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## **The Comparative Study of Religion and Spirituality between American and Pakistani Societies**

**Iqra**

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### **Abstract**

Religious and spiritual beliefs shape many civilizations' rules, actions, and structures. This comparative research examines religion and spirituality in America and Pakistan. Due to historical, cultural, and socio-political reasons, religion and spirituality in both countries vary in expression, interpretation, and social influence. This research focuses on analyzing and contrasting the spiritual and religious practices observed in Pakistan and the United States. The study follows a qualitative approach, relying on secondary sources such as academic texts, scholarly articles, and published reports for data collection. To gain insight into the theological and spiritual principles shaping both societies, relevant literature concerning their historical developments, rituals, and societal impacts was thoroughly reviewed. In the United States, a growing trend toward secularism and religious diversity is evident, with an increasing number of people identifying as spiritual without adhering to formal religious institutions. On the other hand, Pakistan continues to reflect a strong religious identity, where Islamic beliefs deeply influence cultural norms, individual behavior, and community life. Pakistani society is heavily religious, with Islam influencing daily life, governance, and culture. Religion and spirituality provide moral guidance, community cohesion, and personal identity in both societies. Educational and cultural exchange activities between the two countries should improve interfaith understanding and respect. Interfaith conversation should be studied for its role in promoting peace and tolerance in varied societies.

**Keywords:** Religion, Spirituality, Cultural Differences, Interfaith Dialogue, Secularism.

### **Historical Context of Religion in Pakistan**

In accordance with Article 2 of Pakistan's Constitution, Islam is formally established as the official religion of the state. As of 2023, approximately 96.35% of the population adheres to Islam, making Pakistan one of the largest Muslim-majority countries in the world. The remaining 3.65% of the population belongs to various minority religions, including Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, Ahmadiyya, and Zoroastrianism. Notably, Ahmadis are not

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recognized as Muslims under Pakistani constitutional provisions.

Though the country's legal foundation rests on Islamic principles, remnants of British colonial secular influence continue to shape certain aspects of Pakistan's legal and educational systems. Despite constitutional guarantees of religious freedom, minority groups frequently face systematic discrimination, social exclusion, and are often targets of accusations under blasphemy laws, which can lead to violence or legal persecution. Furthermore, these communities remain vulnerable to extremist threats and experience limited access to socio-political platforms.

The religious demography within Islam itself is diverse. Approximately 90% of Pakistani Muslims are Sunni, while 10% identify as Shia. Among Sunni Muslims, the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence dominates, primarily represented by the Barelvi and Deobandi traditions. These two schools, though both rooted in Hanafi fiqh, differ in their spiritual orientations—Barelvīs often emphasize Sufi practices, whereas Deobandis promote a more conservative interpretation.

In contrast, the influence of Wahhabism—a movement originating from Saudi Arabia—has been increasing, particularly through the adoption of the Hanbali school, although it remains less prevalent compared to Hanafi jurisprudence. This ideological shift is often linked to the influx of foreign funding and the global spread of Salafi doctrines.

The Shia Muslim population in Pakistan primarily follows the Twelver (Ithnā'ashariyyah) school, which aligns with Shia Islam as practiced in Iran and Iraq. A smaller portion of the Shia community includes Ismailis, who follow a distinct religious and philosophical path under the leadership of the Aga Khan. These communities are mainly concentrated in regions such as Gilgit-Baltistan and Karachi.

Before the arrival of Islam in the eighth century CE, the region that is now Pakistan was home to a multitude of religious traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and indigenous belief systems. Islam's expansion into South Asia, particularly under Arab and later Turkic rulers, gradually reshaped the religious landscape of the subcontinent.

Religious Demographics of Pakistan (2023):

Religion	Population	Percentage
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Muslims	(231,686,709)	(96.35%)
Hindus	(5,217,216)	(2.17%)
Christians	(3,300,788)	(1.37%)
Ahmadis	(162,684)	(0.07%)
Sikhs	(15,992)	(<0.01%)
Zoroastrians	(2,348)	(<0.01%)
Others	(72,346)	(0.03%)
Total	(240,458,089)	(100%)

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Pakistan ranks as the country with the second-largest Muslim population globally, following Indonesia. The religious landscape is predominantly Sunni, with estimates suggesting that Sunnis constitute between 85% and 90% of the Muslim population. The Shia minority, comprising approximately 10% to 15%, forms a significant presence. In addition to these major sects, a small percentage—roughly 6%—adheres to lesser-known sects or follows alternative schools of Islamic jurisprudence that differ from dominant interpretations.

The state formally recognizes multiple Islamic legal traditions, referred to in Arabic as *Madhāhib* and commonly known in Urdu as *Maktab-e-Fikr*. The Hanafi school of thought is the most prevalent among Sunni Muslims in Pakistan, reflecting centuries of historical continuity and cultural influence. A minority within the Sunni community also follows the Hanbali school, often shaped by exposure to Gulf-based religious scholarship and transnational ideological movements.

Among Shia Muslims in Pakistan, the Twelver (*Ithnā‘ashariyyah*) branch is the most prevalent. In addition, a considerable number of Shia adherents follow Ismaili traditions, including groups such as the Nizaris (followers of the Aga Khan), Musta‘lis, Dawoodi Bohras, and Sulaymanis. These communities possess unique spiritual leadership structures, doctrinal frameworks, and communal rituals that contribute to Pakistan’s rich Islamic heritage.

The Pakistani Constitution officially regards Sunnis, Shias, and Sufis as part of the broader Muslim population.

### **Religion and Society in the United States: A Historical Overview**

Among industrialized nations, the United States stands out for its enduring religious

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engagement. Research conducted between 2021 and 2022 reveals that a large segment of Americans still affirm faith in a divine presence, engage in regular spiritual practices, and consider themselves either religiously observant or spiritually inclined.

Christianity continues to hold a central position in American religious life, encompassing traditions such as Evangelical and Mainline Protestantism alongside Roman Catholicism. However, recent decades have seen a gradual decline in Christian affiliation. Notably, by 2012, Protestants no longer made up the majority, signaling a significant demographic and cultural shift in the nation's religious profile.

The United States harbors the largest populations of Christians and Protestants globally. Following Christianity, Judaism ranks as the second-largest religious affiliation, comprising roughly 1% of the population. Other religious traditions—including Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism—also represent about 1% each. These groups are predominantly concentrated in metropolitan areas and regions with substantial immigrant communities.

Religious intensity varies regionally. In Mississippi, around 63% of residents identify as highly religious, whereas in New Hampshire, only 20% do. Religion also plays a critical role in the political arena, where most members of Congress openly identify as Christian. Both major political parties Republican and Democratic tend to nominate candidates who publicly align with a Christian or religious identity.

Throughout U.S. history, many religious figures have shaped national discourse. Prominent names include Carrie Nation, William Jennings Bryan, Martin Luther King Jr., Wallace Fard Muhammad, Jimmy Carter, and Jerry Falwell, all of whom contributed to movements in civil rights, political reform, or religious activism.

The term "Evangelical Empire," coined by historian Martin Marty, describes a historical period when evangelical Christianity exerted considerable influence over American culture, education, and political.

### **Historical Context of Religion in America**

Unlike many other economically advanced Western nations, the United States exhibits a notably high level of religious belief and participation. Religious practice in America is not only widespread but also remarkably diverse. According to national surveys, a significant majority of Americans express belief in a higher power (2021), regularly engage

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in spiritual practices (2022), and identify as either religious or spiritual individuals (2017). While Christianity continues to be the most widely practiced religion—with major affiliations in Evangelical, Mainline Protestant, and Roman Catholic denominations—its dominance has gradually declined. As of 2012, Protestants no longer constitute the majority religious group in the country.

The United States holds the distinction of having the largest Christian and Protestant populations in the world. Judaism is the second most commonly practiced religion, comprising about 1% of the population. Other religions such as Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism also each represent approximately 1% of the population. The intensity of religious commitment varies notably between states; for example, in Mississippi, 63% of residents consider themselves highly religious, whereas in New Hampshire, only 20% report similar levels of religiosity.

Religion maintains a prominent role in American politics. The vast majority of U.S. Congressional members self-identify as Christian, and candidates from both the Democratic and Republican parties generally maintain religious affiliations, particularly within Christianity. Several influential religious figures have historically shaped the political sphere, including Carrie Nation, William Jennings Bryan, Martin Luther King Jr., Wallace Fard Muhammad, Jimmy Carter, and Jerry Falwell.

This longstanding integration of religion into public life culminated in what historian Martin Marty describes as the rise of the “Evangelical Empire.” During this era, evangelical Christians wielded significant cultural and institutional power. They were actively involved in shaping public policy, including advocacy or opposition to major reforms such as the abolition of slavery, the expansion of women's rights, the enforcement of prohibition laws, and the overhaul of the education and criminal justice systems. Movements such as Adventism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Latter-day Saint movement (Mormonism), and Churches of Christ also emerged during this period, further enriching the nation’s religious landscape.<sup>1</sup> Churches of Christ and Church of Christ, Scientist, Unitarian and Universalist, and Pentecostalism are some of the new Protestant churches that emerged during this time

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<sup>1</sup> Schwadel, P. (2024). Religion and Subjective Social Class in the United States. *Sociology of Religion*, 85(1), 28-59.

period. The religious composition of the United States underwent a significant transformation during the immigration waves of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Unlike the predominantly Protestant immigrants of earlier periods, this era saw a remarkable surge in Catholic and Jewish immigrants, marking a substantial diversification of the nation's religious makeup.

From the early 1990s onward, researchers and social scientists have documented a notable rise in the number of Americans who report no religious affiliation. In 1991, only about 6% of the population identified as religiously unaffiliated. By 2021, that figure had escalated to approximately 29%. This shift is particularly evident among younger Americans, who are statistically more inclined than older generations to distance themselves from organized religion. Parallel to this trend, national surveys have shown a decline in the number of individuals who consider religion to be “very important” in their lives, as well as a reduction in regular participation in religious services.

Several factors have been proposed to explain this growing secularization. Among them are declining trust in institutional religion, public backlash against the politicization of religion during the 1980s—especially by the religious right—and a series of scandals, including sexual abuse cases involving major religious organizations. The conclusion of the Cold War, which had previously reinforced a cultural association between religious identity and patriotism, also contributed to the erosion of religious influence. Additionally, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—carried out by extremists invoking religious rhetoric—further complicated public attitudes toward religion, intensifying skepticism about its societal role.<sup>2</sup>

### **Religion vs. Spirituality**

Spirituality and religion are frequently addressed in relation to one another, they reflect distinct ways of comprehending the holy or divine. Organized systems of belief with set doctrines, customs, and customs that are adhered to by a community are referred to be religions. It is institutionalized, systematic, and frequently accompanied by customs and moral standards. Conversely, spirituality tends to be more individualistic and emphasizes firsthand encounters with the transcendent or divine. It stresses a sense of affiliation with a

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<sup>2</sup> Stausberg, M. (Ed.). (2024). *21st Century Theories of Religion*. Taylor & Francis.

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higher force or inner self but may not subscribe to any particular set of ideas<sup>3</sup>.

The line separating spirituality and religion in the American setting has drawn closer in the last many years. An increasing number of individuals now identify as "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR), reflecting a broader shift away from traditional religious institutions toward more personalized and independent spiritual practices. A variety of social, cultural, and historical influences have been cited as contributing to this evolving trend.<sup>4</sup> Numerous factors are blamed for this trend, such as growing secularism, discontent with religious organizations, and the popularity of alternative religions like yoga, mindfulness, and meditation<sup>5</sup>. These activities, rather than adhering to a rigid set of religious laws, frequently place an emphasis on emotional health and personal development.

The New Age movement, which encourages personal spiritual growth without necessarily adhering to a particular religion, and the expanding impact of Eastern ideologies have also influenced spirituality in the American setting<sup>6</sup>. As a result, people now understand spirituality in a more flexible and individualized way, selecting practices that are consistent with their own values. Because of this, American spirituality is typically eclectic, taking cues from many traditions but frequently rejecting the dogmatic framework of beliefs.<sup>7</sup>

Pakistani society, on the other hand, usually does not make as clear a distinction between spirituality and religion. The predominant religion in Pakistan, Islam, embraces both the spiritual (Sufism) and religious facets of life. In Islam, religious rituals like prayer, fasting, and almsgiving are not only considered obligatory but also means of achieving spiritual development. Indeed, many Pakistanis' religious rituals have historically had a spiritual component due to the influence of Sufism, a mystical offshoot of Islam<sup>8</sup>. Sufism places a strong emphasis on developing a close relationship with God, frequently via poetry, meditation, and saint devotion<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Zinnbauer, B. J., Pargament, K. I., & Scott, A. B. (1999). The emerging meanings of religiousness and spirituality: Problems and prospects. *Journal of Personality*, 67(6), 889-919.

<sup>4</sup> Fuller, R. C. (2001). *Spiritual, but not religious: Understanding unchurched America*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Roof, W. C. (1993). *A generation of seekers: The spiritual journeys of the baby boom generation*. HarperSanFrancisco.

<sup>6</sup> King, U. (1997). *Spirituality: Transformation in a global context*. Religion, 27(3), 263-276.

<sup>7</sup> Ernst, C. (1997). *The Shambhala guide to Sufism*. Shambhala Publications.

<sup>8</sup> Schimmel, A. (1975). *Mystical dimensions of Islam*. University of North Carolina Press.

<sup>9</sup> Ernst, C. (1997). *The Shambhala guide to Sufism*. Shambhala Publications.

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In contrast to the widening split in the United States, where many people seek spirituality outside of conventional religious organizations, Pakistani society integrates spirituality within religion. For instance, while meditation is a spiritual practice that can be used by both Americans and Pakistanis, an American may practice it within the context of mindfulness or personal well-being, while a Pakistani may do it within the religious context of Sufi practices meant to establish a connection with Allah<sup>10</sup>.

### **Role of Religion in Daily Life**

According to a comprehensive study by the Pew Research Center, religion has a noticeable influence on the everyday lives of Americans. Individuals identified as highly religious tend to experience greater levels of life satisfaction, are more likely to participate in volunteer activities, spend increased time with extended family, and show higher levels of engagement within their communities. These patterns are observable across religious denominations, including within specific traditions—such as among devout versus less observant Catholics.

Interestingly, these findings remain valid even after accounting for a wide range of demographic factors such as age, education level, income, marital status, parental status, and geographical location. However, in areas like health awareness, environmental consciousness, and interpersonal behavior, highly religious individuals show similar patterns to their non-religious counterparts. This suggests that while religion may shape some social behaviors and values, other domains of daily life are influenced by broader cultural or personal factors.

These insights emerge from the U.S. Religious Landscape Study, which draws on a nationally representative survey. The study's foundation lies in data collected from more than 35,000 telephone interviews conducted in 2014, along with a follow-up from 3,278 members of the Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel—a probability-based panel designed to reflect the U.S. adult population. Participants were surveyed online and by mail, ensuring a diverse and inclusive sample.

Funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and supported by the Lilly Endowment Inc., the study aimed to look beyond traditional religious measures such as church attendance, daily

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<sup>10</sup> Esposito, J. L. (1998). *Islam: The straight path*. Oxford University Press.



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prayer, and belief in God. Instead, it explored how Americans integrate—or choose not to integrate—religious principles and worldviews into their everyday actions, decisions, and social expressions.

One key element of the study focused on identifying what Americans consider to be the core components of a religious or moral life. Respondents were asked to evaluate the importance of 16 different beliefs and behaviors—such as faith in God, gratitude, forgiveness, and honesty—and rate them as either "essential," "important but not crucial," or nonessential to being a moral person or a practicing Christian or "not important" to what their religion means to them personally. 86% of Christians say that their belief in God is "vital" to their Christian identity, making it their top priority.

Findings from a comprehensive survey by the Pew Research Center reveal that belief in God remains central to the Christian identity in the United States, with approximately 86% of Christians affirming it as the most defining aspect of their faith.

Beyond belief in a higher power, other ethical values play a vital role in shaping how Christians view their religion. A significant portion of respondents consider gratitude (71%), forgiveness (69%), and truthfulness (67%) to be essential to living a Christian life. In contrast, only a minority emphasized practices such as church attendance (35%), dressing modestly (26%), environmental responsibility (22%), and Sabbath observance (18%) as fundamental to their religious identity.

The survey extended its scope to include non-Christian and religiously unaffiliated Americans, asking them what they regard as necessary for being a moral individual. Interestingly, honesty (58%) and gratitude (53%) were also top priorities for these groups, indicating a shared moral foundation across different worldviews, irrespective of formal religious affiliation.

A key insight from the data is the alignment between religious or moral convictions and actual behavior. Those who identify certain values as core to their faith are far more likely to embody those behaviors in everyday life. For instance, among Christians who consider supporting the poor to be a vital religious obligation, nearly 60% reported having donated time, money, or goods to charitable causes in the previous week. Conversely, only 42% of those who did not view this as essential engaged in similar charitable acts.

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This pattern is replicated across other domains. Christians who believe that living a healthy lifestyle, making ethical consumer choices, or caring for the natural environment are part of their faith are significantly more likely to act on these beliefs. These individuals tend to exercise regularly, consider fair labor practices when purchasing goods, and take proactive steps to recycle or reduce waste. On the other hand, Christians who do not associate such behaviors with their faith are less likely to engage in these practices.

### **Understanding religious pluralism and social harmony**

Contrarily, religious tolerance is recognizing each person's and every group's freedom to practice their own faith, regardless of how different it may be from the majority or mainstream religion. Tolerance emphasizes on how these distinctions are managed within a society, whereas religious pluralism highlights the existence of several faiths.<sup>11</sup>

Religious diversity has been a foundational aspect of American society since the nation's establishment. The United States Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, granting individuals the right to practice their faith independently and without governmental interference. As a result, many other religious traditions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, have found a home in the United States. Because of this diversity, there is now a culture that not only accepts but also celebrates religious plurality. Diana Eck<sup>12</sup> emphasizes that because of the nation's dedication to the idea of religious freedom, conversation and engagement between many religious communities are hallmarks of American religious pluralism. Even though pluralism is legally acknowledged, there are variations in tolerance of religion in the United States. Recent developments in international politics and internal unrest have contributed to an increase in religious prejudice, especially directed towards Muslims<sup>13</sup>. Despite these obstacles, American culture has typically attempted to promote acceptance and tolerance of religious pluralism through civil rights campaigns and legal protections.<sup>14</sup>

Pakistan, on the other hand, has a different stance on religious tolerance and plurality

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Eck, D. L. (2001). *A new religious America: How a "Christian country" has become the world's most religiously diverse nation*. HarperSanFrancisco..

<sup>12</sup> Eck, D. L. (2001). *A new religious America: How a "Christian country" has become the world's most religiously diverse nation*. HarperSanFrancisco.

<sup>13</sup> Pew Research Center. (2017). *U.S. Muslims concerned about their place in society, but continue to believe in the American dream*. Pew Research Center.

because of its Islamic republican heritage. The official state religion is Islam, and legislation and social values are greatly influenced by Islamic ideas. Although there are religious minorities in Pakistan, including Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs, these groups frequently encounter obstacles to their freedom of religion practice.<sup>15</sup> The country's blasphemy laws and other constitutional clauses favor the majority Muslim population while occasionally marginalizing non-Muslim communities. Riaz<sup>16</sup>, these legislative frameworks frequently obstruct religious pluralism and restrict the room for candid discussions between various religious communities, especially when paired with social influences.

Sufism has historically contributed to Pakistan's embrace of a more tolerant attitude toward religion. Sufi traditions place a strong emphasis on accepting, loving, and tolerating everyone, irrespective of their religious background. People of various faiths visit Sufi shrines, which act as spiritual hubs where religious lines are frequently blurred<sup>17</sup>. However, the influence of Sufi patience has slightly decreased and intolerance of religion has increased with the growth of traditional views of Islam in recent decades.<sup>18</sup>

The way pluralism is woven into the national identities of Pakistan and the United States differs. The full acceptance of religious pluralism is made more difficult by Pakistan's stronger ties to Islam than with the United States, which advocates pluralism as a tenet of its democracy. Notwithstanding these distinctions, religious tolerance is a difficult issue for all cultures since conflicts between the majority and minority faiths can occur in a variety of settings.<sup>19</sup>

### **Religious and Spiritual Institutions**

Institutions of religion are structured systems of devotion and worship to a higher power, centered around rituals, beliefs, and practices. They are important pillars in the cultural and social lives of their adherents, usually having a formal place of worship, an organized hierarchy, and specified teachings. Spiritual institutions prioritize personal spiritual growth over group rituals and doctrine, emphasizing individual relationships with the divine

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<sup>14</sup> Casanova, J. (1994). *Public religions in the modern world*. University of Chicago Press.

<sup>15</sup> Malik, I. H. (2002). *Religious minorities in Pakistan*. Minority Rights Group International.

<sup>16</sup> Riaz, A. (2008). *Faithful education: Madrassahs in South Asia*. Rutgers University Press.

<sup>17</sup> Schimmel, A. (1975). *Mystical dimensions of Islam*. University of North Carolina Press.

<sup>18</sup> Zaman, M. Q. (2002). *The Ulama in contemporary Islam: Custodians of change*. Princeton University Press.

<sup>19</sup> Malik, I. H. (2002). *Religious minorities in Pakistan*. Minority Rights Group International.

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or the holy, even though they are frequently less structured.<sup>20</sup>

Religious organizations, particularly Christian churches, have long been important in forming social norms and offering social services in the United States. In addition to being houses of worship, churches have served as community hubs providing healthcare, education, and support for equitable treatment initiatives. The Civil Rights Movement of 1960s, which was spearheaded by religious leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., serves as an example of how influential religious institutions are in American society and politics<sup>21</sup>. Nonetheless, the function of conventional religious organizations is changing as American society grows increasingly secular and the number of people who identify as religious is declining. Meditation centers and holistic health retreats are among the many places where individuals are looking for spiritual organizations or groups that emphasize enlightenment on a personal level<sup>22</sup>.

Across the United States, various spiritual communities provide support and guidance to those who see themselves as "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR), fostering nontraditional paths of personal and spiritual exploration. These organizations place less stress on doctrinal authority and hierarchical leadership, favoring flexibility. Eastern religious traditions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, frequently influence these spiritual places, which frequently practice mindfulness, meditation, and yoga. Spiritual institutions, in contrast to traditional religious institutions, provide individuals the means to explore their own journeys of faith by emphasizing personal experience over group rituals<sup>23</sup>.

Islam is the most common religion in Pakistan, where Islamic institutions are strongly ingrained in every aspect of daily life. In addition to facilitating daily prayers, mosques function as important places of worship that foster social services and community connection<sup>24</sup>. Ulama, or religious leaders, are important figures in the community's interpretation of religious law and provision of spiritual direction. Furthermore, madrasahs, which have historically been important establishments for teaching Islamic theology and

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<sup>20</sup> Zinnbauer, B. J., Pargament, K. I., & Scott, A. B. (1999). The emerging meanings of religiousness and spirituality: Problems and prospects. *Journal of Personality*, 67(6), 889-919.

<sup>21</sup> King, U. (1997). *Spirituality: Transformation in a global context*. Religion, 27(3), 263-276.

Fuller, R. C. (2001). *Spiritual, but not religious: Understanding unchurched America*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>23</sup> Roof, W. C. (1993). *A generation of seekers: The spiritual journeys of the baby boom generation*. HarperSanFrancisco.

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jurisprudence, are frequently used to deliver religious instruction<sup>25</sup>.

In Pakistan, Sufi shrines are significant spiritual hubs in addition to official religious organizations. Islamic mysticism, known as Sufism, highlights the pursuit of a personal and experiential bond with God, often nurtured through spiritual expressions like music, poetic verses, and meditative dance. Millions of people visit Sufi shrines, such as those dedicated to well-known saints like Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and Data Ganj Bakhsh, in search of spiritual benefits and healing. These establishments offer a place where people can participate in spiritual activities outside of the more traditional Islamic framework, blurring the boundaries between formal religious and personal spirituality<sup>26</sup>. Sufi shrines provide a more open atmosphere and frequently welcome people from all religious backgrounds, although orthodox mosques and madrasah may follow Islamic law more rigorously.<sup>27</sup>

Pakistani spiritual institutions frequently promote a sense of social belonging, in contrast to American spiritual institutions that typically emphasize individualism and self-empowerment. Community spiritual bonds are strengthened by saint veneration and group rituals like Sufi devotional music, or qawwali. The more individualistic philosophy that permeates Western spiritual institutions contrasts with this community side of spirituality.<sup>28</sup>

### **Religious and Spiritual Leaders**

Within well-established religious traditions, religious leaders occupy positions of power and provide direction to their communities on issues of religion, morality, and the practice of religion. Their capacity to perform religious rites and offer spiritual guidance, together with their understanding of sacred books, religious rules, and doctrines, are the usual sources of their authority. Although they are frequently connected to religious traditions, spiritual leaders typically place a greater emphasis on personal development and spiritual transformation. Their impact is usually less structured and formalized; it usually arises from their charm, spiritual understanding, or capacity to mentor others on their path to enlightenment.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Esposito, J. L. (1998). *Islam: The straight path*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>25</sup> Riaz, A. (2008). *Faithful education: Madrassahs in South Asia*. Rutgers University Press.

<sup>26</sup> Schimmel, A. (1975). *Mystical dimensions of Islam*. University of North Carolina Press.

<sup>27</sup> Ernst, C. (1997). *The Shambhala guide to Sufism*. Shambhala Publications.

<sup>28</sup> Gilmartin, D. (1988). *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the making of Pakistan*. University of California Press.

<sup>29</sup> Roof, W. C. (1993). *A generation of seekers: The spiritual journeys of the baby boom generation*.

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Religious authorities including pastors, the priests, religious leaders, and imams are crucial in forming the moral and spiritual compass of their congregations in the United States. Pastors and priests are frequently viewed in Christian societies as shepherds who provide direction on ethical and social problems in addition to questions of faith. Historically, a large number of religious leaders have taken part in social movements. Faith leaders have historically contributed to major social change efforts. One notable figure is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist pastor who emerged as a leading voice in the Civil Rights Movement by championing justice and racial equality through peaceful protest. His position as a figure of faith endowed him with moral authority that was respected by many social groups.

Spiritual leaders in the United States frequently appeal to a wider audience seeking individual spiritual improvement and often transcend particular religious affiliations. People who stress inner calm, mindfulness, and the link between spirituality and wellbeing, such as Eckhart Tolle and Deepak Chopra, have become quite popular. These leaders provide spiritual direction through publications, seminars, and media, focusing less on conventional religious activities and more on personal transformation<sup>30</sup>.

Religious authorities—ulama and imams in particular—have a lot of power in Pakistani Muslim communities. They are responsible for conducting the daily prayers, giving sermons, and interpreting Sharia law. Ulama are vital in educating the people about morals and religious issues since they are frequently regarded as the keepers of religious knowledge. Their understandings of religious texts have the power to impact both public policy and private life, and their authority is firmly anchored in Islamic tradition<sup>31</sup>. For instance, well-known religious leaders like Maulana Tariq Jameel have influence not only because of their theological expertise but also because of their capacity to uplift sizable crowds with sermons that prioritize morality, confession, and spiritual transformation<sup>32</sup>.

In Pakistan, a distinct kind of spiritual leadership is embodied by Sufi leaders, also known as pirs. These spiritual masters, who are connected to Sufi groups, lead their disciples

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HarperSanFrancisco.

<sup>30</sup> Fuller, R. C. (2001). *Spiritual, but not religious: Understanding unchurched America*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>31</sup> Esposito, J. L. (1998). *Islam: The straight path*. Oxford University Press.



along the road of mysticism and enlightenment. Sufi pirs are typically seen as spiritual leaders due to their charisma, spiritual insight, and supposed closeness to God, in contrast to the formal positions of imams or ulama. They are viewed as go-betweens who can assist their adherents in developing a closer relationship with God.<sup>33</sup> Sufi leaders have a great deal of power over local communities and frequently command sizable followings, therefore their influence transcends beyond religious activities and into the political and social arenas. People from every aspect of life go to the shrines of Sufi saints, such Baba Farid and Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, to seek spiritual healing and blessings.<sup>34</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Religious organizations in the United States are progressively adjusting to secularism and the rising trend toward private spirituality, in which spiritual leaders emphasize holistic well-being and personal growth although moral direction is still provided by pastors and imams. However, in Pakistan, religious organizations still have a big influence on both public and private life. Sufi leaders serve as a link between official religious practice and individual mysticism, while imams and ulama provide official interpretations of Islamic law. In the United States, there is a greater differentiation between spirituality and religion because individuals seeking self-realization frequently use nonreligious routes. The two worlds are more entwined in Pakistan, especially as a result of the impact of Sufi traditions that provide a mystical route inside Islam. However, spiritual and religious leaders are vital in establishing moral principles, promoting communal harmony, and tackling societal and personal issues in both societies. Spiritual and religious leaders serve a fundamental human need—guiding people and communities toward a greater purpose—even though the circumstances and ways in which they show their leadership may differ. Their impact is still changing as a result of societal shifts, illustrating the complex interplay between modernity, tradition, and the search for purpose in life.

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