

Religion and the Construction of Morality, Spirituality and Emotional Support among Female Students of District Kohat

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Abstract

The role of religion is multidimensional across the societies in which it is practiced and acted upon. The major roles can be ideological, such as belief-making, prayers, spirituality, morality, political and economic concepts, and the social system. In light of this idea, this article aimed to explore the construction of moral, spiritual, and emotional beings. The researchers used a qualitative intrinsic case study, interviewing 25 female undergraduate students selected through purposive sampling. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that religion plays an important role in sacred trust, understanding of right and wrong, integrity, divine support, and fortune; these categories are grouped under one theme named "provident". The research provides a novel understanding of religion and its impact on female undergraduate students in District Kohat.

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Introduction

Religion in most societies is not only a belief system but also a way of life. Its function can be prominent in social, cultural, moral, economic, political, and educational systems. Hence, it guides, transforms, and impacts the everyday lives of its followers. From food and personal hygiene to identity and agency, and from social involvement to relationships, religion guides its followers. Many individuals choose to trust religious sources to varying degrees, thereby experiencing varying levels of religious influence in their daily lives (Razzaque et al., 2013). This article also aimed to examine how religion influences the personalities of female undergraduate students.

Ibrahim et al. (2024) reported that Islamic teachings are acclaimed for cultivating ethical stewardship, moral integrity, and a sense of social responsibility among their followers through the effective transmission of their beliefs and practices. It offers enriched themes that promote character development, social cohesion, and community engagement. Despite its advantages, Islamic education also faces challenges, including cultural sensitivities and the risk of contradictory interpretations. Therefore, it is important to seek the prevalent concern: how the emergence of digital information platforms affects, shapes, and competes with existing sources of Islamic information. There are a number of studies establishing a complementary relationship between moral stewardship and religiosity. According to Al-Qaradawi (1995), religious discourse offers ethical doctrines to societies. However, its influence varies from person to person. Apart from guiding decision-making, religions also influence individuals' everyday consumption. It influences their brand selection, clothing choices, and trust in product labels (Karatas & Sandikci, 2013). To truly understand how

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religious discourse shapes personality development, it is also essential to understand its role in everyday decision-making.

Religious Commitment and Moral Reasoning

Various scientific studies, especially Salgado (2014), have found that religion plays a role in motivating individuals and providing them with a sense of purpose. Cumulatively, these studies indicate three different aspects of religious influence

- a. Religion cultivates altruism, kindness, empathy, voluntarism, and philanthropy among its members.
- b. It gives them purpose, a sense of meaning, happiness, and self-actualization, contributing to improved marital adaptation, satisfaction, and adjustment.
- c. Moreover, spirituality is associated with better quality of life, regulation of sexual behavior, a stronger immune system, increased life expectancy, and fewer hospital visits.

Gonzalez (2004) found that religion helps humankind overcome worldly problems and challenges. It helps them attach existential meaning to stressful life situations, exhibit tolerance, and cultivate coping strategies. Research indicates that believing in God and seeking His support helps people cope with limitations (Narayanasamy, 2002; Saudia et al., 1991, as cited in Sanchez, 2009). Likewise, Sanchez (2009) found that prayer inculcates a sense of control, reduces stress, and promotes self-care. Similarly, according to Ellison, Gay, and Glass (1991), Ferraro and Koch (1994), and Pérez et al. (2005), religions offer a sense of purpose, helping individuals navigate challenging circumstances and traumatic events, and making problems appear manageable. Thus, literature confirms the role of religion as a source of social support, help, guidance, strength, and hope amid challenging circumstances.

Religion/spirituality has been found to be positively related to consoling individuals and improving their mental health (Gastaud et al., 2006). Rodriguez (2006) stated that spiritual beliefs act as a hedge against an uncertain world, inculcating a *modus operandi*³ for handling profound challenges and providing a philosophy of life. Religion provides coping mechanisms against stress, anxiety, and humans' existential quest. It cultivates in its followers a powerful cognition, such as strong beliefs and an optimistic worldview, in order to reduce the frequency and likelihood of stress turning into emotional disorders such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation. Moreover, religion offers answers for the existential quest of humans by providing satisfying answers, such as "*where did we come from?*", "*why are we here?*" and "*where are we heading?*"

Koenig (2012) found that religion regulates human behavior for the betterment of their mental health. When followers of religion abide by its rules, it reduces the likelihood of stressful situations arising, such as divorce, difficulties with children, or financial stress. Similarly, religion also discourages habits of drinking, lawbreaking, and unfair market practices, thwarting situations that may arise from stress later. Moreover, religion inculcates pro-social behaviors. It cultivates love for humanity, compassion, forgiveness, empathy, and altruistic action. Such tendencies were linked to higher levels of satisfaction, relief, and contentment. According to Goodman (2023), daily religious experience among youth has been found to reduce delinquency. Adolescents with daily religious practice were found to be more connected to society, parents, and other relatives, externalizing pro-social behavior.

³ A Latin phrase used for the common ways or methods people used for doing things.

Methodology

This section covers all methods and procedures adopted to conduct the present study. It includes the study's universe and nature, study design, sampling procedures, data collection tools, and data analysis.

The researchers adopted the qualitative intrinsic case study method for this study, as per Creswell's (2017) analogy. According to Stake (1995), an intrinsic case study is the most suitable method for any specific issue because it allows researchers to collect rich insights, such as participants' experiences, specific situations, and unique cases that cannot be explained through large-scale comparative studies.

The population of this study was Kohat University of Science and Technology, which has 42 distinct academic departments organized into six faculties: Biological Sciences, Social Sciences & Humanities, Management Sciences, Physical & Numerical Sciences, and Allied Health Sciences (<https://www.kust.edu.pk/kust/pages/index.php>). The study population was divided into five major clusters based on homogeneous characteristics: the faculty of Social Sciences, Management Sciences, Biological Sciences, Allied Health Sciences, and Numerical Sciences.

Within each cluster, 5 female participants aged 20-25 were selected, ensuring that each participant was an undergraduate female in the fourth semester or above. This approach enabled the researcher to ensure the inclusion of participants with relevant academic standing, maturity, and lived experience necessary to provide rich and meaningful insights into the study.

This research is exploratory in nature; hence, researchers conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews in line with the analogy recommended by Neuman (2013). To make the data collection smooth and easier, the researcher introduced herself and her objectives. Prior consent was also received from all participants. All interviews were conducted in Urdu, and sufficient time was given to each participant to share their experiences of religious discourse and its implementation.

The data collected was analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis focuses on examining and pinpointing patterns within the data. There are six steps in this process: namely, gaining familiarity with the data, generating initial codes, conducting themes, reviewing themes, establishing and naming themes, and generating the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Pseudonyms were assigned in the study to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of all participants.

Discussions

The findings reveal that religious beliefs serve as a guiding principle for many followers during events and that all such events occur in accordance with divine principles or purpose, known as provident. Hence, whether something good or bad happens to anyone is decided by God. McGrath (2017) revealed that all human affairs, such as creation, governance, preservation, and guidance, are rooted in God's will. It means a complete trust in God and the belief that he is aware of all human conditions and has a role in controlling events by designing them toward a fruitful purpose. Thus, for strong believers, not all events may be easy, pleasant, or understandable to people. Rather, it highlights the perception that divine wisdom may function even in circumstances that cannot be immediately explained by human beings.

Fortune and Spirituality

The study's findings reveal that religion plays a significant role in students' everyday decision-making. Religion has multidimensional impacts, including personal, attitudinal, social, educational, economic, and political. It is a source of peace and social approval for its followers, and a part of their upbringing and social conditioning. Yusuf (2020) also reported that religious

discourse offers comprehensive ethical guidelines for individuals as well as for whole society. However, in some societies the influence of religious commitment on moral reasoning varies, depending on factors such as social environment, levels of educational attainment, and exposure to diverse perspectives.

The study found that participants connected failure and success to fortune and the will of God. Success is considered a blessing from God, and failure is a test of patience. Most of the participants believed they were Muslim; believing in God is a strong belief, and everything happens with the will of God. Whatever God gives us is our fortune; thus, we should also consider that what is God's will be always best for us.

A participant, Sidra, opined that.

"Religion has a lot of impact on my decision-making because every time I have to take a decision, I always look at the command of God: what He has told us to do and what he has told us is wrong. So, I decide my things according to that because this is for my good."

Another participant named Rabia expressed that.

Yes, I believe that all occurrences are fixed by God; however, we must work for it to achieve what we want. God will give us all that is good. Whenever I try to get something, I start with the name of Allah. I also sometimes take guidance from religion and think that religion is the best guide in any situation, and the best decision is one that is made according to it."

A participant, Laiba, added that.

"Religious teachings have a major impact on my decision-making because I think of the guidance from God whenever I have to make a decision, whether it is a small decision or a big decision, but I always consider God's will in it."

Confidence in decision making

People make decisions guided by religion. Hence, from the above discussion, the study has found that Muslim women's choice of clothing, identity, and social relationships are also heavily guided by religious teachings. Female university students' decisions about dress, social media use, and participation on campus are usually highly informed by religious teachings and sanctioned by families, traditional authorities, and social media validation. To critically understand the role of religious discourse in personality development, it is crucial to examine how religion shapes everyday decision-making (Tarlo, 2017).

A participant named Sidra opined.

I believe religion plays an important role in my daily life because it is guidance from Allah. I always try to act in accordance with the teachings of Islam. In decision-making, I think about the guidance from the religion. What religion has told me about such a decision, I always try to do. So, if I give you an example, if a woman in my family is not happy, she is in an abusive marriage, and she wants to be separated, so I will suggest to her to handle the matter according to Islam because it is her right in Islam. Another example is women's right to inherit. So, we should make things according to the guidance from the religion.

Another participant, Sobia, also expressed that.

Religion has several impacts on decision-making because every time I have to take a decision, I always look at the commands and the guidance of Allah: what Allah has told us to do and what he has told us is wrong. So, I decide on my things based on that, because these are good for me.

Hence, from the above discussion, religious influence and discourse are not limited to formal worship but extend deeply into everyday life and decision-making. Furthermore, it illustrates the pattern that individuals choose to trust religious sources, which eventually shape their personalities and identities as well (Abdur Razzaque et al., 2013).

Another study says Muslims' everyday consumption decisions are usually shaped by religious discourse. It is one of the most concrete examples of how religion shapes everyday decision-making. This can be understood through an example: Muslims' choices of food, music, entertainment, and social relationships are usually strongly influenced by religious teachings. (Karatas & Sandikci, 2013). Similarly, another study has found that Muslim women's choice of clothing, identity, and social relationships are also heavily guided by religious teachings. Female university students' decisions about dress, social media use, and participation on campus are usually highly informed by religious teachings and sanctioned by families, traditional authority, and social media validation. To critically understand the role of religious discourse in personality development, it is crucial to examine how religion shapes everyday decision-making (Tarlo, 2017).

Prayers for inner peace

Prayers are one of the most important parts of any Religion. For Islam, it is said to pray five times a day and ask God to help you in every situation and follow Islam in every aspect of life. It increases inner peace and psychological satisfaction. According to the research on Muslims' consumer behavior, their brand choice, information search behavior, attitude, and trust in product labels are heavily influenced by their religious commitment (Karatas & Sandikci, 2013).

As a participant named Syeda opined,

"Religion plays a vital role in my life. As a female, I do purdah as religion has guided me to do. I pray five times a day, and I follow all Islamic teachings and obligations."

Another participant, Amna, expressed that.

"As a Muslim, religion has a lot of impact on my daily life. My day starts with praying to God. In my daily practice of namaz, roza, etc., and my connection with God."

Consistent with the above findings, Hassan (2005) has also conducted ethnographic fieldwork to show how fixed religious practices such as ritual prayer, fasting, and modest dress help internalize moral dispositions associated with being a practicing Muslim. This study is quite relevant to the present study because it treats religious discourse not merely as a set of beliefs and doctrines, but as an everyday practice which shapes the personality and moral disposition of its followers.

Goal Achievement

Believing in luck is a very big part of Muslim life, but religion also emphasizes the importance of hard work, and as good Muslims, people believe in working hard and putting in effort.

A participant named Iqra opined that.

"There is a very strong connection between religion and luck. God helps and makes successful those who obey him. But at the same time, we cannot rely

solely on luck. If I do wazifas all day but don't work hard towards my goal, then the failure isn't due to luck. It's because of the lack of hard work."

Another participant, Ayesha, also expressed that.

"Failure, fate, luck, and fortune are complicated things to answer because I believe that working towards your goal brings luck in your life because if you don't do anything, you cannot blame luck for that."

Noor further added that.

"I believe in hard work. You need to take actions that will lead you to success and automatically bring you good luck. First of all, you need to help yourself, and God has also told us in Islam to make an effort toward your goals. And after that, at the end, you should leave it on God. "

Concept of right and wrong

As religion gives complete guidance on right and wrong, many participants believed that religion has guided them about what is right and what is wrong, and it protects them from harm because all that is forbidden is not good for humans.

As a participant named Ayesha expressed:

"Yes, I have learned so much from Islam when it comes to morality and right and wrong. Our family and religion both make us understand right and wrong."

Another participant named Najma said,

"Yes, as a Muslim I follow religion and religion has taught me a lot about right and wrong. For example, what is forbidden in religion is wrong, and what is allowed in religion and what is said in religion to do is right. Not only in religion, but also morally and socially, things that religion has forbidden are also wrong. If you look at the things that religion has told us not to do, they are generally for our good, because they are wrong. Religion is the way of life that guides us for our betterment. So, if we follow religion, it will lead us to a better life."

High moral standards

Many people believe they have high moral standards because of religion, which teaches morality to its followers. Moral identity is important in shaping how individuals perceive themselves and conduct themselves toward society. Hardy and Carlo (2011) established that the perception of higher moral identity compels individuals to adopt pro-social behavior and high personal accountability. Moral identity is shaped by social learning, educational environment, role modeling, and community atmosphere among other factors. Similarly, Abo-Zena and Midgette (2019) recommended prioritizing the cultivation of moral identity across various processes. They opined that spiritual and religious experience must be given high importance and treated as integral to development broadly, including development of personality. They recommend that religious discourse should be included at all stages of education so that its impact is not incidental but formative.

As a participant named Sidra further added that.

"I think it has a lot of impact on setting moral standards by setting the line between right and wrong, by following the Islamic rules, gunah/Sin and

sawab/virtue, and forbidden. So I have set so many moral values when I understood the religion properly, with age, with time, with learning."

Another participant named Syeda replied that

"Yes, it has changed my moral standards as I grew up and I understand religion more now, and I read Quran with Tajammah/translation, and I go to Madrasa on weekends. And yes, it has shaped my moral standards very much. Now I have more morality than before."

Participant named Noor disclosed that.

"Religion has told us so many moral values like speaking the truth and not fooling others, like not backbiting."

Patience

Patience is a very important quality of Muslims. It is a strong belief among young Muslims that when they are going through struggle and difficult circumstances, there will be ease afterward and God will help them, so they do not become hopeless.

As a participant, Ayesha disclosed.

"In my opinion, religious discourses generally have many positive impacts. They teach kindness, patience, good character, and help people understand right from wrong. They also provide guidance on how to live life in accordance with religious principles. However, if religious teachings are misunderstood, misinterpreted, or presented without proper guidance, they can create confusion and problems."

Another participant named Irum expressed that.

"I have learned to be patient in life and treat others well and don't want bad for anyone. And especially sabr/patience, like I am a strong believer of that."

Participant Laiba opined that.

"There are a lot of moral values that I have adopted because of the religion. In my case, it was anger control and being patient, because religion has forbidden anger and I have worked on it and adopted patience"

Respect

Islam teaches its followers to be respectful to others and to themselves, whether the other person is older, younger, or non-Muslim; we should respect all humans.

A participant named Syeda revealed that.

"If I think about moral values, there are a lot, but one of the most important things I've learned from religion is respect. Respecting all other human beings and treating others well."

Another participant named Sidra disclosed that.

"I guess a lot of my moral values are inspired by religion, like speaking the truth, and respecting your elders, and being good to all other humans, not only Muslims, but all other humans. And kindness is the most important thing that, as Muslims, we all should have and that I have learned from religion."

Another participant, Laiba, also expressed that.

"Yes, I have learned so many moral values that are inspired by religion, like kindness and having good akhlaq/ethics and respecting others, respecting

others' boundaries, and living a peaceful life and not making trouble for others."

Good intentions

The study findings reveal that religion and religious teaching boost cooperation, solidarity, and good intentions toward others, and the avoidance of harm to fellow human beings. Religion prevents many individuals from hypocrisy and negativity and fosters humility.

A participant named Sidra opined that

"If I think about the content that attracts me most, it is the content that tells us the benefits of having a good 'Niyat,' a good intent for others, like not wanting harm for others. And then there is content that tells us how good your life will be when you don't have bad intentions for anybody. So that attracts me the most, and I follow that."

Another participant, Ayesha, further added that.

"I would say the most important thing that religion has taught me is that what is meant for you will reach you, so you don't need to pull any other person down to get up. Have good intentions for everybody and want good for everybody"

Honesty

Religion has the power of eradicating all social evils. Among such forces, the obligation of honesty is one of the basic teachings that lay the foundation of all societies. The study found that honesty is another great human quality, as it gives dignity to individuals and groups and makes them respectable and fair citizens.

Participant Amna expressed that.

"If I think about certain moral values that are inspired by religion, there can be a lot, but like always speaking the truth and respecting your elders and never doing corruption and being fair in life. Be fair to others."

Another participant, Noor, also disclosed that.

"There are a lot of moral values I have learned from religion, but the most important for me is honesty. I believe it is the backbone of every society and the need of the day. Only honest people can develop a society, as corruption is at its peak nowadays. We all are responsible for our deeds, and honesty is the best virtue."

Hence, the above discussion shows that various theoretical lenses have explored the intricate relationship between moral reasoning and religiosity in Muslim communities. Research has established that religiosity not only cultivates a moral framework for individuals but also uplifts ethical standards of communities. Various studies on Muslim societies have confirmed a direct relationship between religious commitment and higher levels of moral reasoning, particularly in moral dilemmas involving justice, honesty, and social righteousness (Yusuf, 2020).

Moral and Ethical Success

The above findings reveal that religion plays a pivotal role in constructing individuals' understanding of morality and ethics by guiding them about acceptable behavior. This is because there is a clear-cut edge between right and wrong; for example, religion encourages one to be patient, avoid harming others, and pursue success through honesty and just means without pulling others down. Such an understanding of religion also influences individuals' personalities by fostering a

strong sense of moral obligation and responsibility. Hence, religion also functions as a guiding force that boosts patience, honesty, and truth, while restraining unethical behavior and harmful practices. A participant named Syeda disclosed that.

“I believe that many principles are non-negotiable; we must not compromise these. These include honesty, truthfulness, fairness, and respect. Yes, it has a lot of effect on my personality because our religion likes being patient and doing only the things that are not harmful for me and others. That is the quality that I have adopted from my religion. I do not pull others' legs and do not do bad to others; I can never compromise on that.”

Another participant named Amna expressed.

“After reciting the Quran tafsir, I can say that it has shaped my moral standards and personality very much. I understand; now I can think of what is right according to Islam and my understanding of morality.”

Sidra also believed that.

“Yes, religious teachings have changed my moral standards. It sets my moral standards by teaching me what is right or wrong and how a human should behave.”

Source of consolation

Religion consoles people suffering grief, sorrow, anxiety, and depression. Many people believe that if religion were taken out of society, people would be hopeless and depressed and would not be able to deal with grief. There are a lot of positive impacts of religion that console people when they are in trouble because of religion, and people become good human beings when they understand religion completely and try to follow it. So, it brings peace, luck, and success in life.

As a participant named Syeda expressed.

“I think when we are going through hard times and struggles, or our loved one dies, at that time it gives us peace that they are in a better place, and God will have mercy on them”

Participant Noor also revealed that.

“In my opinion, there are a lot of impacts; even all the impacts are positive if we properly understand religion and if we show some patience and kindness. Religion has told us to be patient, kind, and good human beings. If we just follow this, everything will be positive about religion, and this world will be positive.”

Another participant, Laiba, added that.

“I found that prayers offer me the best consolation and inner peace during my bad times. I offer different prayers like Tahjud, Sulat E Toba, and Wazifas/suplications many times to avoid anxiety and depression. I don't find such consolation in other things.”

Hence, from the above discussion, it is clear that religion inculcates ethical and moral values among university students. Despite limitations, existing research studies also support the notion that religious beliefs play a considerable role in shaping individual values, sense of identity, and decision-making. Like any other nationality, Pakistani identity encompasses multiple overlapping notions, such as nationality, ethnicity, and religious and cultural identities. Similarly, female students in Pakistan confront certain additional expectations and barriers, including gender

expectations, family honor, and religious righteousness. Although digital media offer novel avenues for exploring religious identity, they expose students to diverse perspectives that may contradict existing religious beliefs (Buzdar, 2019).

Conclusion

The study was designed to explore the contribution of religion, religious beliefs, and discourse in the personality formation of female students. For this purpose, the researchers interviewed female undergraduate students at Kohat University of Science and Technology. It has been found that religion performs several functions such as sacred trust, understanding of right and wrong, integrity, divine support, and fortune. Religion enables followers to live peaceful lives and avoid negativity. Religion is a source of psychological satisfaction, as it provides explanations for events and divine support in times of hardship. Hence, the current findings suggest that religion is not only a system of beliefs and practices but also a way of life and a source of guidance for many of its followers.

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