
**Rising Atheism and Agnosticism among
Pakistani Youth Causes and Counter-Narratives
from Islamic Theology**

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Abstract

The gradual rise of atheism and agnosticism among Pakistani youth, though not yet statistically dominant, signals a profound intellectual and existential unrest within a society traditionally rooted in Islamic belief. This trend reflects a multifaceted crisis: epistemic confusion stemming from an education system divorced from spiritual foundations; identity displacement caused by globalization and Western cultural hegemony; the allure of scientific reductionism which misconstrues empirical success as a metaphysical worldview; disillusionment with socio-political structures that often use religion as a tool rather than a transformative force; and widespread dissatisfaction with the way Islam is represented, both in media and religious institutions. These factors combine to distance young minds from their religious heritage, leading them to adopt skepticism or outright rejection of faith.

This article presents a comprehensive Islamic theological response to this phenomenon. It identifies the core causes and offers a critical deconstruction of prevailing secular and atheist narratives, particularly those gaining traction through digital media and academic discourse. Drawing upon Qur'anic epistemology, classical Islamic theology ('ilm al-kalām), and the higher objectives of Islamic law (maqāṣid al-sharī'ah), the study proposes an intellectual revival aimed at re-engaging youth through meaningful dialogue, authenticity, and relevance. The article advocates for an approach that is spiritually deep, philosophically robust, and

culturally conscious—one that does not merely defend faith but reclaims its role as a source of meaning, justice, and human flourishing. In doing so, it aims to safeguard the Islamic identity in an age of ideological pluralism and digital disruption.

Keywords: Atheism in Pakistan, Agnosticism, Islamic Theology, Youth and Religion, Qur’anic Epistemology

Introduction

Pakistan, as an Islamic republic, is constitutionally and ideologically anchored in Islam. Its preamble affirms the sovereignty of Allah, and its national identity is framed within Islamic values and principles. However, despite this formally religious framework, a growing trend of scepticism, religiosity, atheism (ilhād), and agnosticism is becoming increasingly visible—especially among the urban, educated youth. While this phenomenon may not yet dominate in absolute numerical terms, it carries significant implications for the religious, intellectual, and cultural continuity of the nation.

This trend is most noticeable in university campuses, digital forums, social media spaces, and online communities where traditional taboos are being challenged, and existential questions are raised with unprecedented boldness. What was once a marginal discourse is now gaining visibility and traction, catalyzed by several interconnected factors?

The Digitalization of Doubt:

Platforms like YouTube, Reedit, Instagram, and Twitter (X) have become fertile grounds for the spread of New Atheism and secular humanist ideologies. Figures such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens have influenced global audiences, and their ideas are now localized and disseminated through Urdu and English digital content.ⁱ

Disconnection between Tradition and Modernity:

Many traditional scholars and religious institutions struggle to engage with philosophical, scientific, or existential questions emerging from modernity. Theological responses often lack the intellectual sophistication or contextual relevance required to address these doubts meaningfully.ⁱⁱ

Intellectual Suppression in Religious and Secular Institutions:

Both madrasas and modern universities, ironically, contribute to the crisis. In madrasas, intellectual curiosity is often curtailed in favour of doctrinal conformity, while in secular universities, religious discourse is either side lined or caricatured, leaving students caught between two epistemic vacuums.ⁱⁱⁱ

Socio-political Hypocrisy:

The visible gap between religious rhetoric and the unethical practices of political, religious, and institutional leaders has eroded trust in religion as a moral force.^{iv} Youth witnessing corruption, injustice, and discrimination often associate these failings with religion itself, leading them to question the legitimacy of faith.

Global Cultural Pressures:

The dominance of Western epistemology, moral relativism, and consumerist lifestyles promoted through global media have induced a subtle but significant displacement of identity.^v

Many young Pakistanis struggle to reconcile their inherited faith with the secular-modernist paradigms that define their academic, social, and digital environments.

In light of the above context, this article aims to engage critically with the phenomenon of rising atheism and agnosticism among Pakistani youth, not through

polemics or denial, but through constructive theological and intellectual inquiry. The core objectives are fourfold:

To Analyse the Causes

The study undertakes a multidimensional analysis of the sociological, psychological, philosophical, and ideological drivers behind the turn toward disbelief.^{vi}

This includes examining the role of education, family structures, media exposure, cognitive dissonance, and trauma—both personal and collective.

To Deconstruct the Rhetoric of Disbelief

A growing number of ex-Muslims and sceptical voices, often articulate and well-read, advance arguments grounded in scientism, relativism, or moral critique of religion. The article seeks to critically deconstruct these narratives, revealing their epistemic flaws, emotional triggers, and socio-political underpinnings.

To Offer Islamic Theological Responses

Drawing upon Qur’anic epistemology, Prophetic tradition, and classical kalām traditions—particularly the works of scholars like al-Ghazālī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, and contemporary kalām revivalists—this paper presents rigorous responses to key contentions such as the problem of evil, divine hiddenness, and perceived incompatibility between science and religion.^{vii}

To Propose Strategies for Revival

The study concludes by proposing actionable strategies aimed at reviving an intellectually vibrant and spiritually fulfilling Islamic discourse. These include curriculum reform, interfaith and intra-faith dialogue, digital da‘wah initiatives, and

the re-training of scholars to address modern questions competently and compassionately.

This article contends that the rising tide of doubt among Pakistani youth is not merely a crisis of faith, but a reflection of deeper structural, epistemological, and existential challenges. Only a holistic response—rooted in tradition yet responsive to modernity—can meaningfully address this shift and re-anchor youth within a confident Islamic worldview.

Mapping the Phenomenon: Defining Atheism and Agnosticism

Understanding the rise of atheism and agnosticism among Pakistani youth necessitates a clear conceptual and theological mapping of these terms, both within secular philosophical frameworks and within Islamic epistemology.^{viii}

Atheism (Ilhād)

In contemporary discourse, **atheism** is generally defined as the **denial or rejection of the existence of God** or any transcendent, metaphysical reality. It ranges from passive non-belief (lack of theistic conviction) to active disbelief (assertion that God does not exist). In the Islamic intellectual tradition, this position is identified by the term **ilhād**, which originally meant "to deviate" or "to incline away from the truth" and is used in the Qur'ān to refer to distortions or denials of divine truth.

Atheism in this form often manifests in two major strands:

1. **Materialist atheism**, which denies all metaphysical realities in favor of empirical or physicalist worldviews.
2. **Humanist atheism**, which replaces divine authority with human autonomy, often accompanied by moral relativism.

Within **Islamic theology** (**ilm al-kalām**), such outright rejection of the existence of God falls under **kufr**, provided it is the result of deliberate denial

(inkār) after knowledge or exposure to divine truth. However, jurisprudential and ethical assessments also take into account degrees of ignorance, coercion, and intellectual confusion.^{ix}

Agnosticism

Agnosticism is the philosophical position that the existence of God is either **unknown or inherently unknowable**. Agnostics do not necessarily deny God's existence but suspend judgment, citing the limitations of human reason, the ambiguity of religious claims, or the absence of empirical evidence.^x

From an Islamic standpoint, agnosticism is addressed through multiple theological lenses:

1. It overlaps with **shakk** (doubt), which the Qur'an repeatedly critiques when it leads to moral paralysis or evasion of divine accountability.
2. It also intersects with **shubuhāt**—intellectual doubts arising from misinterpretation, misinformation, or ideological confusion.
3. On a deeper level, agnosticism may be connected to **qalbī ikhtilāf**—a state of spiritual disorientation or unrest of the heart, often caused by a rupture between the fitrah (primordial human nature) and one's intellectual or social environment.

Spectrum of Disbelief

It is critical to recognize that both atheism and agnosticism function on a **spectrum**—from emotional estrangement and philosophical skepticism to outright militant denial.^{xi}

Especially among youth, disbelief is often not the result of rational conviction but of a complex amalgam of emotional trauma, moral objections, existential disillusionment, and intellectual disengagement. Hence, any theological or pastoral response must be nuanced, differentiating between:

1. **Deliberate ideological rejection**
2. **Doubt due to intellectual challenges**

3. Loss of faith due to moral or spiritual alienation

This mapping serves as a foundation for the subsequent sections, which explore the sociocultural and psychological causes, deconstruct the intellectual rhetoric of disbelief, and provide a comprehensive Islamic theological response to this growing challenge.

Causes of Irreligiosity among Pakistani Youth

The rise of atheism, agnosticism, and broader irreligiosity among Pakistani youth cannot be reduced to a single cause or ideological shift.^{xii}

Rather, it emerges from a constellation of intellectual, sociocultural, psychological, and spiritual crises. This section analyses the key drivers behind this growing phenomenon.

Intellectual Disengagement

One of the most pronounced causes of youthful religiosity is the **failure of traditional religious pedagogy** to stimulate critical thinking or address the contemporary intellectual landscape.^{xiii}

The educational model prevailing in most religious institutions emphasizes rote memorization, fiqh-based legalism, and moral exhortation, but largely neglects epistemological inquiry or philosophical depth.

Outdated Curriculum:

Religious seminaries often rely on classical texts without contextual interpretation. As a result, the questions posed by postmodernity, secularism, and scientific scepticism remain unanswered.^{xiv}

Neglect of Kalām and Philosophy:

Historically, Islamic civilization flourished in intellectual engagement through disciplines like ‘ilm al-kalām, falsafah, and logic (mantīq). Today, these

have been marginalized, leading to an inability to formulate reasoned responses to **scientific materialism, moral relativism, and atheistic humanism.**^{xv}

Binary Thinking:

Many students are taught that doubt equates to sin, leading to **suppression rather than exploration** of questions. This alienates inquisitive minds and pushes them towards secular alternatives that welcome critical inquiry.^{xvi}

Social Media and Digital Echo Chambers

Digital platforms have become the new battleground for ideas, and **youth are the most vulnerable demographic.** Unlike older generations, Gen Z and millennials form their worldview not in classrooms or mosques, but in algorithm-driven digital spaces.

Global Atheist Content:

Influential figures like **Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens** have been digitally translated and localized through Urdu subtitles, making Western critiques of religion accessible to Pakistani audiences.

Local Echo Chambers:

Online forums and social media pages, sometimes anonymously managed, promote **rationalism, agnosticism, liberal secularism, and scientific determinism** as alternatives to “blind faith.”

Meme and Satire Culture:

Religion, religious figures, and traditional scholars are frequently **ridiculed through memes**, short clips, and sarcastic commentary. This trivialization fosters cynicism and emotional detachment from religious identity, especially among youth with weak foundational knowledge.

Disillusionment with Religious Institutions

The credibility of religious authority figures has suffered due to repeated moral, social, and political compromises.^{xvii}

This has resulted in widespread **disillusionment with organized religion**, not with theology per se, but with its representatives.

1. **Moral Hypocrisy:** Scandals involving clergy—ranging from corruption to abuse—undermine the moral authority of those who preach divine values.
2. **Sectarianism and Partisanship:** Many religious scholars are perceived as **sectarian agents**, more focused on refuting rival schools than uniting the ummah or solving real-world issues.
3. **Absence of Role Models:** Few scholars visibly embody both **spiritual integrity** and **intellectual sophistication**. Youth often admire public figures who are either spiritual but anti-intellectual, or academic but morally detached—leaving a void where balanced, holistic figures should be.

Socio-political Discontent

Young Pakistanis live in a society marked by **institutionalized injustice**, **political instability**, and **economic precocity**. In such an environment, religion—especially when instrumentalized by the state or ruling elite—can become a symbol of the oppressive status quo.^{xviii}

Instrumentalization of Religion:

Religious rhetoric is often co-opted to justify authoritarianism, censorship, gender-based discrimination, or ethnic violence. This **taints the moral image of Islam** among critical youth.^{xix}

Science Has Replaced God

Modern science, particularly cosmology, biology, and neuroscience, is seen as rendering the “God hypothesis” obsolete. Scientific explanations are perceived to replace the need for divine causation.^{xx}

This argument confuses categories. God is not a part of the universe like a scientific entity but its transcendent origin. Islamic thought does not see science and religion as opposites, but as complementary paths to truth.

The Qur'an encourages inquiry into nature (e.g., *afalā yanzurūna ilā al-samā'*), while grounding that inquiry in tawhīd. Explaining the mechanics of rain, for example, does not negate divine wisdom—it *reveals it*.

Classical scholars like Ibn Rushd, Ibn al-Haytham, and al-Bīrūnī engaged in scientific study to appreciate divine order, not to deny it.

“Religion Causes Violence and Backwardness”

Religion is often blamed for wars, sectarianism, and oppression. Theocracies are cited as examples of how religion stifles freedom and progress.^{xxi}

This argument conflates the *misuse* of religion with religion itself. At its core, Islam promotes justice, tolerance, and learning. The golden age of Islam led the world in medicine, astronomy, law, and philosophy.

Modern violence is often rooted in *secular* ideologies—Nazism, Stalinism, colonialism—not theology. The Qur'an firmly condemns transgression and aggression.^{xxii}

The decline of the Muslim world is not due to religion but due to corruption, ignorance, and ethical collapse.

“There's No Empirical Evidence for God”

Belief in God is considered unscientific because it cannot be empirically proven.^{xxiii}

This view assumes empiricism is the only valid way of knowing—a philosophical stance, not a scientific one. Many truths—like consciousness, morality, or mathematics—are non-empirical yet undeniable.

God is not an object within the universe. He is the necessary being behind all contingent existence.

Islamic philosophy has long defended belief in God through cosmological, moral, teleological, and ontological arguments.

“Morality Doesn’t Need Religion”
Humans can construct moral systems without religion using reason and empathy.

While humans have moral intuition, without a divine anchor, morality becomes relative. What is moral in one culture may be abhorrent in another. This opens the door to moral confusion or even nihilism.^{xxiv}

The Qur’an roots morality in divine justice (Qur’an 16:90). Islam’s moral code is grounded in *maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah*—the higher objectives of life, intellect, lineage, property, and religion.

Without belief in God, there is no ultimate accountability. Ethics become malleable, subject to manipulation by power or majority opinion.

Islamic Theological Counter-Narratives

Modern ideologies challenge not only Islamic theology but the very human need for meaning. Islam must respond not just defensively but constructively—drawing from its rich tradition in *‘ilm al-kalām*, spirituality, and integrated knowledge systems.^{xxv}

Qur’anic Epistemology: Faith and Reason

Islamic epistemology affirms multiple sources of knowledge: reason (*‘aql*), intuition (*fitrah*), experience (*tajriba*), and revelation (*wahy*). These are not in conflict, but mutually reinforcing.^{xxvi}

Kalām and Modern Apologetics

Throughout history, Muslim theologians responded to philosophical doubts. Al-Ghazālī confronted Greek metaphysics. Al-Rāzī refined cosmological arguments. Ibn Taymiyyah critiqued both rationalists and theologians while grounding knowledge in the Qur'an.^{xxvii}

Contemporary scholars—like Dr. Safaruk Chowdhury, Mohammad Hijab, and Hamza Tzortzis—continue this legacy, engaging modern science, metaphysics, and philosophy to defend faith.

Their efforts demonstrate that Islam is not only compatible with reason, but essential for coherent worldview.

Spirituality (Tazkiyah) and Inner Certainty

Intellectual proofs alone are not enough. Faith is also experiential. Islam offers a path of *tazkiyah al-nafs*—purification of the soul—and *iḥsān*, the highest level of spiritual awareness.

Conclusion

The growing trend of atheism and agnosticism among Pakistani youth is not just an intellectual shift. It is a symptom of deeper disillusionment—rooted in broken promises, moral failures, and spiritual neglect. This crisis reflects a loss of trust in religious leadership, alienation from meaningful faith experiences, and the overwhelming influence of secular ideologies. Many youth are not rejecting God—they are rejecting what they see as hypocrisy, irrelevance, or rigidity in the name of religion. Islam's response must be holistic and compassionate. It must speak to both the mind and the heart. Theologically; the tradition of 'ilm al-kalām and Qur'anic reasoning must be revived to engage doubts with clarity and depth.

Spiritually, the inner path of tazkiyah and iḥsān must be emphasized to help

youth rediscover a personal connection with Allah. Psychologically, faith outreach must address trauma, emotional wounds, and identity crises with empathy and pastoral care. Institutionally, mosques, madāris, and media must be reformed to reflect relevance, accessibility, and intellectual integrity. The Islamic tradition is not outdated—it is deeply equipped to guide humanity through confusion, offering purpose, stability, and peace. Reclaiming this legacy is not a luxury. It is a duty. The future of the ummah depends on our ability to make Islam not just heard—but truly understood and lived.

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