life without overthrowing traditional values. Respondents noted that religious messages assist the younger generations to avoid contemporary problems concerning education, occupation, and social obligations. Meanwhile, religion encourages communal activity in the form of community programs, which include awareness campaigns, education programs, and welfare services. This shows that religion is not fixed; it is also able to be applied to the modern realities in such a way that it leads the communities towards social growth without undermining the morals or culture (Mokyr & Tabellini, 2024).

In general, the paper highlights the overall scenario of religion in District Malakand. It serves as a guide to morality, a unifying element, a control device, and a social transformer. These results highlight the strong social influence of religion, which has a strong impact on the behavior of individuals and the community.

It is also implied in the study that a mixture of religious and community-based practices may prove effective to achieve social peace, moral behavior, and community well-being.

## CONCLUSION

Religion stands as one of the focal social institutions in the District Malakand, which has a visible impact on morality, societal cohesiveness, social control, and reaction to societal change. Not only does its direct personal behavior and build and encourage a group ethical norm, but it also brings together all society members by means of common practices and through collective programs. Religion is thus a very important aspect in ensuring social order, solidarity, and contributing to the development of the community, as well as adjusting to the changing needs of society.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommended to promote the development of educational, social, and welfare services by the mosques and religious organizations that will promote community integration. In addition, incorporate ethical and moral instruction with a religious background in the youth programs and schools to help them develop responsible behavior. Further, the involvement of elders and the religious leaders to mediate and act as role models to strengthen the social norms and settle community disputes. The stakeholder must favor community-based projects, like charity work, sensitization, and educational programs, which have their basis in religious values. The government and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) may provide platforms that allow the community, particularly youth, to use religious advice in solving the modern world problems without compromising cultural and ethical boundaries.

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