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Channeling Islam: Religious Narratives on Pakistani Television and Their Influence on Pakistani Youth

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Abstract: Pakistan’s religious television programs have drawn significant attention in both academic and policy circles. However, there has been surprisingly little systematic analysis of their content and influence. This article shows that, although the televangelists featured on the Pakistani television channels present some of the most conservative views regarding the role of women and religious minorities in society and the role of Islam in governance, Pakistani television is an arena of contestation. The impact of the lively debates between televangelists on young viewers—over whom the ideological battles are being waged—is mixed. Findings from an original survey of Pakistani students and political activists suggest that young people in Pakistan watch religious shows only occasionally. Those

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that do, however, take them seriously. What leads young people to consume religion on television is a sense of social responsibility: that they are doing it not just for themselves, but also—and perhaps more importantly—for others, be it their families or communities.

Keywords: Islam, media, Pakistan, religion, televangelism, television, youth

Since its explosion in the early 2000s, Pakistani television has been both sharply criticized and lauded for its impact on Pakistani society. Some see it as a major contributor to religious extremism, while others as a solution to the extremist predicament. Leading historian Ayesha Jalal characterizes much of the content on Pakistani television channels as “conspiratorial puffery” directly responsible for the “Pakistani tendency for paranoia and violence.”¹ Alternatively, Pakistan’s former ambassador to the United States and United Kingdom, Maleeha Lodhi, deems Pakistan’s “energetic free media” an important source of the country’s resilience despite the numerous challenges.² Religious content on Pakistani television is troubling not only for liberal intellectuals but also for their Islamist counterparts. The latter have been disturbed by the liveliness and confrontation resulting from the conspicuous pursuit of higher ratings. The former expected that, being dominated by members of the educated middle class, the Pakistani media would assume a secular, pro-Western character. They overlooked that “a very considerable portion of the educated middle class is conservative and even Islamist by sympathy.”³

Observers across the ideological spectrum worry about the religious content on Pakistani television. However, there has been surprisingly little systematic study of what this content actually is and how it influences the Pakistani youth, over whom the ideological battles are being waged. This article seeks to shed light on these two questions. We examine the content of religious television programs in Pakistan and their impact on the ideas and behavior of young viewers. The article pays special attention to the role and rights of women and non-Muslims in society and the relationship between Islam and governance. In addition to the television programs, we examine the advertisements and public service announcements that accompany the religious content. The second part of the article describes the results of an original survey measuring the influence of religious programming on Pakistani youth. It probes the respondents’ perceptions of religious television channels, viewing habits, impressions of whether the messages disseminated through these channels are appropriate, and how much they believe their viewing habits influence their ideas and behavior.

This article contributes to the larger literature on the tensions within Pakistan’s “essentially plural society.”⁴ Our findings show that Pakistani television is an arena of contestation—a space of lively debates about religion and its role both in private

and public life. The liveliness does not mean the drowning of ultra-conservative views. But it does provide an opportunity for viewers of different leanings to find a voice that more closely reflects their views and to feel that their voice is being represented in the public arena. At the same time, religious content is not very popular among the surveyed Pakistani youths. Few of them watch religious programs. Those who do, however, take them seriously. Our findings reveal that what leads young people to consume religion on television is a sense of social responsibility: that they are doing it not just for themselves, but also—and perhaps more importantly—for others, be it their families or the community. Viewing religious television is perceived less as a mechanism for personal growth than a means of contributing to a collective good.

Methods

To explore the content and impact of religious television programs in Pakistan, this article uses a multi-method research design. It supplements qualitative content analysis of religious programs with statistical analysis of an original large-N survey. The content analysis is based on an extensive viewing of religious television programs in two cities in Pakistan: Islamabad and Hyderabad, Sindh Province.⁵ A total of seventeen channels were observed in this study.⁶ These were all of the channels that were registered by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority or accessible through cable service. The television programs examined in this article were primarily in the form of talk shows, where one or more “televangelists” shared their opinions with viewers. The term televangelist is used broadly to refer to private actors publically broadcasting their religious messages on television. Some of the show hosts or guests were trained clergymen, while others had informal religious education. They also included other professionals, such as doctors. Most of the leading televangelists were, in fact, not of Pakistani national origin. All of the speakers drew not only on their secular but also their religious expertise. The televised messages we analyze in this article are inspired by a combination of the speakers’ secular and religious ideas, whereby each made arguments and observations of real-life experiences through the lens of his/her interpretation of religious mandates. The study focuses on three salient issues—the role of women in society, the role of non-Muslims in society, and the role of religion in governance—and all televised opinions directly or indirectly related to these topics were included in the analysis.

How effective are the religious television shows in influencing the views and behaviors of the Pakistani youth? How likely are young viewers to pay attention to religious shows in the first place? In the second section of this article, we investigate the young viewers’ perceptions of religious television programs, their impressions of how appropriate the views broadcasted on religious shows are, and how much they think these shows actually influence their views and behavior. The

findings discussed in this section are based on an original survey conducted in Sindh Province, Pakistan. The survey consisted of two stages. The first survey was held at the University of Sindh, Jamshoro, among 139 students.⁷ The student respondents were selected to be representative of the university's different academic programs, including psychology, sociology, linguistics, philosophy, and microbiology. The researchers distributed the surveys (in paper form) in different classes, with instructors' consent. The survey took 10–15 minutes to complete. In order to expand the number and type of participants to include respondents across different social and economic classes, we also surveyed 48 young political activists during party-member training sessions across four different districts of Sindh province. These respondents represent members of 12 different political parties, which range in their ideological orientation.⁸ The total number of respondents is 187, with over 90% of the surveyed born after the year 1980.

Themes in Religious Television Programming

This section examines Pakistan's religious television programming. It focuses on three major themes: the role of women in society, the role of non-Muslims in society, and the role of religion in governance. We also investigate the advertisements and public service announcements that accompany the religious shows.

Role of Women in Society

The religious television programs included in this study were led predominantly by male speakers, who spoke extensively about how women should behave in their personal and social lives. The opinions discussed in these shows focused mainly on two areas: how women should dress and the conditions under which women could work. How men and women should relate to each other was a central theme across both issue areas.

A regular speaker on Peace TV, Dr. Zakir Naik,⁹ set the tone for the discussion of women's attire: that the *hijab*, or headscarf, should be the central part of a Muslim woman's dress. He claimed that a woman's whole body should be covered, with the exception of the hands.¹⁰ A speaker on the Madani channel was more specific: nine-year-old girls should be told to wear the *hijab* and 12-year-old boys should be told to stay away from girls.¹¹ Another speaker on Peace TV, Shaikh Assim Al Hakeem,¹² argued that makeup is unacceptable and a waste of money.¹³ On the Al-Huda channel, Dr. Muhammad Salah¹⁴ argued that women should not display their jewelry in public. He expressed that women should not show their gold or silver adornments to *non-Mohram*, or those who are not part of their immediate family. Islamic way of dress, according to Salah, does not permit jewelry, glittery scarves, flamboyant colors, perfumes, or tight clothes. He argued against beatification, claiming that plastic surgery would only be allowed in cases of deformity caused

by accidents or birth defects. According to him, plucking eyebrows, filling teeth, and getting tattoos are major sins in the eyes of God.¹⁵

When interviewed about the role of women in society, Ms. Amina Sajjad of Quran School agreed with the commentators quoted above that the Quran advises women not to display their adornments, other than what is naturally evident. She stressed that women should not draw attention to themselves. However, she disagreed with the male televangelists about beatification. Drawing on Prophet Mohammad's remark that the hand of a woman should look different than a man's, Sajjad argued that there is no harm in looking pretty if that is what a woman wants.¹⁶ While all speakers who addressed women's dress adopted conservative standards for what is appropriate, it was Ms. Sajjad, the only woman among the experts, who expressed that women themselves might have a choice in their appearance.

Opinions on women in the workplace were also divided. Some commentators were clearly opposed to the inclusion of women in the workforce, while others argued that women should be free to advance in their careers. Naik on Peace TV was in the former camp. He argued that "when all Muslim men die, only then can a Muslim woman appear on television."¹⁷ He claimed that it was the men's responsibility to provide financial security for women. A woman's father and brothers are obligated to provide for her before she is married. After marriage, the obligation is taken over by the woman's husband and sons.¹⁸ According to Naik, if a woman wants to share the financial responsibilities, she may only do so in proper *hijab*, while observing the mandates of *sharia*, or Islamic law.¹⁹ Similar to his opinions on women's attire, Naik's views on women in the workplace emphasized traditional gender roles. He claimed that Islam allows women to take relatively few professions, such as gynecology and teaching, and prohibits them from doing secretarial work, singing, dancing, and modeling.²⁰ Although modern professions like gynecology (specialized medicine) and modeling (a specific form of advertising) are relatively recent innovations, Naik framed their appropriateness as careers for women in terms of Islam, not traditional gender roles. He was concerned primarily with delineating a limited social sphere within which women could operate as workers or professionals. While they would ideally stay at home and perform domestic duties as wives, mothers, or daughters, they could take up a limited number of professions if they had no other choice. Even then, the *hijab* would act as a barrier to keep them safe from the gaze of the *non-Mohram*. Naik's concern for the separation of women and unrelated men was also evident in his opinions regarding workplace conversations between the sexes. He explained that women and men could talk to each other at the workplace, but that they should avoid unnecessary chatter, as there is always Satan between them. The presence of temptation requires preventive action. However, all of Naik's propositions about how to combat sexual temptation in modern life placed the burden of responsibility on the woman. Men were characterized as accountable for the protection of their wives, mothers, and daughters, but not for making professional life safer for women.

Other speakers on religious television shows, such as Javed Ahmad Ghamdi²¹ on Sama TV, presented alternatives to the traditional gender roles emphasized by Naik. Ghamdi argued that the reason why women have not played a vital role in Pakistani society is because they have historically been repressed. He claimed that women's station in life should not be confined to cooking, looking after the home, wearing the *hijab*, and struggling to flourish within four walls.²² According to Ghamdi, women can play an essential role in public life just as men do. The leader of the Quran School, an Islamic *Madrassah* in Islamabad, Amina Sajjad agreed with Javed Ghamdi. She joined the conversation in a phone interview and stated that, if half of the population of Pakistan was forced to stay at home, the country would regress. She provided examples from Lebanon and Egypt, where many women work and can choose whether or not to wear the *hijab*. She further explicated that, in the Battle of Uhud, one of the defining battles waged by early Muslims under the leadership of Prophet Mohammad, Umm Sulaym, a woman, fought with a dagger and protected the Prophet on the battlefield. Sajjad argued that, if a woman can fight in battle, she can be anywhere.²³ She specifically pointed out that women could be astronauts if they so desired. The emphasis on women's ability to become astronauts, a prestigious profession often regarded as the pinnacle of technical and physical achievement, indicates that one of the underlying issues at stake is male pride. By arguing that women can become astronauts, Sajjad was decoupling women's professional achievements from male failure, pointing out that women's success need not threaten men.

Sajjad and Ghamdi's defense of a woman's right to choose her own profession and pursue a career demonstrate the diversity of opinions surrounding gender within the sphere of religious television programs in Pakistan. Islam as a lived experience allows for conflicting interpretations. While Naik was able to draw on his knowledge of Islamic principles to argue for the preservation of traditional gender roles for women, Sajjad and Ghamdi used the same principles to arrive at a very different interpretation: that women can make their own choices about whether and how to join the workforce. The fact that Islam allows for multiple interpretations about women's role in public life is reflected on religious television shows in contemporary Pakistan.

Role of Non-Muslims in Society

The religious television programs that addressed the role of non-Muslims in society focused primarily on two issue areas: how Muslims should treat non-Muslims, and what it means to live in a multi-religious society. How televangelists and religious scholars portray non-Muslims on popular television programs is significant because of the plurality of religious affiliations and sectarian identities in Pakistan.

Religious telecasters addressed how Muslims should interact with non-Muslims when they encounter each other in everyday life. Dr. Muhammad Salah explained on the Al-Huda channel that Muslims have to deal kindly with Christians and Jews as long as they do not declare war against Muslims or ridicule the Prophet, God, and religion.²⁴ He said that Muslims should preserve their identity and beliefs and protect their religion. According to Salah, this means that Muslims should make it clear that they will not celebrate Christmas or any other non-Muslim religious holiday, and will not attend church services and funerals. However, he emphasized that paying condolences during a funeral and congratulating non-Muslims on happy occasions are permissible. He added that Muslims could share the same plate with non-Muslims.²⁵ Another speaker on Haq TV held that a Muslim could pray in the house of a non-Muslim as long as the prayer place is *paak* (clean).²⁶

Opinions regarding quotidian engagements with non-Muslims emphasized the permissibility of inter-faith friendships so long as the believer's Muslim identity is secure. The televangelists' concern for preserving Muslim identity when one encounters a non-Muslim led some commentators to underscore what they saw as the superiority of Islam over other religions. Bilal Philips²⁷ compared Islam with Catholicism and discussed how the two religions differed in terms of whether religious leaders could marry. He argued that, because Catholic priests are not allowed to marry, some of them sexually abused children. He concluded that the prohibition of marriage leads to satanic deeds.²⁸ Philips characterized the Catholic Church as a place of sexual abuse to support his claim that Islam, as a religion, is superior to Christianity.

Other televangelists sought to appropriate what they saw as the "correct" parts of Christianity into the Islamic tradition. Ahmet Deedat²⁹ on Peace TV argued that Islam existed since the creation of the first man on earth, and that all those who followed Jesus until the arrival of the Quran were Muslims. He further claimed that Jesus himself was Muslim by birth. Christianity as such did not exist until it was corrupted by some of the followers of Jesus.³⁰ Naik argued that every human is Muslim by birth. Some choose other religions as they grow up because of social influences. Naik quoted from the Bible, "Thou shall have no God beside me," and argued that it is *kufir* (unbelief) to claim that Jesus, son of Mary, is also the son of God.³¹

The televangelists also discussed the differences between Hinduism and Islam. They emphasized that idol worship is strictly forbidden in Islam. Abdur Raheem Green³² on Peace TV argued that those who worship idols and drink alcohol are far from Allah.³³ When deliberating the differences between Islam and Hinduism, Sheikh Ammar Amonette³⁴ also claimed that the Quran only allows for the worship of Allah, and that the worship of pictures, images, idols, or any other man-made item is prohibited.³⁵ Naik was asked during his talk if God comes to earth in the guise of a human. He responded that many Hindu scholars believe that God sends

avatars in the form of prophets. However, as the creator of man, God does not need to take human form.³⁶ Yusuf Estes³⁷ also addressed the supremacy of Islam by arguing that, unlike other holy books, the Quran has retained its originality. He argued that all authentic religious scriptures agree that there is only one God, and that a final prophet (Muhammad) was destined to arrive.³⁸

Islam's presumed supremacy over all other religions was also portrayed in sermons about the concept of universal Islamic brotherhood. Naik argued that relationships based on region, caste, and blood can only lead to a limited form of brotherhood, whereas Islam believes in a universal bond between believers. He claimed that "humans are born in groups to be distinguished not despised," therefore respect for each other cannot be given on the basis of color, sex, or region of origin.³⁹ He quoted from the Prophet's last sermon: "the more one is *muttaqi* (pious) and God-conscious, the better one is than his fellows." The only metric by which to judge one against another is by his or her piety.⁴⁰ Other speakers disagreed. Amina Sajjad claimed that Islam does not rate anyone superior or inferior: "All are equal in the eyes of Allah. It is not Islamic to compare one's religion with another's to prove one's own as the best."⁴¹ She argued that Muslims need to take the feelings of people of other faiths into account when comparing Islam to their religion. Muslims would be hurt if others tried to impose the superiority of their religion. Therefore, Muslims should abstain from doing the same.⁴²

The channel Al Rehman Al Rahim made a special effort to promote religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue. It focused on disseminating moral lessons about equality, cleanliness, and building a better Pakistan. In a program aired on Al Rehman Al Rahim, Naik said that, if someone saves a human being, regardless of color, creed, or religion, it is equal to saving the entire humanity.⁴³ The channel also frequently broadcasted select quotes from the Quran, Sunnah, and Hadith that emphasized humanitarianism, peaceful co-existence, and overcoming sectarian differences.

Al Rehman Al Rahim also aired the proceedings of a conference on "Interfaith Cooperation and Protection of Human Rights and Dignity," held at the United Nations headquarters in New York. Participants represented different religious traditions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Al Rehman Al Rahim's anchorman, Farhan Ali Agha,⁴⁴ opened the program with the following words:

In many parts of [the] world, Muslims and non-Muslims are working together for a peaceful future. Unfortunately, a few hundred people disturb the peace and create terror and chaos in different parts of the world. The biggest reason of terrorism and chaos is lack of knowledge of one another's religions, lack of communication, and lack of understanding. And there is great, great need for interfaith dialogue. . . . Al Rehman Al Rahim tries to communicate, educate, and share the true spirit of Islam, teaching people to respect other people's beliefs, religions, and practices.⁴⁵

Al Rehman Al Rahim and PTV Home often played psalms in honor of the Prophet and other religious themes. Many of the psalms emphasized tolerance and pluralism. Salwa Derwent,⁴⁶ a recent convert to Islam, sang a psalm on PTV Home with the words “neither your God is any different, nor mine, these diverging paths, it is but something else.”⁴⁷ The pro-tolerance and pluralist messages in some religious television shows and psalms contrasted with the programs that argued for the superiority of Islam over all other religions.

Role of Religion in Governance

Religious television programs often ventured into political topics and discussed significant issues regarding power, leadership, and freedoms in a Muslim society. The televangelists particularly emphasized in their speeches the caliphate question, how to reconcile freedom of expression with respect for religion, the role of Pakistan among Muslim-majority states, political Islam, and the role of religious law (*sharia*) in administration, parameters of good leadership, and modern security institutions and warfare.

The caliphate question refers to the long-lasting debate on whether the Muslim world needs cross-national religious leadership in the form of a caliph. The issue has been raised repeatedly since the abolishment of the last widely recognized Sunni caliphate in Turkey by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1924. Some speakers on Pakistani religious television channels argued that a new caliphate should replace man-made economic and political systems, such as capitalism, communism, and democracy. The specifics of what kind of social, economic, and political institutions a caliphate would bring to replace the existing systems of governance were left vague. Sheikh Zayed Hamid,⁴⁸ for example, argued that the *Khilafat-e-Rashida* (rightly guided caliphate) of the early Islamic community provides an excellent model for good governance that could be adopted in the 21st century.⁴⁹ He claimed that secular economic and political institutions, such as Federal Reserve banking, capitalist and communist economic systems, and political democracy are *Kufr*, or un-Islamic. Darwinism, liberalism, secularism, women’s liberation, democracy, capitalism, and freedom of expression all received their share of criticism from Hamid for allegedly “enslaving” humanity. He branded democracy and capitalism as “Zionist Christian” inventions and blamed them for wars and genocide.⁵⁰ Another televangelist on ARY News proposed that one way out of the corruption of the secular world order is for Muslims to form a United States of Islam. Pakistan would be the prime candidate to lead all the Islamic states, since it was established as a homeland for Muslims in the region.⁵¹ Dr. Amir Liaqat⁵² argued on “Alim Online” that religion and worldly matters were not separate, and that Pakistan should be based on the “ideology of Prophet Muhammad.”⁵³ According to Sheikh Zayed Hamid, there is only one way out of the “dirty and evil” secular institutions: “Now only a miracle can save humanity from this system. The

way to success is to go back to Islamic judicial system.”⁵⁴ He also argued that the enactment of *sharia* should be accompanied with the reestablishment of the caliphate.

Sheikh Zayed Hamid’s characterization of secular systems of economic organization and political rule was based on his perception that Islamist political causes were discriminated against in the media: “Freedom of expression exists for blasphemy, for disrespecting the Prophet, but you cannot talk about the caliphate. Women can dress however they want, but not if they wear a headscarf. In France and other developed countries, women are not allowed to go to [state] institutions with their heads covered.”⁵⁵ Other speakers were also concerned about the coverage of Islam, Muslims, and Pakistan in the world media. Naik criticized the American media for its portrayal of Muslims and Pakistanis. He claimed that Muslims are often shown in American media outlets as terrorists. Meanwhile, no Hindus or Christians are targeted in this fashion. According to the Naik, global media has an anti-Muslim bias that needs to be corrected.⁵⁶

Numerous televangelists on Pakistan’s religious channels advocated for the idea that the Quran must lead Muslims in all facets of their lives, including in political life. Abdul Hakim Ali argued that the Quran is the constitution of Muslims. In it, every issue related to human life is addressed.⁵⁷ Because manmade laws often contradict with Islamic faith, they must be rejected. He gave the example of public drunkenness—if a person drinks publicly, state’s law enforcement agencies must detain him. According to Ali, these rules apply even if Muslims live in the West, because Prophet Muhammad was sent as a judge for the entire world.⁵⁸ According to some of the televangelists, implementing the Quran into daily life has its rewards. Maulana Nadvi argued that the Quran is a book of law that addresses every dimension of life. He compared Islamic law favorably to the current legal system in Pakistan. According to the Nadvi, *sharia* is superior because of two main reasons: it is based on divine law and is, therefore, everlasting; and it does not only punish offenders but also rewards those who obey the law. The rewards lie in being closer to God and in life after death. Because manmade law does not offer positive inducements for obeying rules, Nadvi deems it less effective than religious law.⁵⁹

Despite championing the benefits of religious law and administration over secular systems of rule, some televangelists were rather pragmatic in their approach to issues of law and order. According to the Mufti Sohail Raza Amjadi,⁶⁰ Muslims must obey traffic laws because they are in accordance with the *sharia*.⁶¹ Amjadi also opined on the appropriateness of Islamic ringtones on mobile phones and found them unacceptable: psalms and Quranic verses must not be used as ringtones because people take their phones to the bathroom.⁶² These examples indicate that speakers on Pakistani religious television shows often oscillate between maximalist demands for establishing a caliphate and making the *sharia* the only law of the land, and practical concerns of everyday life.

The religious telecasters spoke extensively about the role of punishment in Islam and how our knowledge of punishment in the afterlife could shape criminal justice in this world. The primary means by which the issue of punishment was addressed was through comparisons between heaven and hell (*Jannah* and *Dozakh*) and who is destined for which fate in the afterlife. Maulana Qadri⁶³ addressed his listeners with the following story:

God showed heaven to *Jibreel* (Gabriel), and he found it amazingly beautiful. Then God showed him the fencing around heaven, and *Jibreel* said to God, "How difficult it is to enter heaven. . ." Then God showed him hell, which *Jibreel* found horrendous. When God showed him the fencing around hell, *Jibreel* was taken aback and said, "God, it is so full of temptations, everyone would like to go there."⁶⁴

Following this story, Maulana Qadri went on to explain that "the world is a prison for those who are *mo'min* (believers) and heaven for those who are *kaafir* (unbelievers). If you abandon the so-called charms of life here in this world, God will offer you charms in heaven."⁶⁵ According to Qadri, good behavior in life requires delaying gratification, which is rewarded in the afterlife. Hell, on the other hand, is tempting, and the road to it is pleasurable. Qadri warned listeners of the Day of Judgment, when all will be wet, plunged in the sweat of their own sins. To avoid going to hell, one must believe in God, prophets, the Day of Judgment, and life after death. He reassured his audience that anyone who designs his life according to the teachings of the Quran and Allah is destined to go to *Jannah*.

Naik was asked about the rewards in heaven for pious Muslims. An audience member raised the issue of the *Hoors*, beautiful women who will be the partners of pious men in heaven, and asked if women will also have similar companions. Naik's response was revealing: since discussing such topics related to women are socially frowned upon, God too has avoided covering the issue in the Quran.⁶⁶ He emphasized that every man and woman would have partners in *Jannah*. Naik's unorthodox argument seems to suggest that God follows earthly decorum in the Quran and avoids conversations that might be too awkward for Muslims in Pakistan in the 21st century.

Other speakers also extensively discussed how justice would be delivered on Judgment Day followed by punishment. Dr. Momdou Muhammad argued on Peace TV that those who disobeyed Allah in their lives and pray for mercy cannot escape punishment unless God forgives them.⁶⁷ Abdul Rahim Green claimed that those who did not obey the *Sunnah* (the example of the Prophet) and Allah's will would be questioned on the Day of Judgement.⁶⁸ Shaikh Muqem Faizi on Peace TV said that Allah created life and death so people could perform good deeds: "Collect good deeds for the day of judgment which will come soon. Whoever does a small good act will be rewarded, and whoever does an evil act will face its consequences. . . People who drink and don't fear Allah will be punished in their graves and on the Day of Judgment."⁶⁹

Warnings regarding the Day of Judgment and punishment in hell are not merely significant for believers who are worried about the afterlife. Instead, they have consequences for how the televangelists think criminal punishments should be carried out on earth. Maulana Nadvi explained that there are severe punishments in Islam that prevent Muslims from perpetrating crimes and sins. He gave the example of punishment for *zina* (adultery) in Islam: for a man, the punishment is to be buried to his waist and to be stoned to death. The only difference for a woman is that she would be buried to her chest before being stoned.⁷⁰ Nadvi quoted an example of severe punishment from the time of Prophet Muhammad. A woman was caught stealing, and her punishment was the amputation of her hand. One of the Prophet's aides requested that she be pardoned. The Prophet ordered people to gather at a nearby mosque and said to them: "if Muhammad's Fatima had stolen she too would have been given the same punishment."⁷¹ Nadvi went on to explain that it is severity of punishments in Islam that prevents crime. He argued that, if Islamic law was implemented fully, there would be no theft.

The televangelists also addressed the qualities of a good Muslim leader. Hussain Yee⁷² argued that a Muslim leader should be fair and should follow *sharia* and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). The Muslims who are in authority must seek to please Allah and help other Muslims. They have to be good Muslims first, remember whom they are serving, and not look down on other people.⁷³ Naik elaborated that a good Muslim is one that is near to God. To be able to stop oneself from committing sin, to be able to pass one's youth in prayer and abstain from earthly temptations is to follow the prophetic deeds.⁷⁴ The televangelists made a case for imitating the Prophet in order to find the right path. Sohaib Bassam⁷⁵ on Huda TV echoed the other speakers when he argued for the value of personal moderation. A good Muslim must be able to resist cruelty, rudeness, violence, and instinctual desires, such as eating, drinking, and sex. As Prophet Muhammad showed, human desires that are not prohibited by the Quran should only be pursued in moderation.⁷⁶

The religious television hosts and speakers also discussed the role of *jihad* (struggle) in Islam. Naik on Peace TV explained that the term *jihad* has multiple meanings in Islam. It means to struggle against any oppression, whether it is an external enemy or one's own self. Naik posited that participating in the external *jihad* only becomes a duty if a legitimate caliph orders it. He claimed that contemporary *da'wat* (invitations) for jihad through the use of media are misconceptions.⁷⁷ Jaffar Idris⁷⁸ on channel Al Rehman Al Rahim emphasized the importance of exploring peaceful conflict resolution before taking up arms. He claimed that, even if the enemy damages a Muslim's property and kills his children, the Muslim must first try to resolve the conflict peacefully. If attempts at peace fail, then there can be war. He referenced the example of Pakistan fighting together with the

United States in Afghanistan against the Soviet forces as a case of contemporary *jihad*.⁷⁹

Other speakers did not agree with the assertion that wars in the service of nation-states can be treated as *jihad*. While one male speaker claimed that he would feel proud if all of his children joined the Pakistani Army and Air Force, and became *shaheed* (martyrs),⁸⁰ others argued that they could not be regarded as martyrs. According to Mufti Muhammad Naeem,⁸¹ martyrdom only takes place when one fights against the enemies of the religion. If one dies while fighting for personal or national interests, he cannot be a martyr.⁸²

Advertisements and Public Service Announcements

The religious television channels and shows ran a number of advertisements and public service announcements that are of interest to this study. Some advertisements focused on the theme of *zakat*, or alms giving. The United Islamic Aid for the poor received airtime to promote its services. The ads announced that *zakat* could be donated in Pounds, Euros, or Dollars. They also specified that donations could be made through the Islamic Bank of Britain and the Islamic Center.⁸³

Public service announcements focused on praising Islam, the Quran, and Arabic language. Peace TV ran short segments arguing that social ills such as suicide, divorce, cat calling (eve-teasing), and robbery are rampant across the world because people are distant from Islam. Naik used the metaphor of being in darkness to describe what being away from Islam is like.⁸⁴ Huda TV and Peace TV aired recitations of the Quran and Naat (poems praising Prophet Muhammad) each day.⁸⁵ Other advertisements promoted the learning of Arabic, particularly for children. Multiple channels ran Arabic language classes and organized Naat and Quran recitation (*Qira'at*) competitions.

Impact of Religious Television Shows on Viewers

In this section, we investigate the viewers' perceptions of religious television programs, their impressions of how appropriate the views broadcasted on religious shows are, and how much they think these shows actually influence their views and behavior. Much of the existing literature on the effects of televised content on viewers has, thus far, been confined to an American context.⁸⁶ This article extends the study of the media's role in shaping public opinion and, more specifically, the effect of televised religious content on viewer attitudes to the South Asian context. Our survey of students and young political activists provides a broad picture of how effective religious television shows are in influencing the Pakistani public.

Most of the surveyed students reported watching television very frequently: 83% of them watch television more than once a week, and over half of the respondents watch it every day. While most students (80%) watch religious TV shows,

less than half prefer them over alternative programs (40%). A high percentage believes that religious programs are beneficial to the public (79%). Roughly half (52%) of the respondents reported having parents or other family members who asked them to watch religious shows.

Students who do not watch religious programs reported that they either get religious content elsewhere (53%), that they think these programs are misleading their viewers (28%), or that they are boring (19%). Those who do watch religious shows do so quite infrequently. Fewer than 6% watch them every day, while 30% watch them every week, 42% every month, and 23% once a year. Students' preferences for religious TV shows span a wide variety. One in three reported being interested in programs that have a general focus on the principles of Islam. Others were interested in topics such as the rights of women (12%), how to treat non-Muslims (9%), and how to pray (6%). When asked to rate the extent to which they believe religious programs influence their ideas about how the world works, over 18% responded with "completely" (5 out of 5, with 1 indicating "not at all" and 5 "completely"). About 14% responded with a four out of five, while 30% was neutral (3/5). One-fourth of the respondents believe these programs do not influence their ideas about how the world works (2/5), and 15% believes their ideas are not affected at all (1/5). When asked to rate the extent to which they believe religious programs influence their behavior, the results were more evenly distributed. One-fourth of the respondents believe that the programs influenced their behavior completely (5/5), 18% agreed that they were influenced (4/5), 22% were neutral (3/5), 18% responded that their behaviors were not affected by religious programs (2/5), and 19% reported not being affected at all (1/5). While the majority, 44%, expressed that religious programs enable them to learn more about Islam, 20% pointed out that these shows make them question their faith.

Political activists were also avid television watchers, with 80% reporting daily viewing, and almost all the others watching TV at least once a week. Roughly two-thirds of the activists reported watching religious shows, but only one-third preferred these shows to the alternatives. A clear majority, 77%, believes that religious programs are beneficial to the public. Fewer than half (40%) have parents or other family members urging them to watch these programs. Most activists who do not watch religious programs reported that they believe these programs are misleading (63%). The rest were evenly divided between those who found them boring and those who receive their religious content elsewhere.

The polled political activists are intermittent viewers of religious programs. Only one activist reported watching religious shows every day, and one-third of the respondents reported watching them every week. The remaining respondents only watch religious programs once a month or year. Those political activists who watched religious shows did so for a variety of reasons. About one in four reported watching these shows in order to learn how to pray (27%). An equal number of respondents' interests focused on principles of Islam and the rights

of women (14% each). Slightly more were interested in how Muslims should treat non-Muslims (16%). When asked to rate the extent to which they believe religious programs influence their ideas about how the world works, fewer than 13% said “completely” (5/5). Only 11% responded with a four out of five, while 36% was neutral (3/5). Seventeen percent of the respondents expressed that these programs do not influence their ideas about how the world works (2/5), and more than 23% believe their ideas are not affected at all (1/5). When asked to rate the extent to which they believe religious programs influence their behavior, the distribution of the results resembled a bell curve. Only 7% believe that the programs influenced their behavior completely (5/5), 26% agreed that they were influenced (4/5), another 26% was neutral (3/5), and yet another 26% responded that their behaviors were not affected by religious programs (2/5). Fifteen percent reported not being affected at all (1/5). While many, 45%, expressed that religious programs enable them to learn more about Islam, 18% said that they learn nothing new.

Using the results of the survey, we examined why some students and political activists turned to religious television programs, while others did not. The descriptive statistics clearly indicate that the respondents’ opinions on Pakistani religious television shows vary widely. Some find them to be informative and valuable, others redundant or misleading. Young people in Pakistan have means other than television to access religious information, such as mosques and family. Why do some of them turn to televangelists for religious knowledge, while others do not?

We explore this question with an ordinary least-squares regression analysis. Our exploratory model tests the impact of the following on the frequency of religious show viewing: age, gender, the respondent’s field of study, whether the respondent believes religious TV shows benefit the public, and whether the respondent is asked by a family member to watch religious shows. The existing U.S.-focused studies of the television’s effects on viewer attitudes largely assume that television-viewing habits are mainly driven by an individual’s personal preferences or attributes.⁸⁷ Our model includes three major factors that may drive individual preferences—age, gender, and field of study. However, considering Pakistan’s cultural context, we also identify two potential social drivers of behavior—family influence and public benefit. Family life plays a critical role in the lives of many Pakistanis, and it is typical for multiple generations to live under the same roof.⁸⁸ When the television set is placed in the common room (as it often is),⁸⁹ family members may influence each other’s viewing habits. Young people are typically at the receiving end of influence due to age hierarchy. Among the most influential household actors in everyday matters, such as television watching, are older women, who may be considered *siyarni* (wise and experienced) and “vested with the authority to make decisions that are binding.”⁹⁰ We hypothesize that social (or non-self-centered) factors—namely, a sense of responsibility to the family and to society at

large—play a significant role in influencing the religious television-viewing habits of Pakistan’s youth.

The dependent variable, “Viewing Frequency,” is an ordinal variable that takes a value between 1 and 5 (1- Never watch religious TV, 2- Watch it a few times a year, 3- Watch it a few times a month, 4- Watch it a few times a week, 5- Watch it every day). Age is a continuous variable equal to the respondent’s age. We used a simplified gender variable that is a dummy, male or female. The variable “Field of study” is also a dummy, measuring the difference between studying social sciences versus natural sciences. The variable “Public Benefit” measures whether the respondent believes that religious shows are beneficial to the public at large with a “yes” or “no” question. “Family Influence” measures if the respondent was asked by a family member to watch a religious television show, which is also a “yes” or “no” question. The results are summarized in the table below.

The results of the model show that “Public Benefit” and “Family Influence” are statistically significant, with a positive impact on the frequency of religious television show viewing. Respondents who believe that religious shows are beneficial to the public at large are more likely to view them regularly. This demonstrates that religious shows are not consumed for purely personal reasons, such as self-development or entertainment. It is an activity strongly driven by a sense of collective good. The more one sees religious programs as having an impact on the public, the more he or she is likely to view them. This finding is also supported

TABLE 1. Factors Influencing Religious TV Watching

Viewing Frequency (Dependent Variable)

Age	-.0076 (.0119)
Gender	.1694 (.1688)
Field of study	.081 (.1759)
Public Benefit	1.1541*** (.1916)
Family Influence	.3866** (.1624)
Observations	149

Note. * Significant at the 0.05 level; ** significant at the 0.01 level; *** significant at the 0.001 level.

Standard errors are in parentheses below the coefficients.

by the impact of family encouragement on viewing habits. Respondents whose family members encourage them to watch religious programs are significantly more likely to view them more regularly. Our findings reveal that religious TV viewing is a social act—one is more likely to do it when one's family members encourage the behavior. Our model also shows that age and gender differences, as well as the respondents' field of study, have no statistically significant effect on religious television-viewing habits. Men and women of diverse ages and educational backgrounds do not differ systematically in the frequency with which they view religious television programs (Table 1).

Conclusion

Religious television in Pakistan is a growing industry. Televangelists who use airwaves to establish a following and reach their target audience have entered the marketplace of religious ideas previously dominated by more traditional clerics. Many of them, such as Texas-based Yusuf Estes or Malaysian national Hussain Yee, are not of Pakistani national origin. Although many have commented on the significance of religious television shows in Pakistan, existing studies have not addressed the content and effectiveness of the new medium. This article partially fills that gap in the literature by providing a bird's eye view of the providers, the messages, and the recipients of religious programming in Pakistan.

Overall, televangelists on Pakistani television represent some of the most conservative views on the role of women and religious minorities in society and the role of Islam in governance. Their messages emphasize traditional gender roles and place the burden of public propriety on women. It is difficult to view most televangelists as proponents of multiculturalism or interfaith coexistence. Most are more concerned with demonstrating the superiority of Islam over other religions than with valuing religious diversity in its own right. The televangelists are also more likely to believe that their interpretation of Islam should be an integral part of governance, and that their definition of public morality should be supported with the use of state power.

Despite the overall conservative attitude displayed in religious television programs, there are dissenting views among both televangelists themselves as well as among other religious experts. Some argue that women should have a more decisive voice over how they dress, that half of the population cannot be expected to abandon modern careers and reside indoors, and that the Prophet himself upheld women's rights. Some religious show hosts extol the value of inter-faith dialogue and coexistence. They see Muslims, and Pakistani Muslims in particular, as potential leaders of multi-faith communities. Many televangelists are also intensely pragmatic in their application of *sharia* to real-world problems.

The lively debates on religious television shows receive a tepid reaction from their target audience, especially the youth. Most of our respondents do not watch

these shows on a regular basis but are aware of their existence. However, those who do watch religious shows tend to take them seriously. Our most important finding about the reception of these shows by the young people in Pakistan is that they perceive watching religious television as a social act. Young Pakistanis are more likely to watch religious shows when their family members ask them to do so. Frequent viewers also believe that they are benefitting the public by paying attention to the televangelists.

Further research on the religious shows in Pakistan could shed more light on the sources and audiences of these programs. The type of religious messages that are circulated on television are linked not only to the televangelists themselves but also to the television channels that choose to air specific show hosts, many of whom are not of Pakistan national origin. Research into the ownership and community links of religious channels would help to illuminate the social actors behind the new wave of religious television.⁹¹ Further research on how Pakistan nationals not represented in our sample, such as residents of rural areas and the elderly, absorb the religious content on television would also contribute to our understanding of contemporary Pakistani media and culture.

NOTES

1. Ayesha Jalal, "The Past as Present," in *Pakistan: Beyond the "Crisis State,"* ed. Maleeha Lodhi, (London: Hurst and Company, 2011), 7–8.

2. Maleeha Lodhi, "Introduction," in *Pakistan: Beyond the "Crisis State,"* ed. Maleeha Lodhi, (London: Hurst and Company, 2011), 2.

3. Anatol Lieven, *Pakistan: A Hard Country* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 230.

4. Paula R. Newberg, "Governing Pakistan," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 41, no. 4 (2014): 168. Also, see Rai Shakil Akhtar, *Media, Religion, and Politics in Pakistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

5. The viewing was conducted by four research assistants, all of whom were Pakistan nationals, between November 2009 and March 2010. The cities were selected for their diversity and political significance.

6. These channels are Peace TV Urdu, Peace TV English/Spirituality, ARY-Q TV, Geo News TV, ARY News, Haq, Noor TV, Al Rehman Al Rahim TV, Al-Hadi, Iqra, Labaik TV, Huda TV, PTV Home, A-TV, TV One, Sama TV, and Madani TV. Some of the channels listed here are dedicated religious channels, while others broadcast religious programs daily or weekly. Each city's cable television operators screen different channels. Several of these channels lacked the appropriate license from the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority. They are, however, included in this study because they are on the air and reach a significant number of Pakistani citizens.

7. The university was selected randomly from a list of Sindh's largest universities.

8. The following are the political parties from which the respondents were drawn: Awami Jhamuri Party (AJP), Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N), Pakistan Muslim League- Functional League (PML-F), Pakistani People's Party (PPP), Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP), Jeay Sindh Quami Mahaz (JSQM), Awami Workers Party Pakistan (AWPP), Sindh United Party (SUP), Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Muttahida Qami Movement (MQM), and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI).

9. A charismatic Indian cleric and television preacher, president of the Islamic Research Foundation in India, and founder of Peace TV channel, which specializes in comparative religion. He has been banned from entering the UK due to his controversial views.

10. Zakir Naik, "Rights of Women in Islam," Peace TV, January 23, 2010.

11. "Imaan ki Shakhain (The Branches of Faith)," Madani Channel, February 28, 2010.

12. A Saudi national known as one of Saudi Arabia's prominent propagators of Islam in English. His controversial views on homosexuality and women sparked student protests of his visit to a UK university in 2012, and the event was ultimately canceled.

13. Shaikh Assim Al Hakeem, Peace TV, February 2, 2010.

14. A U.S. citizen of Palestinian origin who had studied at the University of Al-Azhar in Egypt. In 2007, he was tried and acquitted of racketeering conspiracy for his alleged support of Hamas. He died in April 2016, at the age of 62.

15. Muhammad Salah, "Ask Huda," Al-Huda, January 27, 2010.

16. Interview with Amina Sajjad, Quran School, Islamabad, January 27, 2010.

17. Zakir Naik, "Dare to Ask," Peace TV, February 2, 2010.

18. Ibid.

19. Zakir Naik, "Dare to ask," Peace TV, January 29, 2010.

20. Zakir Naik, "Dare to Ask," Peace TV, February 2, 2010.

21. A reformist Pakistani scholar who publicly opposed Pakistan's blasphemy laws, at considerable personal risk. He was expelled from Jamaat-e-Islami in 1977 for his dissenting views and, in 2006, resigned from the Council of Islamic Ideology (a constitutional body responsible for providing legal advice on Islamic issues to the Pakistani government). He left Pakistan after learning about a plot to bomb his family's Lahore home.

22. J. A. Ghamdi, "Javed Ahmed Ghamdi [Part 1]," Sama TV, February 20, 2010.

23. Interview with Amina Sajjad, Quran School, Islamabad, January 27, 2010.

24. Salah, "Ask Huda," Al-Huda, January 28, 2010.

25. Ibid.

26. Unidentified Speaker, "Haq Time," Haq TV.

27. A Canadian preacher who lives in Qatar and was educated in Saudi Arabia and Wales.

28. Bilal Philips, "Empire of Deceit," Peace TV, January 16, 2010.

29. A South African Muslim missionary of Indian descent.

30. Ahmed Deedat, "Bible," Peace TV.

31. Zakir Naik, "Dare to Ask," Peace TV, February 2, 2010.

32. A British Salafi Muslim convert who became known for his speeches at the Hyde Park Speakers' Corner in London.

33. Abdur Raheem Green, "Culture, Confusion," Peace TV.

34. An imam at the Islamic Center of Virginia.

35. Shaikh Amonette Ammar, "Universal Quran," Huda TV, January 25, 2010.

36. Zakir Naik, "Universal Brotherhood," Peace TV English, January 16, 2010.

37. A Texas preacher who was named the "Islamic Personality of the Year" at the Dubai International Holy Quran Award ceremony in 2012.

38. Yusuf Estes, "Tell Us about Islam [Part III]," Peace TV, February 2, 2010.

39. Zakir Naik, "Universal Brotherhood."

40. Ibid.

41. Interview with Amina Sajjad, Quran School, Islamabad, January 27, 2010.

42. Ibid.

43. Naik, "Universal Brotherhood."

44. A Pakistani model, actor, and television anchor.

45. Farhan Ali Agha, "Interfaith," Channel Al Rehman Al Raheem, February 13, 2010.

46. A British singer whose recitation of *Naat* on PTV Home became viral on the Internet.

47. Salwa Derwent, *Na'at* Recitation, poetry by Babar A. Chandhri, PTV Home.

48. A Pakistani political commentator.

49. Zaid Hamid, "Khilafat-e Rashida [Episode 1]," I TV One, February 2, 2010.

50. Ibid.

51. Unidentified speaker, ARY News, January 30, 2010.

52. A Pakistani broadcaster and politician.

53. Amir Liaqat, "Alim Online," GEO News, January 31, 2010.

54. Hamid, "Khilafat-e Rashida [Episode 1]."

55. Ibid.

56. Zakir Naik, Peace TV, February 27, 2010.

57. Abdul Hakeem Ali, "External Message," Huda TV Online, January 25, 2010.
58. Ibid.
59. Maulana Abu Zafar Hussain Nadvi, "Islami Shariaat kay Asraat Insani Muaashrey per (Impact of Islamic Shariah on human society)," Peace TV Urdu, January 31, 2010.
60. A well-known Islamic personality with a large fan base, famous for his show "Khwabon Ki Tabeer."
61. Sohail Raza Amjadi, "Questions and Answers," Geo TV, December 30, 2011.
62. Ibid.
63. A Pakistan-born Canadian Islamic scholar of Sufism and professor of international constitutional law at the University of the Punjab.
64. Tahirul Qadri, "The Concept of Hell and Heaven," ARY-Q TV.
65. Ibid.
66. Naik, Peace TV Dubai.
67. Momdough Muhammad, "Words of Wisdom (On the Day of Judgment)," Peace TV Spirituality.
68. Abdur Raheem Green, "Culture, Confusion (On the Day of Judgment)," Peace TV.
69. Shaikh Muqem Faizi, Peace TV, February 27, 2014.
70. Maulana Abu Zafar Hussain Nadvi, "Islami Shariaat kay Asraat Insani Muaashrey per (Impact of Islamic Shariah on human society)," Peace TV Urdu, January 31, 2010.
71. Ibid.
72. A Malaysian national of Chinese descent who is the founder and president of Pertubuhan Al-Khaadem, a religious charity organization in Malaysia.
73. Hussain Yee, "The Muslim Rulers (On traits of a Muslim Leader)," Peace TV English.
74. Zakir Naik, "Those Who Are Dear to God," Peace TV.
75. A UK-based imam of Jordanian and Palestinian origin.
76. Imam Abu Suhaib Bassam, "Who Is Muhammad," Huda TV, January 26, 2010.
77. Naik, "Dare to Ask," Peace TV, January 29, 2010.
78. A Sudanese sharia advocate.
79. Jaffar Idris, "The Rational: Jihad, Suicide, and Revenge," Huda TV, January 26, 2010.
80. Unidentified Speaker, Al Rehman Al Rahim, February 7, 2010.
81. Head of the Jamia Binoria, an international Deobandi Islamic educational institute located in Karachi.
82. Mufti Muhammad Naem, "Shahadat," Geo TV, December 3, 2011.
83. Advertisements on Peace TV.
84. Naik, Peace TV.
85. Huda TV, December 12, 2009.
86. Matthew Levendusky, *How Partisan Media Polarize America* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2013); Shanto Iyengar, *Media Politics: A Citizen's Guide* (W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 2011); Natalie Jomini Stroud, *Niche News: The Politics of News Choice* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011); Diana C. Mutz and Byron Reeves, "The New Videomalaise: Effects of Televised Incivility on Political Trust," *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 1 (February 2005): 1–15.
87. Kevin Arceneaux and Martin Johnson, *Changing Minds or Changing Channels? Partisan News in an Age of Choice* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2013).
88. Hastings Donnan and Fritz Selier, *Family and Gender in Pakistan: Domestic Organization in a Muslim Society* (Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 1997).
89. Most Pakistanis, especially young people, do not have a separate television set in their bedroom.
90. Judi Aubel, *The Roles and Influence of Grandmothers and Men* (Washington, D.C.: United States Agency for International Development, 2011), 10.
91. New research is now beginning to examine Pakistan's post-2002 media environment: Elizabeth Bolton, "Khabarnaak: Satirizing Current Affairs Television," American Institute of Pakistan Studies Junior Scholars Conference, October 22, 2015.