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Understanding the Rise of Atheism in Pakistan: An Analysis of Socio-Educational and Psychological Factors

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Abstract

This is a research paper that explores a very nuanced and delicate issue of the apparent increase of atheism and religious skepticism in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Beyond the simplistic descriptions, it examines the interaction of socio-educational, psychological and digital determinants that are leading to the propensity towards non-belief among some of the population and especially the young ones. The paper points to the following motives as the intellectual dissent created by the availability of international information, critical defects in the national education system to accommodate faith with contemporary scientific understanding, and deep socio-economic disillusionment. It also analyzes how social media is a catalyst; it offers the doubters an alternative view of the world and anonymity of community. In combining the available qualitative indicators in the digital spaces with the theoretical models of secularization and identity, this paper will argue that the trend can be viewed as a complex crisis of meaning and authority. It then ends by outlining avenues of positive interaction and the necessity to reform education, a sympathetic religious discourse, and more sophisticated studies to explain this drastic change in the socio-religious environment of Pakistan.

Keywords: Atheism, religious skepticism, national education system, faith, Pakistan

Introduction:

It is the paradox of Pakistan: a country-state which constitutionally and culturally has a strong Islamic identity, but in which the discourse of religious doubt and disbelief is fermenting, especially among the urbanized and educated young people in the country.¹ On the one hand, there is the mainstream discourse of a robust Islamic identity; on the other hand, there is the underdiscussion of religious doubt and disbelief, especially among the young people in the country, who are urbanized and educated. This contradiction between the official religiosity and the individual apostasy constitutes an essential, though little researched, crack in the Pakistani society of today. Learning about this phenomenon is not just an academic task, but it is crucial to understanding the changing processes of faith, identity and social cohesion in the country where religion is closely interlaced with national consciousness.

This question has a multi-layered meaning. The emergence of atheism socially attacks the foundation of family and communal organization under the leadership of religion. It challenges the hegemonic discourse that links Pakistani identity with that of the Muslims only, culturally. Theoretically, it raises some underlying questions regarding the project of Islamic nation-building by the state and how it can accommodate different worldviews, such as non-belief. Its consequences are both on individual levels of

faith crisis and social alienation, and on a wider scale on the question of citizenship, rights, and pluralism to its limits within an Islamic republic.

In this case, atheism will be taken not as a single stance but a continuum of unbelief that is relevant to the Pakistani setting. This spectrum contains strong or explicit atheism (the positive denial of the existence of a deity), agnosticism (the view that the existence of a deity is unknown or unknowable), deism (the view that an impersonal creator is not involved in the world), and spiritual non-affiliation (a lack of interest in or engagement with organized religious doctrine without a philosophically strict atheist position).² This subtle definition is important because many people might not believe in the existence of a deity, which would make them an agnostic, rather than taking a philosophically inflexible

The study of atheism in Pakistan is a sensitive one. The combination of legal systems (blasphemy laws) and the strong social stigma contributes to the atmosphere of fear and causes the skepticism to stay in the shadow and empirical data collection becomes extremely difficult.³ As a result, there is a significant gap in the research. Although much has been done to explore religiosity, extremism, and religious lives in Pakistan, little has been done to systematically examine the factors and processes behind atheism, and the current literature is mostly filled with anecdotal reports or web-trail analyses.

The main purpose of the study is to determine and discuss the main socio-educational, psychological, and technological factors of the tendency to atheism and religious skepticism in Pakistan. It specifically targets the youth segment of the population, who are on the frontline to deal with the conflict between tradition and globalization.

The research questions that will guide this study are as follows:

1. What are the major intellectual, cognitive, and personal trauma-based causes which prompt individuals to challenge and eventually alienate religious faith?
2. What role does underperformance of the Pakistani educational system, both religious and secular, in generating a crisis of faith?
3. How is it that social factors with influencing effects such as familial pressure, economic instability, political violence, exposure to global culture, etc., become conducive environments of religious disbelief?
4. What is the facilitative power of digital media and information technologies procedural in accessing skeptical discourses and creating communities of dissent?

2.Theoretical Framework:

In this paper, the emergence of atheism in Pakistan has been examined using a multidisciplinary theoretical approach that cuts across the religious doctrine, sociological processes, and available academic literature.

The religious philosophical background is underpinning. The Asharite strand of Sunni Islam, traditionally taking a harsh theological and legal position on apostasy (irtidad), is the most influential religious discourse in Pakistan, based primarily on a conservative, state-sponsored form of Islam. The classical jurisprudence, which is powerful in the modern religious discourse, has a tendency to equate the social and psychological renunciation of faith to treason and brings harsh punishment⁴ to the religious skepticism, making it only privately practiced or anonymous in the online world. Moreover the orthodox understandings of doubt (shakk) can be construed as not an intellectual or spiritual challenge to be worked through, but as an act of failure in faith or a vice that cannot be theologically reassured or pastorally supported by Christians.

Sociologically, three important theories help to explain the dynamics involved in the structure and individuals. The theory of secularization especially the subjective aspect of secularization is applicable. Although the classical theories of the inevitable decline of religion in the modern world have been criticized, the idea of the decline of religious authority in certain spheres, namely, among educated elites and due to the exposure to pluralistic worldviews through the means of globalization, helps us to understand the undermining of the traditional belief systems.⁵ The conflict between a socially constructed Muslim-Pakistani identity and the self-constructed identity of skeptic or non-believer can precondition cognitive dissonance, which can be resolved by either quitting the mainstream or secret non-conformity.⁶ The emergence of atheism can therefore be regarded as a counter-hegemonic resistance, which is enabled by the globalized digital media that allow access to other ideological models. The necessity of the study is pointed out by a short literature review. Theism in scholarly literature has mostly dealt with Western, secular backgrounds. Studies of Muslim majority societies, including those of secularism in Turkey or post-Islamism in Iran, have given insight into comparative situations but do not touch upon the peculiar constitutional and social context of Pakistan.⁷ There is some academic literature on religious non-practice or humanist movements in India and Bangladesh, by comparison little scholarly effort has been made to study atheism in Pakistan⁸, which makes a gap in the literature all the more striking (and thus the object of the proposed research).

3. The major reasons that lead to disposition to atheism:

Pakistan is not becoming increasingly atheistic and religiously skeptical because of one particular ingredient but because of a combination of intellectual, institutional, and cultural forces. Collectively these factors undermine the pillars of inherited belief especially to a generation that has to grapple with the most open accessibility of information and worldwide stories.

3.1. Intellectual and Cognitive Factors:

On the personal front, the path to the same can start with the intellectual protest. The dissemination of information, mostly in English and available in digital media has provided a section of Pakistani youth with the means of critical interrogation. This results in the fundamental challenge to the religious dogma that is introduced as having no alternatives and cannot be questioned. Religious beliefs about the cosmos, gender roles, and codes of punishment (hudood) are also becoming targets of rationalist criticism, not only towards religious texts and sources, but also towards the gross inconsistency between religious teachings and objective scientific principles.⁹ As an example, creation and evolution accounts tend to be set in opposition by both religious conservative educators and the mainstream scientific atheist rhetoric, compelling voters to make a two-polar decision.¹⁰ An extremely personal trigger is personal trauma and the problem of evil. The traditional theological interpretations of suffering the test or the divine wisdom and wisdom in a society that is struggling with political violence, endemic corruption, extreme inequality and personal tragedy sound empty. Theodicy crisis is the result of the experience of unwarranted suffering: God is all-powerful and good, then why does injustice and suffering of that extent exist? To others, the logical result is that there is no such deity, so atheism makes sense psychologically as a reaction to a chaotically cruel world that seems not to be ordered by God.

3.2. The Educational System Failures:

The education system of Pakistan is divided and contradictory, which is the active element of the crisis of faith. The greatest breakdown is the increasing distance between dogmatic teaching and contemporary empirical schooling. In mainstream secular schools and universities, students learn about scientific approaches, critical thinking and secular history, whereas in madrassas and classes of compulsory state-provided Islamic studies, students tend to learn a literalist, de-contextualized view of religion that cannot be challenged. This generates cognitive dissonance; instruments of critical thought learned in one classroom are made to be illegitimate in another. It is enhanced by the fact that critical thinking and comparative religious studies are deeply lacking in the curricula of the countries. Religion is not taught

as alive tradition which has inner diversity, history, and philosophical levels, but as a number of facts to memorize. The students have not been taught how to approach theological issues or to perceive Islam through the prism of the world religions and philosophies, and they will be intellectually helpless in the presence of skeptical arguments on the Internet or in the discussion with a peer.¹¹

Moreover, the inability of the traditional religious pedagogy to respond to the modern ethical and existential problems can be seen as glaring. Issues on human rights, gender equality, biomedical ethics, or the philosophical grounds of morality in a pluralistic world are either dismissed and/or dogmatized into century-old decisions that appear to be outdated and unfair to the youth. When religious power cannot give ways of answering the burning questions of life in the modern world which are satisfying and intellectually viable, the whole structure of faith will face the danger of being disposed as outdated.

3.3. Cultural and Global Shifts:

Outside personal and organizational worlds, macro-cultural changes are transforming the basis of faith. The effects of secular humanist values of globalization, as propagated by Hollywood, international news media, YouTube, and social networking sites are ubiquitous. They make it a normal part of the world to believe that morality should be grounded in human reason and compassion, as opposed to the divine command, and that personal freedom and happiness is paramount. The continuous exposure to lives and systems of values in which religion is an individual option or is not present at all renders the strictures of a religiously determined life to be contingent as opposed to natural.

This is directly connected with the growing heroization of individualism as opposed to the collectivist and traditional identities. The Pakistani society has always been focused on family, community, and religious ummah rather than on the individual self. Nevertheless, the myths of self-realization, personal freedom, and seeking personal happiness are strongly appealing all over the world, most notably to the middle classes in urban areas. Religious identity may come into a head clash with the aspiration to individual sovereignty when perceived as causing a sense of restrictive collective commitment, that is, determining professions, marital decisions, social practices, and even personal thinking. To others, atheism turns out to be the final statement of asserting the autonomy of their conscience and career choice, which puts a distance between their self and the collective identity foisted by the religious Muslim.¹² This cultural change does not produce atheists directly but it produces a social-psychological space in which the apostasy seems to be a real, though challenging, option of claiming a self-constructed identity.

Social Factor Contributions:

Although intellectual and educational reason is the driver of doubt, the social context in Pakistan can also serve as a test, building on individual uncertainty into a strong sense of identity. The combination of the pressure of the family, disillusionment with the socio-political system, and access to digital relationships are the factors that may hasten the loss of religious belief.

4.1. The Social Environment and Family:

The family, which has been traditionally the major bastion of faith, may ironically turn into the source of alienation. In most Pakistani homes, authoritarian parenting styles and discouragement of questioning are common occurrences in which religious and cultural standards are imposed as the sole truth. The initial critical thought processes of a child or a young adult about religion should not be suppressed by censorship or punishment, or by emotional blackmail (you are breaking your mother's heart), faith is linked with coercion and not conviction. This dynamic positions religious devotion as a question of social conformity and not truth to self, thus, future denial will be a kind of psychological liberation.¹³

The latter pressure goes beyond the home to the larger community and leads to even great social ostracization or feeling unsafe to express doubt. In a society where the moral character, commercial transactions and the marriage chances of an individual are connected with a public demonstration of piety, there is social and even physical danger in saying you are inclined to a religious, skepticism. The panic of being branded a kafir (unbeliever) or murtad (apostate) and being isolated by the family circles, deprived of their jobs or killed makes the skeptics lead a secretive and disguised life. The condition of insecurity and inauthenticity that persists can enhance resentment concerning the religious structure which is being required where the individual is firmed as a dissident identity. Even the social processes to conserve faith may hence drive the secret skeptic still farther off.

4.2. Socio-Economic and Political Pressures:

Failure of the state and society at macro-levels have severe effects on micro-level faith. Systemic corruption, economic despair and unemployment are the major causes of the theological crisis. When people do what is right by following the right path, education, working hard, praying, but experience constant inequality and nepotism, a feeling of a divine working to create a right order may be lost (adl). The widespread discourse of the belief that piety results in provision (rizq) is strongly opposed by everyday life and results in what scholars call religious cognitive dissonance.¹⁴ To others, the answer is

that, since an omnipotent God should have been monitoring such a system, He is accomplice to the injustice, and therefore unbelief is a more acceptable moral stance.

The response to religious extremism, sectarian violence and politicization of religion is equally potent. Pakistan has been subjected over decades to state-sponsored Islamization, with aftereffects of the Afghan wars opening the Pakistani society to inhuman violence in the name of Islam. Religion is a weapon on the surface, served by sectarian assaults on mosques as well as the persecution of religious minorities and the atrocities of groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan. This is a strong dissociation to most people and the young generation in particular that the Islam of the militants and the Islam of the politicized clergy is viewed to be violent, retrogressive and against contemporary values. Opening oneself to rejecting religion altogether may thus be an ethical and emotional reaction to its perceived hacking by the violent and political players. The lack of faith becomes a purifying exercise of getting rid of a foul identity.

4.3. The Social Media and Technology Catalyst: Digital:

When the push off religion is created in the socio-political arena, the digital technology offers the pull to an alternative. Internet is the main method of access to skeptical discourse and other worldviews all over the world. YouTube, Reddit, and Twitter argue that there is an unlimited access to the arguments of New Atheists (Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris), philosophical and scientific debates, and the criticism of religion in the global outlook. This exposure makes atheism seem normal and shows it is an intellectual position that has millions of adherents and that it is not a weird or strictly Western sickness. It offers the mental support that the local educational system does not offer, giving people the logical arguments to cement their already-existing doubts.¹⁵

More crucial, perhaps, social media allows to create the online communities where dissenters find their anonymity and validation. The existence of closed Facebook groups, subreddits such as r/exmuslim, and secret twitter circles provides a secure space within which Pakistanis can voice their doubts (and debrief), traumatic experience of leaving faith, and peer support without the threat of immediate retaliation. It is a transformative virtual community; this virtual community fights against the extreme isolation that society imposes on people and offering them solidarity. Authentic expression is made possible through anonymity and validation by other people going through the same experiences is a way of counterbalancing internalized guilt and fear. These Internet enclaves do not just harbor the already existing atheists; they actually enable the shift in the personal doubter to the confirmed non-believer by giving a new and stimulating sense of social identity to take the place of the one being lost.¹⁶ By so doing,

technology does not simply enlighten the intellectual paradigm shift, but rather constructs the social change out of faith.

5. Case Studies & Available Data:

The problem with atheism in Pakistan is that it is impossible to quantify it, which makes a pure statistical analysis difficult. This part thus utilizes on qualitative pointers and case studies to chart the phenomenon with the natural constraints taken into consideration but with emphasis on its observable features.

Accepting the Scarcity of Data:

Lack of official or credible Survey data in any form is the greatest impediment to research. Pakistan has some of the strictest laws against blasphemy (Sections 295-B/C of the Pakistan Penal Code) including the death penalty, and laws that ensure social ostracism, so it is dangerous to publicly declare oneself an atheist.¹⁷ None of the government institutions or significant polling organizations have been bold enough to use direct questions concerning religious faith or unfaithfulness in national surveys or census. This information vacuum compels scientists to have to work with indirect indicators, online ethnography and anecdotal data, all of which indicate a tendency that is crucial in that it is largely under the carpet of official scrutiny.

Data on Initiatives: The Digital Archive of Doubt:

Anonymous online sites are an important archive in the absence of surveys. Raw, unrefined narratives are given by Pakistani-centric subreddits such as r/pakistan (in their less circumspect discourse) and the openly apostate r/exmuslim, where much of the content is written by people who identify themselves as Pakistani.¹⁸ These platforms are overwhelmed with personal testimonials of their experiences of belief to disbelief and give lectures, debate, and personal vlogs that criticize Islamic doctrine through the lens of skepticism that receive tens of thousands of views and comments domestically. An early network site was the blog "Pakistan Atheists and Agnostics" which is currently frequently blocked in Pakistan. These online remnants, though not statistically significant, do establish a networked community of dissenters, which gives them a lexicon and a sense of belonging, which they cannot safely develop in real life.

Organizational Specialty: Higher Education and Metropolitan Areas:

Journalistic and anecdotal sources will always point to particular milieus because skeptical thought is hotspots. The most frequent are public universities and especially in the faculties of Natural Sciences, Engineering and Medicine. The strict empirical education in such sciences that place special value on evidence, reproducibility, and logical consistency, can make a student used to a literalist religious

worldview experience cognitive dissonance. Colleges offer a fairly liberal atmosphere in which theories can be tentatively shared, and the choice of international scholarly periodicals and web-based classes only contributes to critical thinking further.¹⁹ The socio-demographic profile which develops is always that of the urbanized, educated and digitally literate middle or upper-middle classes. This group possesses the linguistic ability (English) to view the skeptical material around the world, the intellectual training to read complex arguments and adequate exposure to different ways of life via the media and travel (some of them) to some extent. They are also the most vulnerable to the acute conflict between modern globalized values on one hand and traditional religious expectations on another hand. Although atheism does not pertain to this group, the conditions of its articulation, both on-line and in reliable closed groups, are most easily found in this sociologically specific situation.

6. Recommendations and Future directions:

The multi-layered interventions driving religious skepticism in Pakistan are multi-layered, sensitive, and practical and must move beyond the condemnation to understanding and intellectual involvement. The suggested waypoints are expected to enhance the resilience in the religious system and make society more inclusive.

6.1. The Reforms in Education and Religion:

The systemic pedagogical reform is the most important intervention in the long term. The curriculum, especially Islamic science should not be based on memorizing and doctrinaire but should be designed in such a manner as to promote critical thinking. It teaches Islamic intellectual history, theology (kalam), and philosophy (falsafa), and establishes the rich history of debate and argument that the tradition itself has. Moreover, special attempts are required to overcome the science-religion gap in the Islamic contexts. This is possible through incorporating the works of contemporary Muslim scientists and philosophers who deal with evolution, cosmology and ethics, but which indicate complementarity and not the conflict that is expected of them.²⁰ In line with this, a much needed reform is needed in religious institutions. The ulema and mosque imams should also be trained in modules that deal with pastoral counseling and contemporary theological issues. Promoting empathetic interaction with the sceptic on behalf of religious scholars might eliminate the estrangement that drives people to secret apostasy. Institutionalised platforms of formal dialogue between theologians, scientists and philosophers should be developed.

6.2. Societal and Policy-Based Intervention:

The formation of safe spaces of dialogue and psychological support is an urgent need at the societal level. University counseling centers and civil society groups might establish confidential programs on those who are having faith crisis where they explore their doubts without the fear of being exposed and

prosecuted. The psychosocial support is needed to reduce excessive anxiety and isolation that has been reported in this study.

Media needs to change its role of giving voice to the extremist and the religious rhetoric that is shallow, and encourage inclusive and logical religious discussions. State and non-state media can generate content making use of scholars who take their time arguing intelligently over tough questions about suffering, interpretation, and modernity as an example of thoughtful and self-confident Islam not afraid of questioning.

Lastly, NGOs and civil society are considerably prospective. International and local agencies may contribute significantly to the provision of finances to conduct subtle, ethical studies on religiosity and secularization in Pakistan to bridge the existing knowledge gap. Moreover, they are able to promote interreligious and even intra-religious comprehension by conducting workshops and dialogues that incorporate humanist and skeptic voices and developing an intellectual pluralist culture. More importantly, legal reform advocacy to safeguard the freedom of conscience, as stipulated by Art. 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is a long term objective that the civil society must input in.²¹

Conclusion:

This paper has maintained that the current trend towards atheism in Pakistan is neither a local nor an imported eventuality, but rather a compounding of overlapping forces. The central observations are that a set of three causative forces exists: intellectual, including the scientific skepticism and the problem of evil, which contribute to the initial stimulation of doubt; social, including authoritarian family structure, socio-economic despair, and response to religiously-motivated violence, which contribute to the creation of an environment of alienation; and the digital catalyst, which supplies the arguments, community, and anonymity to bring one to personal skepticism. These factors combined prove that the disbelief in religion is usually a rational, though painful, reaction to certain cognitive, social, and existential crises in the modern Pakistani life.

This is, however, limited by serious methodological constraints in this analysis. The delicate and dangerous character of the subject matter necessitated intensive use of digital ethnography and analysis of online discourse, which can inaccurately represent the opinion of the urban, English-literate, and tech-savvy segment of the population. The fact that it is impossible to carry out a mass, secure, and verifiable face-to-face interview ensures the information is not as rich or as random as an effective qualitative fieldwork. Therefore, the results can be used as evidence of tendencies and processes and not as a generalized statistic on the popularity of atheism.

These constraints provide direct guidelines on the way forward in future research. There are many areas where rigorous scholarly investigation is urgently wanted: the specifics of gender aspects of apostasy should be studied, the specifics of the social and family pressures on women, which may lead to apostasy studied; the regional and class differences to get beyond the urban and middle classes; analysis of the social and religious services of cohorts over time. Also, studies on the theological and pastoral reaction to doubt in mainstream Islamic institutions in Pakistan would be important in offering valuable information in positive interaction. This research gap is important in creating a subtle analysis of one of the most profound, yet unspoken, changes in the Pakistani society.

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