

Religiosity and Social (in)tolerance in Daily Life: A Qualitative Study of Muslim Youth in Punjab, Pakistan

Iftikhar Ahmad

Iftikhar8401@gmail.com

Assistant Professor, Sociology, Government Graduate College, Sahiwal

Muhammad Rizwan Safdar

drizwansafdar.iscs@pu.edu.pk

Assistant Professor, Institute of Social and Cultural Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore

Muhammad Siddique Akbar

siddique.iscs@pu.edu.pk

Assistant Professor, Institute of Social and Cultural Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore

Corresponding Author: *Iftikhar Ahmad Iftikhar8401@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Religion plays an important role in shaping identity and developing relationships in countries like Pakistan where religio-political divisions are more prominent but this role of religion is multifaceted and contextual. This study explores the contextual role of religion in determining that how young Muslims use religion in their daily life and at the same time how religion modified their attitude towards religiously different people. This study employed qualitative research technique based on interpretivist ontology which is materialized through Phenomenological approach. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews by using semi structured interview guide from 24 undergraduate college students. The themes were detected by extracting codes based on six step thematic analysis method developed by Braun and Clarke's (2006). In the thematic analysis two themes emerged. First, the participants considered religion as a framework for daily life, by using Islamic teachings as moral guidelines for financial dealings; Islam as motivating factor for personal decisions and relationships; source of empathy; while they showed a negotiating attitude towards dowry and customs of passage. Second, they also reported a pluralistic and adaptive religious perspective, where religion emphasis on moderation, contextual flexibility, open cognitive system and respect for diversity. The youth in Pakistan is at crossroads between the orthodox religious practices and modern realities of life, this tense situation can create inclusion or exclusion attitude among the youth.

Keywords: Religion, social (in)tolerance, Muslim youth, Punjab, thematic analysis

INTRODUCTION

Religion's role in personality development and creating social solidarity (Durkheim, 1995) is contextual and subjectively interpreted. This role of religion in human life is multifaceted with diverse engagements with in the given broader religious framework. The structure of religion is multidimensional not a single block of religious beliefs and practices that are simply woven into a complex whole. This multidimensional role of religion is also depicted in classical sociological thought: Durkheim emphasized religion's role in creating communal bonds through common rituals (Durkheim, 1995), whereas Weber observed that religious interpretations could also produce rigidity or openness in social attitudes (Weber & Kalberg, 2013). This tension is quite visible in present scenario where individuals prefer to navigate their religious identities across diverse social, educational, and political settings.

In this scenario it is pertinent to explore that how religion plays a central role in both public and private life of Pakistani youth. According to United Nation Development Program, 64% of Pakistanis are under the age of 29 years (UNDP, 2017), with youth (ages 15–29 years) making up 30% of the total population (Qadri & Umer, 2017). The vast presence of youth in Pakistan can play revolutionary role in the current religio-political scenario. The existing literature highlight the religion's role both as an institution and as an individual factor. As an institution religion negotiates with the elements of bigger social structure like political environment and multiculturalism in society while as an individual factor it works as a moral guideline that manage the routine activities of its adherents both at personal and public levels (Al Sadi & Basit, 2013; Bilgili, 2015; Hoffman, 2020; Muhid, 2020). There is a pressing need to explore the religion's role in personal and public life of people particularly youth where society is divided on the bases of religion and politics (Hanif et al., 2020).

The unprecedented events of violence against minorities and other deprived groups particularly in Punjab made it imperative to conduct an unbiased research-based inquiry to dig up the matter. The main unfortunate incidents of violent attacks on minorities include Lahore church bombing in 2015 and retaliation by mob (BBC-News, 2015), lynching of Sri Lankan factory manager in Sialkot in 2021 (Baloch, 2021), mob attacks on Christians in Jaranwala and Sargodha in 2023 (Amnesty International, 2023) and 2024 (HRCP, 2024) respectively, vandalism of sacred places of Ahmadis (Ahmadiyah Community, 2020). These incidents depict a dismal picture of horrible results of the allegations of blasphemy and sectarianism in Pakistani society. Particularly, Ahmadis, Christians, Shia Muslims, and women are the soft targets of both institutional and direct violence under the umbrella of religious morals (HRCP, 2025). (Fiaz et al. (2022) emphasized the role of religio-political organizations in promoting sectarianism in the Punjab. Pakistan's educational and ideological frameworks have reinforced exclusionary narratives that make intolerance socially acceptable (Hoodbhoy, 2014). From this we can infer that religion plays a paradoxical role where it may act as a unifying force or a dividing factor among people of different faiths.

The prevailing situation of sectarian violence like in Parachinar (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) (AlJazeera, 2021) made it imperative to explore the dynamics of these out-group hostilities particularly among the young population. Religion's role in the daily life of youth is mediated by their expression of religiosity, negotiation between traditional religious-cultural practices and a modern secular environment, and religious socialization within a specific political and cultural context (Altinoğlu, 2018; Bilgili, 2015; Faried & Shams, 2018; Spierings, 2019; Yeşilada & Noordijk, 2013). These mediating factors may play a more pivotal role in the religiously and politically divided societies like Pakistan. It will be of paramount importance to see that either religion leads to peaceful existence or create hostile attitudes among its adherents. The most research on such a crucial issue in religio-politically divided societies like Pakistan is quantitative in nature which only focusing on reporting statistical association of religiosity with social (in)tolerance without considering the subjectivity on the part of Pakistani Muslim youth (Jelen & Wilcox, 1991; Swindell & L'Abate, 1970). The subjective understanding of the role of religion in the life of Punjabi Muslim youth is under explored and there is a dire need to conduct a qualitative study which can explore both individual's utilization of religion for routine matters of life and how religion shape the attitude towards others different on the bases of beliefs and cultural practices.

The present study was conducted to fill this gap by a qualitative exploration that how youth negotiate with religion in daily life activities and in what ways religion shape (in)tolerance among youth. This is quite tough to understand the real scenario of religious influence without getting real-time response of participants with incorporating their personal inputs in detail. The true knowledge about the real-life experiences of youth is a prerequisite for the better understanding of religion and (in)tolerance association and for the development of effective educational policies and youth related programs that in future promote harmony in society.

Research Questions

- 1: How do young people utilize religion in their daily life?
- 2: How does religiosity shape (if any) social (in)tolerance in different contexts and situations?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This study employed qualitative research technique based on interpretivist ontology which is materialized through Phenomenological approach to get insight into the subjective understanding of religion in the life of Muslim youth. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews by using semi-structured interview guide from 24 undergraduate college students. The themes were detected by extracting codes based on six step thematic analysis method developed by (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Table 1: Demographic and Academic Characteristics of Participants (N = 24)

Variable	Frequency	%
Age of Respondent (Years)		
18–22	6	25
23–27	12	50
28–32	6	25
Academic Discipline		
Natural Sciences	12	50
Social Sciences	7	29.2
Linguistics	5	20.8
Semester		
2 nd	3	12.5
4 th	6	25
6 th	10	41.7
8 th	5	20.8
Education of BS4YP Entry		
F.A.	3	12.5
ICS	4	16.7
F. Sc (Pre-Medical)	11	45.8
F. Sc (Pre-Eng.)	6	25
Nature of Previous Educational Institution		
Public	9	37.5
Private	15	62.5
Residence		
Urban	10	41.7
Rural	14	58.3
Gender		
Male	7	30.3
Female	17	69.7
Religious Sect		
Sunni/Brelvi	14	29.2

Ahl e Tashia	2	8.3
Deobandi	3	12.5
Ahle-Hadees	2	8.3
No Sectarian Identity	3	12.5

Data Collection

This study employed a purposive sampling technique to recruit 24 undergraduate Muslim students. Data were collected through face-to-face, in-depth interviews, which were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for qualitative analysis. A semi-structured interview guide was used as the primary instrument and was adapted iteratively as new themes emerged during the data collection process.

Data Analysis

This study utilized the six-step thematic analysis framework outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process began with the repeated reading of transcribed interviews to ensure familiarization with the data. Initial codes were then systematically generated to identify key features of the data. Subsequently, these codes were collated and organized into potential sub-themes, which were further refined and gathered to form coherent and representative main themes.

RESULTS

Thematic Analysis of Religiosity as a Framework that Shape Social (In)tolerance

The first theme revealed that participants viewed religion as a framework for daily life. This was demonstrated by their use of Islamic teachings as moral guidelines for financial dealings, as a motivating factor for personal decisions and relationships, and as a source of empathy. Conversely, they exhibited a negotiating attitude towards traditional practices such as dowry and customs of passage. The second theme revealed a pluralistic and adaptive religious perspective, which emphasized moderation, contextual flexibility, an open cognitive system, and respect for diversity. These findings highlight the valuable role of religion in an individual's life as a moderator of worldview, shaping attitudes towards others through the promotion of open-mindedness and the acknowledgment of pluralistic religious perspectives.

Religion as a Framework for Daily Life

Religion functioned as a foundational framework that influenced all aspects of the students' lives by providing moral guidelines for financial dealings, motivation for personal decisions and relationships, a source of empathy, and a means to negotiate cultural customs like dowry and rites of passage within an Islamic framework. Religion is no longer considered merely a system of beliefs and practices; rather, it was viewed as a dynamic force capable of negotiating between traditional religious standpoints and modern reality.

Religion as a Moral Guide

Majority of the respondents (13 out of 24) clarified that Islamic teachings prohibit exploitative practices like riba (usury) and encourage ethical financial dealings, emphasizing trust and fairness. The emphasis of Islam on the mandatory imburement of zakat (alms) is the prime example of socio-economic equality in society. As one of the participants said:

“In my daily life, especially in social and financial dealings, I prioritize Islamic teachings.”

Another participant said:

“When it comes to financial dealings—like lending, borrowing, or paying zakat—we try to adhere to Islamic teachings.”

Personal Life Related Decisions

Religion work as an ethical guide in maintaining relationships with friends and relatives and at the same time prefer modesty in outlook. As one of the participants stated:

“Whenever I build relationships, I first ensure that these interactions are aligned with Islamic principles.”

Another participant reiterated:

“I made a personal decision to observe purdah and wear hijab so I can fulfill my religious obligations while being part of that environment. This too is a religious decision.”

Yet another participant echoed:

“I try my best not to unintentionally deceive or hurt anyone. Motivated by this belief, I treat friends, colleagues, and new acquaintances with kindness, sincerity, and goodwill.”

Religion and Empathy

Religion indoctrinates empathetic attitude among students. They consider help of the needy a sacred duty and support social justice for the deprived. One participant emphasized this duty, by stating:

“If someone is facing a problem, I offer personal support and even share my number so I can help resolve their issues. I see all this as my religious duty as a Muslim.”

Another participant reiterated:

“Islam teaches us to speak the truth, uphold justice, and live according to Islamic principles... My effort is always to act in the light of Islamic teachings.”

Yet another participant told:

“When we look at the current situation in Palestine and Israel, our hearts bleed. If we were allowed, we would sacrifice our lives and wealth for the cause. Martyrdom is our pride, and dying for Islam is part of our faith.”

Religion as a source of Accomplishment

Students' religiosity served as a transformative mechanism for their personal and spiritual achievement, manifested through their practices like incorporating daily Salah (prayer), seeking Quranic guidance during struggles, and relying on divine intervention during challenges. These devotional acts among them became instrumental in navigating life's complexities while pursuing both worldly and eternal success. As a few participants reflected:

“I didn't use to pray regularly, but then I realized that for success in this world and the Hereafter, we must include fundamental commandments like prayer in our daily routine.”

“I didn't use to pray, but during that time, I started offering Salah. When a person falls, they turn toward Allah. Worship gives such inner strength that one cannot imagine.”

And

“Whenever I face a difficulty, I leave the matter to Allah, believing that He shows the right path at every stage. The Quran always provides guidance.”

Religion and Cultural Practices

Religion served as both a guiding framework and a point of tension in cultural practices, particularly in matters like marriage, divorce, and rites of passage. Students believed that while Islamic principles provide clear ethical guidelines by emphasizing dignity, justice, and simplicity but they also pointed out some conflicts between religious ideals and deep-rooted cultural norms such as dowry systems and extravagant wedding ceremonies like mehndi and dowry. As participants explained:

“In matters like marriage or divorce, our religion provides a complete, dignified, and just procedure. Similarly, in financial dealings, we try to adhere to Islamic teachings. In our personal lives, too, we try to make every decision according to Islam. For example, marriage is the most important decision of my life, and I intend to do it simply and according to Islamic ways, free from non-Islamic customs.”

And

“Events like mehndi, dowry, or wedding ceremonies are often based on culture, even though we know many of them aren't part of Islam... Sometimes social pressure forces us to follow traditions.”

The students' quotes demonstrate how Islam functions as a framework for negotiating between traditional practices and modern realities in their everyday lives.

Pluralistic and Adaptive Religious Perspective

In this perspective, religion was perceived as an open belief system that believes in moderation and freedom of choice, promotes contextual flexibility, and encourages pluralism in society. The depiction of modern realities in the engagement with religious beliefs and practices was very much present among Pakistani youth.

Moderation and Freedom in Islamic Practices

The students considered Islam a pragmatic institution that can comply with modern challenges by increasing choices for its adherents and, at the same time, encouraging adaptation through ijma and qiyas. One participant told that:

“Moderation is key in everything. Islam does not impose excessive restrictions, there is no compulsion in Islam. You must tolerate and understand for yourself what is good, better, and right for you.”

Another participant highlighted the flexibility within Islamic boundaries:

“Islam has given great flexibility; you can do many things within limits. I am pursuing worldly education but also moving toward Islam.”

Yet, another student rejected the idea that Islam is rigid or harsh:

“Islam never promotes extremism, it teaches balance. It is a religion of peace, never encouraging conflict or tension.”

Misconceptions about Islamic rigidity was challenged:

“Many people think that these are strict rules with no exceptions. But if we examine Islam properly, we find many exceptions, and we realize that in every situation, there is some relaxation given to us.”

A pragmatic understanding of Islamic jurisprudence was also expressed:

“Allah has set limits for everything. For us, there are four sources: the Quran, Sunnah, consensus (Ijma), and analogy (Qiyas). According to these, since we study in a boys' college, there is some flexibility here. And through Ijma and Qiyas, if we don't have another option, we can benefit from this.”

Flexibility depending on situational needs

Students interpreted religion's role in shaping attitudes toward religious and social others as context-based and situational. There is clear boundary demarcation on certain matters but at the same time some matters are negotiable according to the prevailing conditions under Islamic scrutiny. As one participant said that:

“Some points lead us to clear boundaries, while others allow flexibility. It depends on the situation some matters are non-negotiable, while others permit compromise.”

Another participant said:

“Allah (God) has set limits for everything. For us, there are four sources: the Quran, Sunnah, consensus (Ijma), and analogy (Qiyas). According to these, since we study in a boys' college, there is some flexibility here. And through Ijma and Qiyas, if we don't have another option, we can benefit from this.”

Respect for Counter Argument

Religion's emphasis on listening others first and then evaluates the prevailing scenario discourage closed belief system, as illustrated by following statements:

“Listen to the other person and also express your own views. We cannot always dominate; we must listen to others and then explain the correct solution according to our perspective. There is no need to force anything.” And

“While staying firm in my faith, I can listen to others and respect their beliefs.”

Religious and Cultural Diversity

The Muslim undergraduate students' acceptance of differing religious and cultural beliefs and practices reflected a conscious demarcation between normative religious injunctions and culturally embedded expressions of faith. As one participant noted:

“Some things are cultural, not religious. We don't interfere in others' practices—like how different sects pray and what they believe.”

Table 2: *Themes, Sub-themes and Major Codes in Thematic Analysis*

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Major Codes
1. Religion as a Framework for Daily Life	1.1 Religion as a Moral Guide	1.1.1 Borrowing or lending money
		1.1.2 Paying zakat
		1.1.3 Fulfilling promises as religious duty
	1.2 Personal Life Related Decisions	1.2.1 Observing purdah and avoiding co-education for religious and personal comfort
		1.2.2 Prefer relationship aligned with Islamic principles
		1.3.1 Personal support in need is considered religious duty
	1.3 Islam and Empathy	1.3.2 Willingness to sacrifice for religious causes (e.g., Palestine conflict)
		1.3.3 Islam teaches fairness, respect for all, and opposition to oppression
		1.4.1 Incorporating prayer (Salah) into daily life for success in this world and the hereafter
		1.4.2 Turning to prayer and Quranic guidance during personal struggles
	1.4 Religion as a source of Accomplishment	1.4.3 Relying on Allah's guidance

	1.5Religion and cultural practices	when facing difficulties 1.5.1Following Islamic principles in marriage and divorce 5.2Struggling with cultural practices (e.g., dowry) that contradict Islamic teachings.
2.Pluralistic and Adaptive Religious Perspective	2.1Moderation and Freedom in Islamic Practices	2.1.1Islam does not impose excessive restrictions 2.1.2Islam has given great flexibility 2.1.3Islam never promotes extremism
	2.2Flexibility depending on situational needs.	2.2.1Some matters are non-negotiable, while others permit compromise 2.2.2The key is to balance personal beliefs with religious principles
	2.3Respect for Counter Argument	2.3.1Listening to others and respecting their beliefs
	2.4Religious and Cultural Diversity	2.4.1Acceptance of differing religious and cultural, beliefs and practices

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that religion functions as a central framework through which Pakistani youth navigate their daily lives, decision-making, and perceptions of others. The Islamic teachings shape financial practices, social interactions, and personal integrity. Acts such as paying zakat, fulfilling promises, and avoiding exploitation in financial dealings were repeatedly emphasized as moral imperatives grounded in religion. For many Pakistani youth, religion provides not only spiritual meaning but also practical norms regulating everyday transactions (Fiaz et al., 2022; Hoodbhoy, 1998). Religious socialization plays an important role in inculcating choices for moral and social attitude (Jelen & Wilcox, 1991). The willingness to sacrifice for religious causes illustrates the dual role of religiosity, as a driver of compassion and as a potential gateway to exclusivist thinking (Eisenstein, 2009).

The prayer (Salah) and reliance on Allah (God) were considered the pathways to success and resilience. Religiosity provides coping mechanisms in stressful contexts, allowing youth to frame adversity as spiritually meaningful (Katnik, 2002). This tendency is especially pronounced in Pakistan, where religion is often invoked to explain both misfortune and perseverance (Pew Research Centre, 2018). There was a distinction between Islamic principles and cultural traditions such as dowry or extravagant weddings. Pakistani youth often negotiate between “authentic” religion and “corrupting” cultural practices, reflecting an ongoing struggle between modernist reformist ideals and entrenched customs (Hoodbhoy, 1998).

A pluralistic and adaptive religious perspective emerged among Muslim college students which is a nuanced approach to religious practice. Many participants stressed moderation, tolerance for diversity, and the importance of balancing personal freedom with religious boundaries. Karpov (1999) proposed a

curvilinear model of tolerance, where both strict dogmatism and excessive secularism can reduce tolerance, while moderate religiosity fosters openness. The respect expressed for sectarian diversity and counterarguments also supports findings by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (2022) that younger Pakistanis, compared to older generations, often exhibit more flexible and pluralistic orientations despite growing sectarian violence in society.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTION

In this study only sample of Muslim college students from Punjab was used, which may not fully capture the diverse religious and cultural picture of youth across other regions of Pakistan. Future research could expand the sample to include minority groups and postgraduate/university students across different provinces, employing longitudinal designs to track changes in religiosity and (in)tolerance over time. Additionally, comparative studies with youth from other Muslim-majority countries and plural societies could help situate Pakistani students' experiences within broader global debates on religiosity and social (in)tolerance.

CONCLUSION

For Punjabi Muslim youth, religion functions as a dynamic moral compass and a framework for evaluating the compatibility of cultural values with their faith. This engagement is modern and pragmatic, fostering a pluralistic worldview that promotes open-mindedness. Ultimately, the role of religion is moderating; its essence prevails not as a rigid doctrine, but as a negotiating force that shapes the adoption and execution of cultural practices.

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