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Indexing



An Analytical Survey on the University Students Understanding of Atheists' Argument in Pakistan

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Abstract

This research paper is an attempt to examine Atheist's arguments in the context of Pakistan. Atheism is a growing phenomenon across the world; however, the factors which led the atheists to adopt atheism as their identity vary from context to context. Consequently, the goal of this research paper is to explore major factors which led the Muslim youth towards atheism in Pakistani context. This research is important, firstly to understand the arguments normally given to alienate the youth from their religion, and secondly to initiate a way forward to counter the arguments so the people of Pakistan remained intact to their inherited religion—Islam. This study focuses on answering two basic questions. How does one become atheist? What are the factors which lead towards atheism? Semi-structured qualitative interviews are used as a method of this study and 19 self-identified atheists from different universities have been interviewed on the bases of comprehensive open-ended questionnaire ranging from their diverse educational, institutional and their peer groups. A non-probability snow-ball sampling technique is used to find participants for interviews. Each interview is recorded and later coded and analysed the data in search of understanding the argument in the participants' responses. This research concludes that there are both similarities and differences across countries in the way atheists conceptualize atheistic ideology and their evaluation of the arguments on atheism. The results also suggest that the debate of atheism is highly contextual and adaptation of research methodologies from country to country should be done.

Keywords: Atheism, Pakistani Atheist, factors, fundamental beliefs, marginalized minority

Introduction

Man has a unique faculty of reasoning that is exclusively characteristics of him; it stands to reason that man has a legitimate right in posing questions. This habit of never giving up leads him towards posing critical questions about himself, life, the world, the cosmos, and the transcendence. Astonishingly, this involuntary and irresistible habit to question things has treated all people on an equal basis, because various parties develop a natural tendency to put forward the same basic, but significant, questions. Majority of the

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people, if not all of them, seem to arrive at the same point when it comes to answering questions about life such as: why am I here? And what will happen to me after death? Who is God? If God loves the human being then why He created evil, pain, and sorrows? To question about the nature of transcendental reality is not something which is a totally new phenomenon; it goes back to the time of Greek philosophers, but it never gained such a wide popularity in history as it has in this modern period because of the influence of western philosophy over other philosophies. In history societies made their worldviews based upon the nature of the question they ask about the world, the life, and human beings.¹

A few decades back, not many knew about it. It does not mean that there was no Atheism. Atheism was there in different societies in various hidden forms. People use to be scared to openly talk about it, but now the case is different as it has become a sensation in the present times and with the emergence of the discipline of the sociology of religion atheists did not remain hidden to the society anymore. Several studies have been done to explore the experiences of atheists and their reconversion process. As this discipline was emerged in the west, initial studies have been done in western context in many ways. Sergio Perez and Frédérique Vallières conducted a study to identify the reasons why ex-clergymen and seminary students turned to atheism. Their study concluded:

The resulting model of deconversion is comprised of three core categories: reason and enquiry, criticism and discontent, and personal development. Despite being closely interlinked, these categories were clearly distinct and represent an intellectual impetus, moral and ethical judgments of religion, and overcoming personal issues, respectively.²

The above-mentioned study identify three core categories as reason behind deconversion however the sample of the study was limited to the clergymen and seminary students, which lacks to generalize the conclusion of the study. Their conclusion can be relevant to clergy men and the students of religious leanings however, it cannot be relevant for the process of de-conversion of general youth. Mohamed Mostafa Mahmoud in his research project upon Egyptian society divided the reasons behind deconversion into two categories, the philosophical and psychological. In the line of psychological reasons, the author added three subthemes, life shocks, attention grabbing and the family. While describing philosophical reasoning the author emphasize that philosophical likeminded people emphasize upon free thinking about the beliefs and God which led the people to adopt agnosticism as their identity.³ To achieve the goal of the study, the author selected

¹Abul A'la Mawdūdī, *Islāmī Tahzīb aur us kē Aūṣūl-o-Mubādī* [Islamic Civilization and Its Foundations] (Lahore: Islamic Publication, 1997), 6-12.

²Sergio Perez, and Frédérique Vallières, “How Do Religious People Become Atheists? Applying a Grounded Theory Approach to Propose a Model of Deconversion,” *Secularism and Non-religion* 8, (2019): 3.

³Mohamed Mostafa Mahmoud, “Atheism: Reasons and effects of Atheism among Egyptian Youth,” (Unpublished Research Project, Nile University, 2019), 8-10. Online available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337389193_Atheism_Reasons_and_effects_of_atheism_among_Egyptian_youth. Accessed on: August 31, 2021.

159 Egyptians whose ages varies from 18 to 35 years old. But from his sample it's not evident that from what religious background the people belong. Either they were all Muslims or they represent different religious backgrounds.

David F. Bradley and et al conducted a quantitative study to explore the nonbelievers' reasons for not believing in the existence of god(s). Their study included 369 participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The study concluded that intolerance among religious groups, the problem of suffering.⁴ Alan Cooperman and Gregory A. Smith conducted a study to find out the factors driving the growth of religious 'nones' in the U.S. The authors conclude that generational replacement appears to be an even larger factor driving the growth of religious 'nones' in the U.S.⁵ This study examine the ration of "nones" in the light of generational gap, however, the reasons why an atheist turns to atheism in the modern world have not discussed. Louis Dupré in his study included scientific naturalism and scientific humanism as one of the major factors which deriving the people to modern atheism. He concluded that thought the atheist are presenting the modern philosophy of secular humanism as religion but without 'supernatural' element in the humanist position. The authors reject the claim by rightly calling it as a misnomer.⁶

All in all, from the above-mentioned research work it become evident that the most of the research studies argue that atheism is a growing ideology in the west and it is also influencing other societies across the world. When scholars turn their attention to the academic study of atheism, they focused upon numerous questions like what atheism is; what the difference between an atheist and agnostics is. What is the history of atheist ideology in different societies? What kind of factors leading the modern mind towards atheism? What kind of challenges did atheism posed upon its counterpart, the religion? How is an atheist identity seen in different parts of the world? How is religion responding to those questions' atheist ideology is making upon religion? Consequently, most of the atheistic literature dealt with these questions and it can be categorized in the light of the above-mentioned questions. Here, the aim of this research paper is not to review this whole literature but only three aspects—evolution of atheism in Pakistan, definition of atheism and factors leading towards atheism—are covered here as they are more appropriately relevant to this study.

⁴David F. Bradley, et al, "The Reasons of Atheists and Agnostics for Nonbelief in God's Existence Scale: Development and initial validation," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 10, no. 3 (2018): 272-73.

⁵Alan Cooperman, and Gregory A. Smith, "The Factors Driving the Growth of Religious 'nones' in the U.S.," *Pew Research Center*, September 14, 2016. Online Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/14/the-factors-driving-the-growth-of-religious-nones-in-the-u-s/>. Accessed on: August 31, 2021.

⁶Louis Dupré, "On the Intellectual Sources of Modern Atheism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 45, no. 1 (1999): 10.

2. The Context of Pakistan and the Survey of Atheism in Pakistan

Pakistan is a highly religious country, and it was emerged in the map of history in 1947. It gets its freedom at the name of religion and two nation theory which mean that in India along with other nations two distinctive nations inhabit, the Muslim and Hindus. Both nations are distinctive from one another in their customs, rituals, and worship services. Consequently, the Muslims of India demanded a separate homeland for the Muslim of India, and finally they succeeded to get a separate homeland for the Muslim in 1947.⁷ According to the 2017 Census, Muslims make up 96.2 percent of Pakistan's population, Hindus 1.6 percent, Christians 1.59 percent, Scheduled Castes 0.25 percent, Ahmadis 0.22 percent, and other minorities 0.07 percent.⁸ Till now several efforts were made to infuse religious spirit among the Pakistani and to strengthen their relationship with their religion Islam. The government designates religious affiliation on identity documents; "No Religion" is not an accepted answer.⁹ In 2012, Gallup conducted a survey and according to its report, approximately 86% of its population has reported that religion is particularly important in their lives.¹⁰ The importance of religion is also reflected in the legal documents such as the Constitution of Pakistan which states that Islam is the state's religion and Urdu is its official Language. According to Mehdi, Muslim *Sharī'ah* principles are the primary basis of legislation.¹¹

In 2012, a survey of Global index of Religiosity and Atheism was conducted by Gallup. The main purpose of this survey is to find out the presence and rise of Atheism in Pakistani society. Samples were taken on National level and mode of research was direct interaction with individuals. The report of this survey was published on Tuesday, July 24, 2012. This survey became the part of Gallup International. The survey has four parts which they had done on the fasting in month of *Ramadan* and the "Role of Religion" in the life of Pakistanis;¹² it includes (a) in the first part they asked people about claimed observance of fasting during Ramadan; (b) In the second part they asked for views regarding how many Pakistanis consider themselves as Religious persons, do they really perceive themselves as

⁷For detail see: Syed Riyāḍ Ḥasan, *Pakistan Nāghūzīr Thā* [Pakistan was Indispensable] (Karachi: Shu'ba Tasneef wa Taleef, 7th edition, 2010).

⁸Maria-Magdalena Fuchs, and Simon Wolfgang Fuchs, "Religious Minorities in Pakistan: Identities, Citizenship and Social Belonging," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 43: 1 (2019): 52-67, DOI: 10.1080/00856401.2020.1695075. Accessed on: February 16, 2021.

⁹United Nation General Assembly, "Human Rights Council Thirty-sixth session 11-29 September 2017," Online available at: [1715598 \(humanists.international\)](https://www.unhcr.org/refugees-and-migrants/2017/9/1715598-humanists-international). accessed on February 11, 2021.

¹⁰Gallup, 2012. Online available at: https://gallup.com.pk/bb_old_site/Polls/240712.pdf. Accessed on February 16, 2021.

¹¹Rubya Mehdi, *The Islamization of the Law in Pakistan* (Rutledge Publishers, 2013).

¹²Jagran Josh, "Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism: Number of Atheists Increased on Global Level," (WIN Gallup International. Recuperado el, 2012), <https://www.jagranjosh.com/current-affairs/global-index-of-religion-and-atheism-report-number-of-atheists-increased-on-global-level-1369644886-1>

religious persons; (c) in the third part they tried to find out the issues of different approaches towards religion. Here, focus was to differentiate between those people who consider religion as observance of religious rules and those people who consider their religion as just good relationship with other people; (d) and lastly, in the fourth part they tried to find out the other dimension of religious quest between ‘worldly’ and ‘other worldly’.

Gallup Pakistan took a sample of men and women from four provinces of Pakistan. They asked people that Whether or not they pray regularly? How they perceive themselves as a person? After getting answers from them Gallup Pakistan found out that 84% people think themselves as religious persons. 12% people do not consider themselves as religious persons. 1% people claimed themselves to be Atheists 3% did not have any view which means they were not sure.

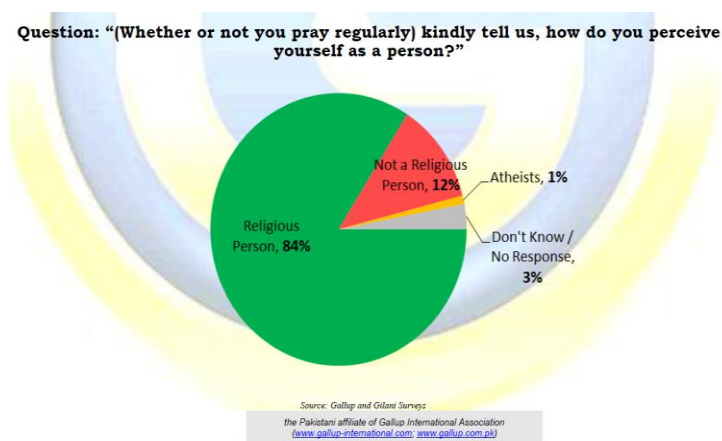


Figure 1. Question: Whether or not you pray regularly?

There is a growing trend among Pakistani youth not to associate themselves with any religion. This unaffiliated portion of youth not only makes up a growing portion of the population, they also are growing increasingly secular, upon certain key issues of religion related to socio-political dimensions. The 2012 Religious Landscape Study finds that atheism is increasing in Pakistan.

The 2010s was a decade that simultaneously gave them an identity and took it away. Social media was a major tool for atheist to propagate their ideology. Kunwar Khuldune Shahid noted “for most Pakistani atheists, PAA (Pakistani Atheists and Agnostics) and other social media [groups] provided space for their first ever meeting with another Pakistani atheist.”¹³ The founder of this page is a young man whose real identity is hidden but he operated his campaigns under the name of ‘*Hazrat Nakhuda*.’ In January 2012 Mr.

¹³Kunwar Khuldune Shahid, “The Defiance of Pakistani Atheists,” *The Diplomat*, August 22, 2019. Online available at: The Defiance of Pakistani Atheists – The Diplomat. Accessed on: February 11, 2021.

Ghaffar Hussain who is a Counter-extremism expert wrote an article for the website TheCommentator.com. This website is owned by Robin Shepherd. Mr. Ghaffar Hussain took *Hazrat Nakhuda's* interview. At that time Mr. Ghaffar Hussain mentioned in his article that the Facebook page by the name of 'Pakistani Atheists and Agnostics' has over 800 members. We have taken a picture from the Facebook page of Pakistani Atheists and Agnostics. After going through their Facebook page, we come to know that their number has increased over the years. As we can see that this number of over 800 members (at the time of interview with *Hazrat Nakhuda*) was in 2012. Now in 2016 that number increased to 7856. In which 7807 people follow this page and 7856 like this page. 7056 members increase in between 2012 – 2016. In 4 years more than 7000 people appear on the forum. The increase of 7000 members is not something ignorable. It is not a small number in fact. We should consider the fact that over the period of just 4 years it is a massive increase.

In 2015, the government took strong actions against the organizers of such groups under the cyber act crime and they were kept prison in different. The government step is taken both positively and negatively among the different circles of Pakistan. Muslim activists appreciated government's action; however, the liberalist and human right movement activists condemned the government and considered the situation dangerous for freethinkers and humanists.¹⁴ There is not a recent survey or data to know the current situation of atheism in Pakistan but is evident that they are no more active in these days as they were in 2010s decade. As far as the growth of atheism is concerned in the modern day, the question was asked from the scholar that atheism is growing in Pakistan or not? Majority of the scholars positively said that it is increasing while some said that it is not atheism that is increasing but agnosticism. The scholars did not pay much attention to study the phenomenon in the light of the growing academy discipline of non-religion and atheism. So, in this article an attempt has been made to fill this academic gap and two major aspect of the definition and factors which led the Muslim youth towards atheism are discussed.

3. Defining Atheism in Pakistani Context

Majority of the studies on atheism consider denial of the existence of God as a major component of defining atheism. In the words of Cliteur, a prominent atheist defined that "Someone who does not believe in any god or deities."¹⁵ In the same vein Richard Dawkins, a prominent atheist states atheist is someone who claims there is no such being as God.¹⁶ In this way, an atheist becomes: someone who is simply not a theist: not the one who

¹⁴U.S. Commission on International Freedom, "Dangerous Situation for Freethinkers and Humanists in Pakistan," 2015. Online available at: [1715598 \(humanists.international\)](http://www.humanists.international/), accessed on: February 11, 2021.

¹⁵Paul Cliteur, "The Definition of Atheism," *Journal of Religion and Society* 11 (2009): 2. Online available at: <http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2009/2009-4.pdf>. Accessed on: February 16, 2021.

¹⁶Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (USA: Random House, 2016).

proclaims the non-existence of God. This argument is also supported by George H. Smith and Michael Martin. Smith in his famous book *Atheism: The case against God* writes: “Atheism, in its original form, is not a belief, in fact, it is actually the absence of belief. An atheist is not basically a person who believes that a god does not exist; rather, he does not believe in the existence of a god.”¹⁷

Similarly, Michael Martin in his famous book *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* states that, “if you look up “atheism” in a dictionary, you will probably find it defined as the belief that there is no God. Certainly, many people understand atheism this way.”¹⁸ This denial of the existence of God is known as Atheism. According to Hick atheism is opposite to Theism which means “belief in the existence of a god or gods. Specifically, theism is the belief in the existence of one God who is viewed as the creative source of human beings and the world.”¹⁹ However, it is interesting to note that 46.15% respondents considered the denial of God as a component of atheism. It is found in the research that implicit atheists are growing in Pakistan than explicit atheists. Both types of atheism—implicit and explicit—may be consequential and for individual thoughts and behaviour but the question which arises here is that which type of atheism or disbelief should demand most of ‘*ulāmā*’s attention? Moreover, which type of atheism is more dangerous? If we have an overview of the studies already done upon atheism, it became evident that majority of them deals with explicit atheism. As Bullivant and Ruse noted:

Almost all scholarship on atheism concerns itself with explicit beliefs and their ties to socio-cultural contexts, conscious reasoning, and social identities. And for historians, sociologists, social anthropologists, and most scholars of religion, explicit beliefs, and the social identities they express are the more interesting phenomenon.²⁰

The above excerpt clearly indicated that most of the studies dealt only with explicit form of atheism and not study yet have really explained the implicit atheism. As this study concluded that implicit form of atheism is growing in Pakistan, it is emphasized here that much attention should be paid to implicit atheism instead of explicit atheism. It is also emphasized here that implicit atheism is more dangerous for the society who is religious in its nature. Barrett’s work on theological correctness supports this perspective to some extent. He emphasized that the more complex explicit beliefs of individuals matter less than more basic implicit beliefs when people are reasoning quickly about events in the world.²¹ In religious terminology, the implicit atheists can be termed as hypocrites for, they do not categorically reject religions, nor do they follow it.

¹⁷George Smith, *Atheism: The Case against God* (Prometheus Books, 2010), 7.

¹⁸Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (USA: Temple University Press, 1992), 463.

¹⁹John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Springer, London: The Macmillan Press, 2010).

²⁰Loise Lee, “Western Europe,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed., Stephen Bullivant, and Michael Ruse (Oxford University Press, 2013), 486.

²¹*Ibid.*, 486.

4. Research Methodology

Qualitative research method was adopted in this research. This method is chosen because it is a method in which a social phenomenon having actions of people emphasizes on interpreting the individual experiences which turns into social realities. As I wanted to probe out the subjective feelings of an atheist, therefore, an interpretive and exploratory framework was the most appropriate research approach. An interpretive and exploratory approach leads to gain insight into the meaning and behaviours, experienced in a specific social phenomenon through the subjective experience of the participants.²² This study is based upon primary and secondary data.

The primary data is collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews. The questions were open ended, based on the objectives of the study. From May 2018 to September 2019, the interviews from 19 self-identified atheists were conducted from Lahore, Pakistan, whereas 13 renowned religious scholars/Clerics who are serving in famous universities of Lahore in the religious studies department were also included in the study. Of those 19 self-identified atheists who were interviewed, 7 were female and 12 were male, ageing from 15 to 24 years. In term of education attainment, 9 of the participants hold master's degree whereas 10 of the respondents had graduation degree. The interviews ranged from approximately 50 minutes to one – half an hour, depending how many the respondents expand their response to the questions. After interviewing an atheist, I subsequently asked them if they could recommend other who might be suitable for my study. From those interviewees, I asked for additional contacts, and thus my sample grew and found more atheists. Interviews were also conducted with the scholars who possess first-hand knowledge about the Islamic education, educational system, Muslim community, atheism in Pakistan. This is to ensure that those having vital information are not missed in the selection process.²³

These experts, with their particular knowledge, understanding and their experience can provide insight of the nature of problem and can give suitable and concrete recommendations for the solutions. As described by Tremblay, that the key informants should meet the following criteria, firstly; have knowledge relevant to the study, secondly; willing to share his knowledge.²⁴ Thus, the key respondent that was selected for the

²²Donna Mertens, *Research and Evaluation in Education and Psychology: Integrating Diversity with Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods* (Sage Publication, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2005).

²³J. W. Creswell, V. L. P. Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* (Sage Publications, 2016).

²⁴Marc-Adelard Tremblay, "The Key Informant Technique: A Non-Ethnographic Application," *American Anthropologist* 59, no. 4 (1975): 688-701.

interview includes Dr. Hafiz Zubair Taimi,²⁵ Prof. Asif Iftikhar,²⁶ Sheikh Sohaib Ahmed²⁷ and Dr. Raghieb Naeemi²⁸ Moreover; interviews were conducted with many other scholars/clerics to get the in-depth knowledge of atheism and the encountering strategies.

Secondary data is already produced by someone else for different purpose but can also be used by the researcher. The secondary data was obtained from traditional research sources, such as journals, unpublished thesis and dissertations, Conference and Seminar papers, Books, official government documents. In order to strengthen the structure of the study, data was also obtained from other popular publications related to youth, such as blogs and websites, recorded videos, publication, research and survey results.

As far as the question of impartiality and researcher's biasness is concerned, the researcher played the role of an interviewer, observer and analyser of the study. The researcher conducted the interviews from the self – identifies Atheist and the famous religious scholars associated with religion department in major universities in Lahore, Pakistan. Finally, the data was transcribed and analysed carefully to answer the research questions as described by the researcher. The right to privacy of the interlocutor atheist was upheld in the conduct of this study. As the data collected from the interviewee was kept confidential at all the time. Prior to the commencement of the interview, they were assured of their confidentiality by signing a consent form. The atheist interviewees were assured that they will not be identified by their original name at any time in the research. Issues of confidentiality and anonymity were prominent in my research project especially the atheist respondents. Thus, all the atheist respondents' names were given pseudonyms which do not contain identifiers that make them traceable. The basic concern of the ethical consideration in research is to prevent and protect any maltreatment of any kind of the respondents.²⁹

²⁵Assistant professor at COMSATS University Lahore, Pakistan and author of a famous book ' *Wajud-e-Bari ta'ala: Madhab, Science aur Falsafah ki Roshni Main*' (Existence of God in the Light of Philosophy, Science and Religion)' Lahore: Dar- al Fikar- Al Islami, n.d.).

²⁶Permanent faculty member at Lahore University of Management Sciences. He has recorded a series of lectures in a TV program on Atheism <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2zNFgkZ-Qc>

²⁷Graduated from International Islamic University, Founder and Chairman of Qur'an College and Islamic Training Institute Lahore Pakistan and vice president *Jamiat-e-Ahl Hadith* Pakistan. He is amongst the famous religious scholars in Pakistan. He recorded many television programmes on peace TV, Geo TV. He has a numerous lecture on Muslim youth to his credits given at many educational institutes like LUMS, GIFT University, University of Management and Technology, FAST University.

²⁸He is the principle of Madrassa Naeemia, one of the most famous Madrassa (Institute for Religious Education) in Lahore, Pakistan. Dr Raghieb Naeemi is also member of Islamic Ideological Council, Pakistan, and ex- vice president of *Tanzeem ul Madaris*.

²⁹John Creswell, and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* (Sage publications, 2017).

A category system was then developed through reading a portion of the data, and the content of the database was coded into different concepts to identify any recurring themes within the discussions. The coded data was then placed into files related to each of the topics covered in the coding scheme. The codification and examination of nineteen self-identified atheist's and Islamic scholars' interviews, I have identified six major themes—three from atheists and three from the scholars.

5. Limitations of the Study

Although this research fills a gap in the missing literature on atheist by focusing specifically on a Muslim youth, there are several limitations of this study that should be considered. First, the setting of the study was unfavourable and hostile which do not encourage the atheist identity. As mentioned previously, the country in which the study took place is highly religious, fundamental, and underdeveloped. These contextual factors play an important role to adopt atheism in the city of Lahore. Further, many of my participants cited feeling of very low rate of their acceptance in Lahore. Moreover, the methods are limited by the fact that interlocutors have their own specific way of describing the social world and the perspectives at one point in time. Responses to questions may vary based on the audience of the informant, the informant's state of mind, and other external factors. Another limitation to this study was that respondents who were raised in a religious household were all raised in Muslim families. Experiences with adopting an atheist identity after rejecting a religion other than Christianity may be an area that could be studied further. Future research should include Christian, Sikhs and Hindus youth group who inclined towards atheism. Despite these limitations, my study was unprecedented in Pakistani context where the topic is least discussed among the scholars. This study provides an exploration of the process by which Muslim youth identify as atheists and the factors which led them towards atheism.

6. Factors Leading to Atheism: Atheist's Perspective

It is evident from the data that ex-Muslims and now atheists belong to varied socio-cultural and religious backgrounds. The major factors leading them towards atheism are the role of media, the problem of suffering, contradiction in religious teachings, misdeeds of the cleric and scientific knowledge and discoveries. It shows that this study in some aspects verify the results of the previous studies like Stephen LeDrew's³⁰ (2013) who emphasized that Religious socialization and secular socialization is a gateway to atheism in Canadian context, Greksa's³¹ (2015) study in which the author suggested that college play vital role in there de-conversion, Khan's³² (2016) study which emphasized that non-

³⁰Stephen LeDrew, "Discovering Atheism: Heterogeneity in Trajectories to Atheist Identity and Activism," *Sociology of Religion* 74, no. 4 (2013): 431-453.

³¹Cali Greksa, "The Atheist Experience: A Sociological Approach to Atheist Identity in College Students," Master Thesis (University of Colorado, 2015).

³²Iraj Khan, "Rise of Atheism in Pakistan," Unpublished MS Thesis (University of Management and Technology, 2016).

religious family, rigidity, Ignorance of religious teachers, Modern media and Intolerance are the major factor leading towards atheism in Pakistani context, Shoukry's³³ (2016) study explored Globalization, culture and strict religious socialization as leading factors to atheism in the Egyptian Muslim context and last but not least is Steven's³⁴ (2016) study which identify the role of Parents, their Education, Misfortune, other cultures and the role of friends leaning the people to atheism. All in all, it is evident that people are leaving religion because of numerous reasons and if we categorized them under one border factor they are mostly related to the failure of appealing answerers by religion or the scholars of the religion to the questions the modern movements of globalization, secularism and scientific knowledge have raised. A questioning phase, as reported by many of my participants raised in a Muslim household or who reported having any sort of belief in God, was a very important part of accepting an atheist identity. Their journey to atheism starts from questioning religion. Most of the participant responded that they started to question religion at their teenage. Fifteen of the nineteen respondent told they started to question religion at their teenage. Four of the respondents told they started to question religion in their adulthood. It is concluded that majority of the respondent started to question religion in their teenage however they claimed atheistic identity in their adult age. Even claiming an atheistic identity as we have discussed above because of the context of Pakistan and the fear of excommunication they still did not profess publicly as atheist. In order to hide their identity, they still obey religious rituals whenever they feel that if they did not perform them in front of their family it may lead to severe consequences. Following a brief description of these subthemes and pie chart is given:

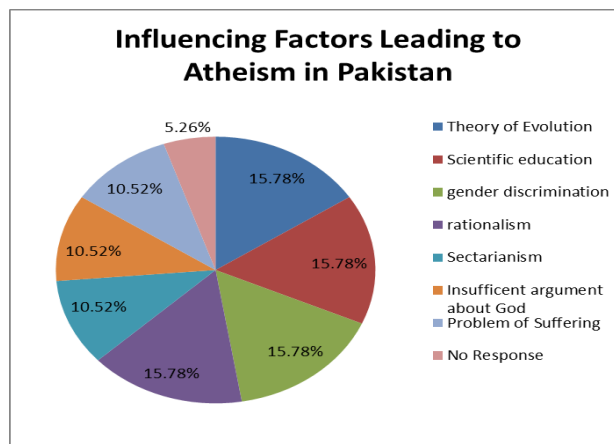


Figure 2. Influencing factors leading to Atheism in Pakistan: Atheist's perspective

³³ShouWael Ossama Al- Soukkary, "Becoming and Being: Atheism as a Social Experience in Egypt," Master Thesis (The American University in Cairo, 2016).

³⁴Steven Tomlins, "Navigating Atheist Identities: an Analysis of Nonreligious Perceptions and Experiences in the Religiously Diverse Canadian City of Ottawa," PhD dis., (University of Ottawa, 2016).

In the following discussion a brief analysis of the above-mentioned factors is given:

6.1. Theory of Evolution

Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) theory of evolution, in its implication challenged the religious view of creationism. Though the acceptance of the implication of evolution on human being in the Muslim world is very low and only 14% Pakistanis think that the human evolution is true, but it is not something which can be neglected as it posed a social and cultural threat in the form of materialism and atheism.³⁵ As 15.78% respondents of the study responded that they adopted atheism because of the contending views of human evolution and creation theory of Islam.

6.2. Scientific Education

With the advancement of technology, industrial revolution and the increasing influence of natural science to comprehend the life and its realities compelled the learners of these sciences to think the world in terms of materialism. 15.78 per cent respondents responded that they gave up Islam to pursue studies in science and medicine. They responded that obtaining a scientific education was a primary motivator for them to leave Islam. As one of the respondents Wasif told "When I was around 23 years old I lost a complete interest in Islam and its rules because they were hindering my ability of being a science student as well as Muslim."

6.3. Gender Discrimination

Some of the teachings of Islam in its literal interpretation like, the issue of polygamy, women's witness, patriarchal traditions in interpretations of the Qur'an, the issue of veil and etc. are look like gendered biased and it is another reasons for the Muslim youth to leave Islam and to adopt atheism. 15.78 per cent of respondents claim gender discrimination as the factor which influences them to adopt atheism. As one respondent Sadia responds:

When I was in my teenage, I was forced to wear hijab and not talk to opposite gender as it is considered a sin my parents got myself admitted in school where education system was for both boys and girls then how was it possible for me to not to talk to them so I was confused.

It is clear from the above mentioned response that how the teachings regarding veil for women compelled her to leave Islam. So, here it becomes prerequisite for the 'Ulāmā to make clear the concept of veil in Islam and bring to light all of its other aspects before the society, so a clear understanding regarding veil came before the society.

³⁵Salman Hameed, "Bracing for Islamic Creationism," *Science and Religion* 322, no. 12 (2008): 1637-1638.

6.4. Rationalism

Rationalism is a view that regards reason as the chief source and the test of knowledge. Rationalism has been the rival of the systems claiming esoteric knowledge, whether from mystical experience, revelation, or intuition.³⁶ Following this notion of rationalism, 15.78 per cent respondents argued that they find good reason under the ideology of rationalism not to follow religious beliefs and teachings. As one of the respondent Nadeem told “growing up in a secular democracy, joining the school and getting educated rationally helped to pave the way for rational thoughts.” So, to understand the reality and the world rationally is compelling the youth to leave religion and to choose atheism as an ideology of life.

6.5. Sectarianism and the Internal Inconsistencies of Religious Teachings

Sectarianism or the internal groups and the internal inconsistencies of religious teachings and in the sacred scriptures of Islam are also another big reason to leave Islam for the modern youth. 10.52 per cent of respondents said they became atheists because they couldn't find consistency in religious ideas and teachings. One of the respondents Sofia told that “I saw what religion was doing over here, so I decided to research on it using the social media and different holy books...the contradictions in the sacred books of an ever-perfect God made me (to adopt atheism).” Here, the question the atheist raises is that how an ever-perfect God can make contradictory comments in a book that is considered by the Muslims revealed and error-free. This issue is discussed by the interpreters of the Qur'ān under the theme of *Ta'arud bayn al-Qur'ān* (Internal Contradictions of the Qur'ān). So it is prerequisite to have a well command upon this issue before one start to talk with the atheists.

6.6. Problem of Suffering

Connecting to the above-mentioned issue is the issue of the problem of suffering. 10.52 per cent of the respondents responded that suffering and evil in the world went against God's concept of mercy, justice and all-powerfulness in the universe; so, they asked, why does the world suffer while God is all-merciful? Why does God know everything, and why does He has the power to do anything? Because of this on-going suffering, many people have turned away from religious beliefs. As one respondent Fayyaz said “I left religion because God leave the people in suffering in this world”.

6.7. Insufficient Argument about the Existence of God

Lastly, 10.52 per cent stated they couldn't come up with a persuasive explanation for God's existence. After searching for evidence of the existence of God and Satan and finding none, Fayyaz, a respondent, became an atheist. If examined the reality of the claim, it is found that it is a matter of ignorance.

³⁶Brand Blanshard, “Rationalism,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, November 17, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/rationalism>. Accessed on: September 1, 2021.

All in all, the above-mentioned reasons to adopt atheism by the Pakistani atheist can be narrowly categorized into two major categories which include the over-emphasis upon the use of reason to comprehend the universe and its realities without believing upon the transcendental reality or realities; criticism and discontent upon the teachings of Islam, its external structures and the notion of God. Following a brief description of the factors identified by the scholars is given.

7. Factors Leading to Atheism: Scholar's Perspective

Scholars also identify numerous factors which led teenagers to question religion, beliefs, or doctrines at this certain age. Though, there are some general factors, but there are some others factors which as well vary as the context changes. These general factors include the role of media, scientific education, and the problem of suffering, gender discrimination and rationalism. As far as the context of Lahore is concerned, the scholars identify that loose religious socialization is also another major factor because of which the modern youth is leaning towards skepticism and then towards atheism. The form of atheism which commonly found among the ex-Muslim youth of Lahore is not hard-line atheism or explicit atheism. Using Dawkins spectrum to identify the level of atheism among the skeptics this study concluded that 78% respondents are implicit atheist or agnostics and only 22% are strong atheist. A comparative analysis of the factors identified by atheists and scholars is as follows:

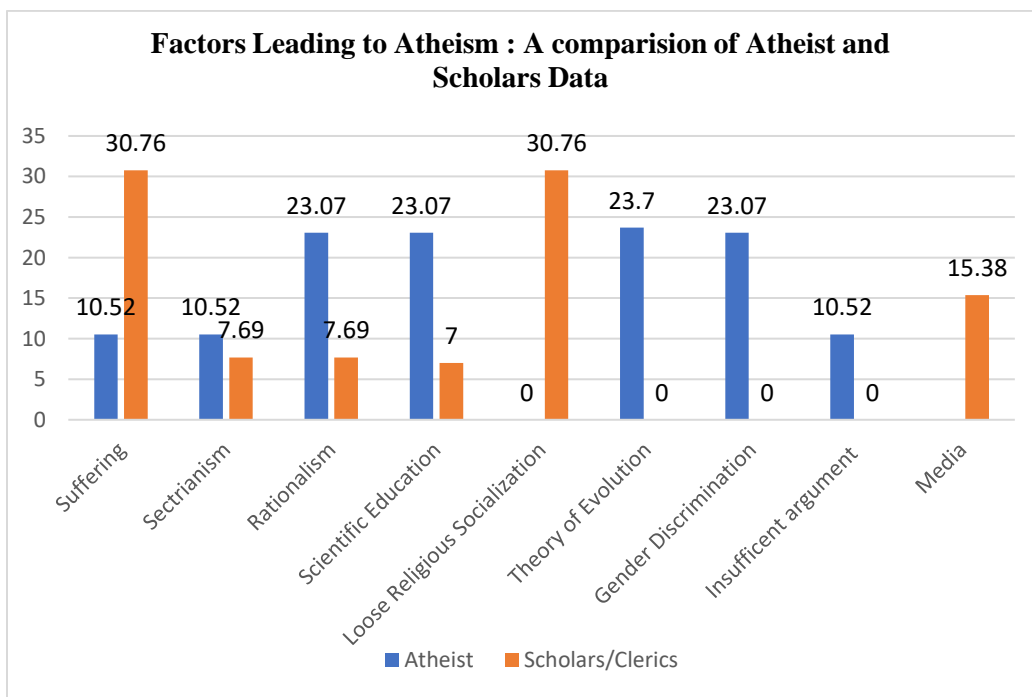


Figure 3. Factors Leading to Atheism: A Comparison of Atheist and Scholars Data

From the above-mentioned graph it is evident that scholars consider the problem of suffering, loose religious socialization and the media as a major factor behind the rise of atheism in Pakistan. These three themes comprises on 76% of the total data collected from the Islamic studies scholars who are teaching Islam as a subject to the university students in the different universities of Lahore. On the other hand, the atheists completely ignore these reasons behind their conversion to atheism and only 10.52 per cent people added suffering as a factor to adopt atheism and contrary to the scholar's view, the atheists consider the theory of evolution, scientific, gender discrimination and insufficient argument about God as major tools behind the rise of atheism. These themes comprise on 57% of the total data. This comparative analysis shows that how the teachers of Islamic studies are ignorant about the factors that are leading the university youth towards atheism. If, it is the situation of Islamic scholars who are associated with the Universities from where the problem is emerging, consider how ignorant would be the common '*Ulāmā*' about the actual situation who do not have a direct attraction to these students. They are really thinking in a wrong direction. It is concluded that if the '*Ulāmā*' really wanted to address the issues of the youth they have to strengthen themselves by the knowledge about the philosophy of science.

A common point among these factors is sectarianism. 10.52% atheist consider it as reason behind their conversion to atheism, however, scholar's give little attention to it as well and only 7.69 % consider it as a reason of deconversion. Another similar point is rationalism. 23.07% atheist choose it as a reason to deconversion, however, scholar's give little attention to it as well and only 7.69 % consider it as a reason of deconversion. The same importance is given to scientific education as a factor to deconversion. It is interesting to note here that the points which are similar also contained statistical variations and do not meet one another's statistical positions. As far as the question whose statistical position should be considered more important is concerned, it is suggested here that those who are directly facing the issue of atheism and leaning towards it, is more important than who are simply discussing the issue on philosophical and theoretical grounds.

8. Conclusion and Findings

From the above-mentioned discussion, it is concluded that contrary to western atheists who considered the denial of God as a major component of western atheism Pakistani atheists considered freedom or liberty as a defining factor to Pakistani atheism. Consequently, majority of Pakistani atheists are not explicit atheists, they are implicit atheists or agnostics. In addition, atheists and scholars also disagree with each other in the identification of the factors which lead Pakistani youth towards atheism. Atheists emphasized that atheism become an important ideology of the future generations because religion failed to provide them satisfactory and rational answers to the questions raised in the aftermath of western renaissance and the scientific revolution like the theory of evolution, the problem of suffering, gender discrimination, rationalism, and sectarianism. Scholars added that '*Ulāmā*'—who were the custodians of Muslim societies and historically they played their effective role to prevent the Muslim '*ummah*' from both the internal and

external challenges—cannot equip themselves with modern knowledge and consequently they lost their grip over the youth and the influx of the western ideologies led the modern youth to atheism.

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