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Islamic Religious Identity and Socio-Political Attitudes among University Students in Pakistan: A Revised Sociological and Islamic Studies Analysis

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Abstract
Islamic religious identity occupies a distinctive position in the social and cultural formation of Pakistani society, where religion is not confined to the private sphere but remains closely connected with family life, education, moral values, collective belonging, political discourse, and conceptions of citizenship. University students constitute a particularly significant social group within this context because higher education exposes young people to diverse intellectual traditions, political ideas, social networks, digital media, and competing interpretations of religion. This article examines the relationship between Islamic religious identity and socio-political attitudes among university students in Pakistan from an interdisciplinary perspective that brings together sociology and Islamic studies. Rather than treating religiosity as a single or uniform variable, the article conceptualizes Islamic identity as a multidimensional phenomenon involving belief, ritual practice, moral orientation, communal belonging, social responsibility, and political interpretation. It argues that religious identity can contribute simultaneously to political engagement, civic responsibility, social solidarity, democratic participation, and moral concern, while particular forms of exclusive or politicized identity may also be associated with intolerance, sectarian boundary-making, or restrictive understandings of citizenship. The article further explores the roles of family, educational institutions, peer networks, religious institutions, social media, and political discourse in shaping students' religious and socio-political orientations. The Islamic normative framework emphasizes justice, consultation, human dignity, accountability, moderation, and recognition of human diversity, suggesting that an Islamic conception of religious identity cannot be reduced to sectarian or partisan identification. The article concludes that the relationship between religiosity and socio-political attitudes among Pakistani university students is complex, contextual, and mediated by socialization processes. A more constructive understanding of Islamic identity requires connecting religious commitment with ethical citizenship, intellectual openness, social justice, and responsible participation in pluralistic society.

Keywords
Islamic religious identity; university students; Pakistan; religiosity; socio-political attitudes; sociology of religion; Islamic studies; political socialization; citizenship; social tolerance

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Introduction

Religion remains one of the most influential sources of collective identity in Pakistan. Since the establishment of Pakistan, Islam has occupied a central position in the country's

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constitutional imagination, social institutions, public discourse, and cultural vocabulary. Yet the social meaning of being Muslim is neither uniform nor static. It is continuously interpreted through family relationships, educational experiences, religious instruction, political ideologies, social class, regional cultures, sectarian affiliations, media environments, and encounters with people holding different religious and political perspectives. Religious identity therefore operates simultaneously as a source of personal meaning and as a social category through which individuals understand themselves and others. For university students, this process is particularly significant because the university represents a transitional social environment in which inherited identities encounter new forms of knowledge, argument, political debate, and social interaction.

The university period is also a formative stage in the development of political consciousness. Students begin to move beyond the political understandings transmitted by parents and local communities and encounter competing explanations of the state, democracy, citizenship, justice, rights, authority, and social change. Political socialization during higher education is therefore not simply a matter of learning formal political institutions. It is a broader process through which young people develop orientations toward authority, participation, political efficacy, social responsibility, and collective action. Recent research on Pakistani higher education similarly indicates that family, peers, media, and educational experiences contribute to the political socialization of university students (Kataria & Bhatti, 2025).

Within this process, religion can function as both a normative framework and a social identity. A student may understand Islam primarily through personal worship and moral discipline, through attachment to a particular religious community, through an ethical commitment to social justice, through political ideology, or through a combination of these dimensions. These forms should not automatically be treated as equivalent. A strong religious identity does not necessarily produce one predictable political attitude. Two students may both describe themselves as highly religious while differing substantially in their attitudes toward democracy, political participation, gender relations, minority rights, freedom of expression, social welfare, or sectarian diversity. Consequently, the central sociological question is not simply whether religion influences political attitudes, but how religious identity is interpreted, transmitted, negotiated, and translated into social and political orientations.

This distinction is particularly important in Pakistan because public discussions of religion frequently move between personal faith, collective identity, moral regulation, political ideology, and state policy. When these dimensions are analytically collapsed into a single category of "religiosity," the complexity of Muslim youth experiences becomes difficult to understand. Sociology of religion provides concepts for examining religion as a social institution, a source of meaning, a mechanism of socialization, and a form of collective identity. Islamic studies, by contrast, provides access to the internal normative resources of the Islamic tradition, including Qur'anic concepts of justice, consultation, human dignity, moderation, accountability, and social responsibility. Bringing the two perspectives together makes it possible to distinguish between the sociological forms that religious identity takes and the normative ideals against which those forms can be critically evaluated.

The Qur'anic understanding of human social diversity is particularly relevant to this discussion. The Qur'an presents human beings as originating from a common human lineage while acknowledging differences of peoples and tribes:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُم مِّن ذَكَرٍ وَأُنثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا

(الحجرات 49:13)

The verse does not erase difference; rather, it places difference within an ethical framework of mutual recognition. The concluding criterion of moral distinction is taqwa rather than

ethnicity, lineage, wealth, or social status (Qur'an 49:13). Such a principle has direct implications for understanding religious identity in a contemporary university environment characterized by diversity and interaction.

Similarly, the Qur'anic emphasis on justice provides an important normative basis for assessing political attitudes. The Qur'an commands believers to stand firmly for justice even when justice conflicts with personal or group interests:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ بِالْقِسْطِ شُهَدَاءَ لِلَّهِ وَلَوْ عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِكُمْ أَوِ الْوَالِدَيْنِ وَالْأَقْرَبِينَ

(النساء 4:135)

From this perspective, religious identity carries an ethical obligation that extends beyond protecting one's own group. It requires justice even where personal, familial, or communal interests are involved. This normative dimension is sociologically important because identities become politically consequential when individuals use them to determine whom they trust, whom they support, whom they consider morally legitimate, and what kinds of political behavior they consider acceptable. Religious identity may therefore encourage civic engagement when it generates concern for justice, charity, public welfare, and responsibility. It may also become politically divisive when it is constructed primarily through opposition to an imagined religious or ideological "other." The same broad category of Islamic identity can thus produce different social consequences depending on the interpretive framework through which it is experienced.

Existing scholarship on Pakistani students supports the need for such a nuanced approach. Research on religious thinking and social attitudes among Pakistani university students has found that students' religious orientations are expressed not only through ritual observance but also through everyday conduct, interpersonal behavior, and attitudes toward social harmony (Ashfaq, 2021; Aziz & Aziz, 2022). Research on Pakistani youth and political participation likewise demonstrates that political efficacy, democratic attitudes, and motivation for participation cannot be understood independently of the wider social environment in which young people develop (Buzdar & Fatima, 2022). These findings suggest that religious identity and political attitudes should be studied as interconnected dimensions of socialization rather than as isolated variables.

The present article therefore develops an interdisciplinary conceptual argument concerning Islamic religious identity and socio-political attitudes among university students in Pakistan. It does not claim to present a new statistical survey of Pakistani universities. Instead, it synthesizes sociological theory, Islamic normative sources, and existing empirical scholarship to explain the mechanisms through which religious identity may shape political and social orientations. The central argument is that Islamic identity among university students should be understood as multidimensional and socially mediated. Its relationship with socio-political attitudes depends not simply on the intensity of religious commitment but also on the content of religious interpretation, the form of socialization, the surrounding political environment, and the extent to which students connect religious commitment with universal ethical principles.

Religious Identity as a Sociological and Islamic Category

Religious identity is more complex than formal membership in a religious community. From a sociological perspective, identity refers to the ways individuals locate themselves within systems of meaning and social relationships. Religion can provide a powerful framework for answering questions concerning who one is, what one values, to whom one belongs, what obligations one possesses, and how one should behave toward others. In this sense, religion does not merely provide beliefs about transcendence; it also organizes everyday practices and social expectations.

Émile Durkheim famously interpreted religion as a mechanism through which communities represent and reinforce their collective life (Fincham & Dunne, 2020; Launay, 2022). Although contemporary scholarship has moved beyond a purely functionalist account, Durkheim's insight remains relevant to the study of university students because religious practices can create solidarity, reinforce shared norms, and distinguish members of a community from those perceived as outsiders. The sociological significance of religion consequently lies not only in theological propositions but also in the relationships and institutions through which those propositions become socially meaningful.

Max Weber, meanwhile, emphasized the relationship between religious ideas and forms of social action (Launay, 2022). Weber's broader approach encourages attention to the ways religious meanings become motivations for conduct. For university students, this means asking how Islamic ideas concerning justice, charity, modesty, responsibility, authority, and morality are translated into actual social and political orientations. Religious beliefs become sociologically significant when they shape decisions, judgments, priorities, and patterns of action.

Contemporary approaches to religious identity have further demonstrated that individuals may inhabit several identities simultaneously. A university student can be Muslim, Pakistani, Punjabi, Baloch, Pashtun, Sindhi, Kashmiri, middle class, urban, male or female, politically conservative or progressive, and professionally oriented at the same time. These identities do not always operate in harmony. Situations of political conflict can make one identity more salient than another. Social media can intensify particular dimensions of identity, while university interaction can weaken or complicate previously unquestioned assumptions.

This multidimensional character of identity is particularly relevant to Pakistan. The category "Muslim" contains substantial internal diversity. Differences of sect, jurisprudential orientation, theological interpretation, family tradition, educational background, region, class, and political ideology can influence the way students understand Islam. It is therefore analytically problematic to assume that all religiously committed students share identical socio-political attitudes.

The Islamic tradition itself provides conceptual resources for resisting an overly narrow understanding of religious identity. Islam contains a strong conception of belonging to a moral community, but that belonging is repeatedly connected with ethical obligations. The Qur'an describes believers as a community associated with the promotion of good and prevention of wrongdoing, but it also links religious identity with justice and moderation. The Qur'anic principle of

وَكَذَٰلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا

(البقرة 2:143)

presents the Muslim community as an ummah characterized by balance and moderation (Qur'an 2:143). The concept of wasatiyyah is significant for contemporary students because it challenges interpretations of religious identity that equate stronger religiosity with social extremity or hostility toward difference.

The Qur'an also emphasizes consultation in collective affairs:

وَأَمْرُهُمْ شُورَىٰ بَيْنَهُمْ

(الشورى 42:38)

While shura should not be mechanically equated with modern liberal democracy, it establishes an important Islamic principle concerning collective decision-making, consultation, responsibility, and participation. In a university context, this principle can encourage students to view political participation not merely as a competition for power but as a form of collective responsibility.

The Prophet Muhammad's teachings similarly connect faith with social responsibility. The widely cited hadith,

"لا يؤمن أحدكم حتى يحب لأخيه ما يحب لنفسه,"

places concern for others within the moral meaning of faith (Sahih al-Bukhari 13; Sahih Muslim 45). The social implications are significant: religious identity cannot be reduced to private ritual if faith is also connected to the moral treatment of others. The hadith tradition therefore offers a framework in which interpersonal ethics, empathy, responsibility, and social solidarity become expressions of religious commitment.

This is especially important when considering political attitudes. A religious identity based primarily on ritual observance may have different political implications from one that explicitly interprets religious commitment through justice, welfare, accountability, and social responsibility. Similarly, an identity constructed primarily through sectarian distinction may generate different attitudes from an identity constructed around universal ethical values. The sociological task is therefore to identify the mechanisms that connect religious meaning with social action.

University Students, Socialization, and Political Attitudes

The university is not a socially neutral environment. Students enter higher education with beliefs and identities acquired through family, community, schools, religious institutions, media, and local cultures. At university, these inherited orientations encounter new sources of influence. Teachers introduce theoretical perspectives that may challenge conventional assumptions; peers expose students to alternative interpretations; student organizations create political and social networks; and digital media expands the range of ideological material to which students are exposed.

Political socialization is therefore a continuing process. The university can reinforce existing political orientations, moderate them, or transform them. Recent research on Pakistani higher education has emphasized that political socialization among students is shaped by multiple formal and informal agents, including family, peers, media, and educational experiences (Kataria & Bhatti, 2025). The implication is that political attitudes cannot be explained by one institution alone.

Family nevertheless remains one of the most influential mechanisms of religious socialization. In Pakistan, many students encounter religious narratives long before they enter university. Parents and extended family members transmit understandings of religious obligation, gender norms, political legitimacy, social morality, and acceptable forms of public behavior. These early messages may become deeply embedded because they are associated with emotional attachment and familial authority.

Schools and madrasas constitute another major source of religious socialization. Their influence differs according to curriculum, pedagogical method, institutional culture, and theological orientation. A student exposed to interpretive and dialogical approaches may develop a different relationship with religious difference from a student whose religious education emphasizes boundaries and conformity. The distinction is not between "religious" and "non-religious" education; rather, it concerns the type of religious reasoning that educational institutions cultivate.

Universities can either broaden or narrow these processes. An academically open university may expose students to sociology, political science, philosophy, history, Islamic studies, economics, law, and literature, allowing them to examine social problems from multiple perspectives. Such exposure does not necessarily weaken religious commitment. On the contrary, it may enable students to distinguish between fundamental religious principles and historically specific interpretations.

Peer groups are equally important. Young adults frequently develop their social identities through friendships and group affiliations. Religious student organizations, political societies, debating forums, volunteer groups, and informal friendship networks can all provide settings in which religious and political ideas are interpreted. The social reward attached to particular positions may sometimes be more influential than abstract theological argument.

Digital media has added another layer to this process. University students can now encounter religious lectures, political commentary, sectarian polemics, academic scholarship, activist content, and conspiracy narratives within the same digital environment. The authority of traditional religious institutions is therefore increasingly accompanied—and sometimes challenged—by decentralized forms of digital religious authority. Students may follow scholars from different countries, political activists, influencers, and anonymous ideological accounts simultaneously.

This digital environment has two opposing implications. On the one hand, it can broaden intellectual access and expose students to diverse interpretations of Islam. On the other hand, algorithmic recommendation systems may repeatedly expose users to similar content, producing ideological reinforcement and creating the impression that a particular interpretation is universally accepted. Religious identity may consequently become more self-conscious and politically charged.

The political attitudes that emerge from this environment can be understood through several dimensions. The first is political efficacy: whether students believe that they can understand politics and influence political outcomes. The second is political participation, including voting, discussion, activism, student organization, community work, and other forms of civic engagement. The third concerns attitudes toward democracy and political institutions. The fourth concerns social tolerance, particularly toward religious, sectarian, ethnic, and ideological differences. The fifth concerns perceptions of justice and equality.

These dimensions do not necessarily move together. A student may be highly politically active but distrust democratic institutions. Another may support democracy but remain socially intolerant. A third may be religiously observant but politically disengaged. A fourth may be strongly committed to Islamic ethics and simultaneously support pluralistic citizenship. Consequently, religiosity should not be treated as a simple predictor of a single political outcome.

Islamic Religious Identity and Socio-Political Attitudes

The relationship between Islamic identity and political attitudes becomes clearer when religious identity is separated into its normative, communal, and ideological dimensions. The normative dimension concerns moral principles derived from religious belief. The communal dimension concerns belonging to a religious group. The ideological dimension concerns the use of religious concepts to explain political authority, state structure, public morality, and social change. These dimensions can overlap, but they are not identical.

The normative dimension can potentially encourage civic responsibility. Islamic teachings concerning justice, charity, honesty, trust, accountability, and care for vulnerable people provide moral resources for public engagement. Zakat, sadaqah, and the broader Islamic emphasis on social welfare can cultivate concern for economic inequality and social deprivation. The Qur'an repeatedly connects worship with ethical conduct, suggesting that religious commitment has social consequences rather than remaining purely private.

Justice is particularly important. The Qur'anic command to maintain justice even against oneself and one's close relations establishes an ethical principle that challenges nepotism, corruption, favoritism, and group-based injustice (Qur'an 4:135). For university students,

such a principle can provide a religious basis for critical attitudes toward corruption and abuse of power.

At the same time, the communal dimension of identity can produce solidarity. Shared religious practices create social networks and mutual support. Students who participate in religious communities may experience belonging and collective responsibility. Such networks can facilitate charitable activities, educational initiatives, volunteerism, and community service.

However, solidarity has a potential boundary-making effect. When collective identity is constructed through opposition to outsiders, solidarity may become exclusionary. This is a classic sociological tension: the same identity that creates internal cohesion can establish boundaries between "us" and "them." In religious contexts, these boundaries may be sectarian, denominational, ideological, or political.

This tension is particularly relevant in Pakistan, where religious identity intersects with sectarian differences and political contestation. A student may regard religious commitment as a basis for moral responsibility while simultaneously developing negative stereotypes about members of another sect. The presence of religiosity therefore does not automatically guarantee tolerance. Recent qualitative research among Muslim youth in Punjab likewise treats religiosity and social tolerance as a contextual and multifaceted relationship rather than assuming that religious commitment has one uniform social effect (Ahmad et al., 2025).

An Islamic normative approach provides grounds for challenging such exclusionary tendencies. The Qur'anic command to know one another across differences in peoples and tribes can be interpreted as an affirmation of social recognition rather than hostility (Qur'an 49:13). The Qur'an also instructs believers to act justly even toward those whom they dislike:

وَلَا يَجْرِمَنَّكُمْ شَنَآنُ قَوْمٍ عَلَىٰ أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا ۚ اعْدِلُوا هُوَ أَقْرَبُ لِلتَّقْوَىٰ

(المائدة 5:8)

This principle has direct implications for political behavior because political disagreement frequently produces dislike, polarization, and group competition.

For university students, therefore, Islamic identity can provide a framework for political participation if political action is interpreted as a means of promoting justice and public welfare. The danger emerges when religious identity becomes synonymous with partisan loyalty. Once political parties, personalities, or movements are treated as embodiments of religious authenticity, criticism of the political actor may be interpreted as criticism of religion itself. This transforms political disagreement into moral conflict.

The sociological distinction between religious commitment and political partisanship is consequently essential. Islam as a religious tradition cannot be analytically reduced to any particular political party or movement. Students may legitimately derive political principles from Islam while disagreeing about their practical application. A mature religious identity can accommodate disagreement because it distinguishes between revelation, interpretation, political strategy, and individual judgment.

Democratic attitudes provide another important dimension. There is sometimes an assumption that strong religiosity necessarily produces opposition to democracy. Such an assumption is too simplistic. Islamic concepts such as shura, accountability, justice, public consultation, and responsibility can provide points of dialogue with democratic principles, although Islamic political thought does not simply reproduce any particular modern democratic model. The relevant question is not whether Islam and democracy are identical, but how Muslim students interpret the relationship between religious principles and contemporary political institutions.

Research on young people in Pakistan has demonstrated that political attitudes and motivation for participation are shaped by a complex combination of personal and social

conditions (Buzdar & Fatima, 2022). This suggests that religious identity should be studied alongside educational experience, socioeconomic context, family influence, political opportunity, media exposure, and perceptions of institutional legitimacy.

A further dimension is citizenship. In a pluralistic society, citizenship requires individuals to negotiate differences of religion, sect, ethnicity, language, class, and political opinion. Islamic identity can either complicate or strengthen this process depending on how it is conceptualized. If citizenship is understood as loyalty only to members of one's own religious group, pluralistic citizenship becomes difficult. If Islamic identity is understood as an ethical commitment to justice, trustworthiness, human dignity, and public welfare, it can provide a moral foundation for responsible citizenship.

The Qur'anic principle of human dignity is relevant here:

وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ

(الإسراء 17:70)

The verse speaks of the dignity of the children of Adam, offering a broad human category that can inform discussions of social respect. In contemporary Pakistan, where university students encounter religious and sectarian diversity, this principle can encourage an understanding of human worth that does not depend entirely upon group membership.

The same approach can be extended to minority citizenship. The socio-political attitudes of Muslim university students are significant not only because they shape majority political culture but also because they influence how future professionals, teachers, administrators, journalists, lawyers, researchers, and political actors may understand minority citizens. A religious identity that emphasizes justice should logically encourage fair treatment of minorities, while an identity built primarily around exclusion may normalize discriminatory attitudes.

The prophetic tradition also provides a significant ethical framework. The Prophet Muhammad's conduct in dealing with different communities demonstrates that social relationships cannot be reduced to religious sameness. The historical experience of Madinah, although not directly transferable to the modern nation-state, remains important in Islamic political thought because it illustrates a political community involving groups with different religious identities under an agreed social and political arrangement (Abid & Bioud, 2020). The significance for contemporary students lies less in mechanically reproducing a seventh-century political structure and more in examining principles of covenant, mutual obligation, security, justice, and coexistence.

Religious Identity, Social Tolerance, and the Challenge of Sectarianism

One of the most important questions concerning religious identity among Pakistani university students is whether stronger identification with Islam promotes tolerance or increases social distance. The answer depends upon how tolerance itself is conceptualized. Tolerance does not necessarily mean agreement. A tolerant student may strongly disagree with another religious or political position while accepting the other person's right to hold and express that position within lawful and ethical boundaries.

This distinction is crucial in university environments. Intellectual development requires exposure to disagreement. If students are taught that disagreement itself signals moral corruption, academic dialogue becomes difficult. Religious education that encourages reasoning, debate, ethical disagreement, and respect for evidence can strengthen both religious confidence and intellectual openness.

The Islamic intellectual tradition historically contains substantial diversity of interpretation. Differences among jurists, theologians, philosophers, commentators, and political thinkers demonstrate that Islamic scholarship has never been a completely monolithic intellectual

system. The existence of interpretive disagreement does not necessarily undermine religious identity; it can demonstrate the capacity of a tradition to engage complexity.

For university students, this history has pedagogical importance. Students who understand legitimate interpretive diversity may be less likely to interpret every disagreement as a threat to Islam. Conversely, students whose religious education presents one particular interpretation as the only possible expression of Islam may find it more difficult to distinguish between religious fundamentals and secondary interpretive questions.

Sectarianism becomes particularly problematic when theological boundaries are translated into social exclusion or political hostility. A sociological analysis must therefore distinguish between sectarian identity as a form of community belonging and sectarianism as a form of antagonistic boundary-making. The former can be part of ordinary religious pluralism; the latter can undermine social cohesion.

Recent research on Muslim youth in Punjab has highlighted the contextual nature of the relationship between religious practice and social tolerance (Ahmad et al., 2025). This reinforces the argument that religiosity should not be treated as an automatically positive or negative influence. The social consequences of religious commitment depend on family socialization, educational environment, peer networks, political discourse, and interpretive frameworks.

Social media intensifies this challenge. Religious debates that might previously have remained within local communities can now reach thousands of students instantly. Short videos and emotionally charged posts often reward certainty, outrage, and confrontation more than careful interpretation. Students may therefore encounter religious discourse in forms that are rhetorically powerful but intellectually shallow.

The challenge for universities is not to suppress religious expression but to cultivate religious literacy and critical thinking. Students need the ability to distinguish between a Qur'anic principle and an individual interpretation, between a classical scholarly opinion and a contemporary political claim, and between legitimate religious disagreement and sectarian incitement. Such distinctions are essential for an intellectually mature Islamic identity.

Religion, Political Participation, and Democratic Citizenship

Political participation is another area where religious identity may have significant consequences. Religious communities often possess organizational structures that can mobilize people around social issues. Religious motivation can encourage students to participate in charity, community service, political campaigns, public debate, and social reform. In this sense, religious identity may increase rather than decrease civic engagement.

The Islamic concept of amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa nahy 'an al-munkar, commonly understood as encouraging good and discouraging wrongdoing, can provide a religious vocabulary for social responsibility. Yet its interpretation requires ethical and legal restraint. Social reform cannot simply mean imposing personal preferences upon others. The principle must be considered alongside justice, wisdom, proportionality, and avoidance of harm.

The Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes wisdom and appropriate conduct in communication:

ادْعُ إِلَىٰ سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحِكْمَةِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ وَجَادِلْهُم بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ

(النحل 16:125)

For students participating in political and social debate, this provides a valuable ethical principle: disagreement should be conducted through wisdom and good argument rather than humiliation, hatred, or coercion.

The political role of university students should also be understood in relation to citizenship education. Universities do not merely produce employees; they help form citizens. Students who learn to analyze evidence, evaluate political claims, understand institutions, and engage

respectfully with disagreement are better positioned to participate constructively in public life.

Religious identity can support this process when it strengthens concepts of accountability and moral responsibility. The Islamic concept of amanah, or trust, is particularly relevant to public office and citizenship. Political authority can be understood as a responsibility rather than merely a privilege. The Qur'an commands that trusts be delivered to those entitled to them and that judgment be made with justice:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُكُمْ أَن تُؤَدُّوا الْأَمَانَاتِ إِلَىٰ أَهْلِهَا وَإِذَا حَكَمْتُم بَيْنَ النَّاسِ أَن تَحْكُمُوا بِالْعَدْلِ

(النساء 4:58)

This principle has contemporary political significance. If students internalize political authority as amanah, they may become more critical of corruption, nepotism, abuse of power, and political irresponsibility. However, this requires moving beyond abstract religious language toward practical civic ethics.

At the same time, universities must avoid presenting political engagement through a single ideological lens. A religiously informed university environment should allow students to disagree about political parties, economic systems, constitutional arrangements, and public policy while maintaining a shared commitment to ethical conduct. Political pluralism does not require moral relativism; students can disagree strongly while accepting common standards of evidence, justice, and respectful discourse.

Gender, Social Roles, and Changing Youth Attitudes

Gender represents another area where religious identity interacts with social attitudes. Pakistani university students encounter competing interpretations of gender roles through family, religious teaching, educational institutions, popular culture, social media, and global discourse. Religious identity may influence attitudes toward women's education, employment, political participation, family responsibilities, and public behavior.

An analytical Islamic perspective should distinguish between Qur'anic principles and culturally inherited practices. The Qur'an repeatedly recognizes men and women as morally responsible human beings. The Qur'an states that believing men and believing women are allies of one another in promoting good and preventing wrongdoing:

وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتُ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَاءُ بَعْضٍ

(التوبة 9:71)

This formulation is significant because it assigns moral and social responsibility to both genders.

For university students, the question is not simply whether religion influences gender attitudes but which interpretation of religion is transmitted and how students negotiate it with contemporary educational and professional realities. A student may maintain strong religious commitments while supporting women's higher education and professional participation. Another may interpret religious identity through more restrictive cultural expectations. The diversity of attitudes demonstrates again that religiosity is not a single variable.

The sociology of gender also reminds us that social expectations are institutionalized through family, education, employment, and media. Religious discourse interacts with these structures rather than operating independently of them. Consequently, understanding students' gender attitudes requires attention to socioeconomic background and lived experience alongside religious identification.

The Role of Family, University, and Religious Institutions

The family remains the first major site of identity formation. Children learn not only religious beliefs but also how religion is connected to everyday conduct. Parents communicate

attitudes toward other sects, political parties, minorities, gender roles, authority, and education. These messages may become part of the child's moral framework long before critical reflection develops.

University education can introduce reflexivity into this process. Reflexivity involves the capacity to examine one's own assumptions and recognize that beliefs are situated within social and historical contexts. For religious students, reflexivity does not necessarily mean abandoning faith. It can mean becoming more conscious of the distinction between religious principles, inherited customs, and personal interpretation.

Religious institutions also play a central role. Mosques, madrasas, religious teachers, scholars, and online religious platforms contribute to the formation of Islamic identity. Their influence varies considerably. Some emphasize ethical development, scholarship, service, and social responsibility; others may focus more heavily on doctrinal boundaries or political mobilization.

The challenge is therefore not to determine whether religious institutions are "good" or "bad," but to understand the type of religious socialization they produce. A religious pedagogy that cultivates intellectual humility may contribute to tolerance. A pedagogy that repeatedly constructs social life through rigid binary categories may intensify polarization.

University Islamic Studies departments can play a constructive role by exposing students to the historical diversity of Islamic thought. Islamic Studies should not be confined to memorization of information; it can become a discipline through which students critically examine Qur'anic interpretation, Hadith, Islamic law, ethics, intellectual history, and contemporary social questions.

Toward an Integrated Model of Islamic Religious Identity

The discussion suggests that Islamic religious identity among university students should be conceptualized through at least five interconnected dimensions: belief, practice, morality, belonging, and social-political interpretation. Belief concerns theological commitment; practice concerns ritual observance; morality concerns everyday ethical behavior; belonging concerns attachment to the Muslim community and particular religious traditions; and social-political interpretation concerns the translation of religious principles into views about society and political life.

These dimensions should not be assumed to correlate perfectly. A student may be highly observant in ritual matters but politically disengaged. Another may participate actively in social welfare while being less regular in ritual practice. A third may possess extensive Islamic knowledge but hold strongly partisan political views. A fourth may identify strongly as Muslim but interpret political questions through secular constitutional principles. Such variation is sociologically normal.

The integrated model proposed here therefore rejects a linear assumption that "more religiosity" automatically leads to either greater tolerance or greater conservatism. Instead, religious identity operates through mediating mechanisms. These include the content of religious education, social networks, political environment, socioeconomic position, media exposure, personal experiences of injustice or discrimination, and the degree of intellectual openness available to the student.

The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation is also useful. An intrinsic orientation treats religion as a deeply internalized framework of meaning, whereas an extrinsic orientation may use religion for social status, political advantage, group belonging, or instrumental purposes (Humala et al., 2024). The distinction should not be applied mechanically, but it highlights an important issue: public religious identification does not necessarily indicate the same depth or type of religious motivation.

In Pakistan, this distinction matters because religion carries substantial social prestige. Religious language can provide political legitimacy, social respectability, and group solidarity. Consequently, some forms of religious expression may be driven partly by social expectations rather than theological conviction. University students may negotiate these pressures in different ways.

The relationship between Islamic identity and political attitudes can therefore be represented conceptually as a process:

Religious socialization → interpretation of Islamic identity → interaction with social institutions and networks → construction of political meaning → socio-political attitudes and behavior.

This is not a deterministic model. The process is recursive. Political experiences can reshape religious interpretation just as religious interpretation can influence political attitudes. A student who experiences institutional injustice may reinterpret religious teachings concerning justice and authority. A student who encounters religious diversity at university may revise previously rigid assumptions. A student who becomes involved in political activism may develop new understandings of citizenship and responsibility.

Methodological and Analytical Scope

This article adopts a qualitative, conceptual, and literature-based design. It does not claim to generate new survey data or to generalize from a newly collected sample of university students. Instead, it brings together three kinds of material: classical sociological theory concerning religion and social action; empirical research on Pakistani students and youth; and primary Islamic normative sources, especially the Qur'an and selected hadith collections. This distinction is important because the article makes an analytical argument about relationships and mechanisms rather than a statistical claim that a particular level of religiosity necessarily produces a particular political attitude.

The empirical literature reviewed here provides useful but bounded evidence. Nadeem, Akhter, and Buzdar, for example, studied 114 university students from eight Pakistani universities and found that students commonly expressed support for religious harmony while also relating religiousness to everyday conduct and social attitudes. Buzdar and Fatima examined 700 secondary-school students from Muslim and non-Muslim communities and found that religious affiliation was significantly related to motivation for political participation, while also identifying concerns about political institutions and the position of minorities. More recent work by Ahmad, Safdar, and Akbar, based on in-depth interviews with 24 undergraduate students in Punjab, describes religion as a framework for everyday moral decisions and reports pluralistic and adaptive orientations among participants alongside tensions between inherited practices and contemporary realities. These studies should be read as complementary rather than interchangeable because their samples, ages, methods, and research questions differ (Ahmad et al., 2025; Buzdar & Fatima, 2022; Hanif et al., 2020; Kataria & Bhatti, 2025).

The article also uses political socialization as a bridge between religious identity and political attitudes. Recent research on Pakistani higher education indicates that family, peers, media, and educational experiences all contribute to the political awareness and behavior of university students. Kataria's 2025 quantitative study, based on 100 university students in Muzaffarabad, Gujrat, and Lahore, emphasizes the multidimensional character of political socialization and identifies continuing gaps in political knowledge and trust in media. The present analysis extends that insight by asking how the moral meanings attached to religious identity may interact with those socialization processes.

An important methodological principle is therefore analytical separation. The article distinguishes between what the Islamic sources prescribe, what sociological theories explain,

and what empirical studies actually observe. Qur'anic principles should not be presented as empirical evidence about student behavior, and empirical findings should not be treated as direct proof of a theological ideal. The value of an interdisciplinary approach lies precisely in keeping these levels distinct while examining how they may illuminate one another. This approach also avoids the common mistake of assuming that the social behavior of some Muslims is an automatic expression of Islam itself.

Finally, the article treats university students as a socially situated population rather than as an abstract category. Students enter higher education with family histories, regional cultures, class positions, sectarian experiences, media habits, and different levels of religious knowledge. University life can reinforce inherited identities, but it can also expose students to disagreement and reinterpretation. The resulting identity formation is therefore better understood as an ongoing process of negotiation than as a fixed possession.

Dimensions of Islamic Religious Identity among University Students

Islamic religious identity can be analytically divided into several overlapping dimensions. The first is doctrinal identity: the student's identification with Islamic beliefs and a sense of belonging to the Muslim community. The second is ritual identity, expressed through practices such as prayer, fasting, Qur'anic recitation, and participation in religious gatherings. The third is ethical identity, through which religious commitment is translated into honesty, justice, compassion, self-restraint, and responsibility toward others. The fourth is communal identity, which concerns attachment to a religious community, mosque, family tradition, sect, or broader Muslim collectivity. The fifth is civic-political identity, which concerns how Islamic values are related to citizenship, authority, political participation, rights, and public responsibility. These dimensions may reinforce one another, but they may also diverge.

This multidimensional model helps explain why a simple religiosity scale can obscure important differences. A student may be highly observant in ritual terms but relatively disengaged from political activity. Another may be deeply committed to Islamic ethical principles while supporting pluralistic democratic participation. A third may interpret religious identity primarily through communal boundaries and therefore evaluate social relationships according to perceived in-group and out-group distinctions. The sociological question is not which student is "more religious" in a general sense, but which dimension of identity is salient in a particular social situation and how that dimension is interpreted.

The Qur'anic framework gives particular importance to moral accountability. The Qur'an links human diversity with mutual recognition and places moral worth in relation to righteousness rather than ancestry or social status. It also commands justice even when justice is difficult for one's own interests or group loyalties. These principles make it difficult to justify an understanding of Islamic identity based solely on group preference. They instead encourage a model in which religious commitment produces obligations that extend beyond the immediate community (Qur'an 4:135; Qur'an 49:13).

Human dignity is another important dimension. The Qur'an describes the children of Adam as honored, a principle that provides a broad moral vocabulary for thinking about the treatment of persons in social and political life. In a university setting, this principle can inform attitudes toward classmates of different ethnic, linguistic, sectarian, or religious backgrounds. It does not require the abandonment of religious conviction; rather, it provides a basis for distinguishing conviction from contempt and disagreement from dehumanization (Hanif et al., 2020; Mappiasse & Hayadin, 2022).

The concept of wasatiyyah, or moderation, is also relevant. The Qur'an characterizes the Muslim community as a middle or balanced community and connects that position with bearing witness to humanity. Moderation in this context should not be reduced to political

centrism. It is better understood as a disciplined refusal of excess, injustice, or moral irresponsibility. For students, such a principle may support a style of public disagreement that is confident in religious commitment but restrained in language and behavior.

Consultation, or shura, provides another bridge between religious identity and civic participation. The Qur'an praises believers whose affairs are conducted through consultation. Classical Islamic political thought developed this principle in different ways, but its ethical significance remains relevant: collective decisions require listening, deliberation, responsibility, and recognition that no individual possesses unlimited authority. A university that teaches students to deliberate respectfully can therefore create an environment in which religious identity becomes compatible with participatory civic habits.

The prophetic tradition further connects faith with responsibility toward others. Reports preserved in the major hadith collections emphasize responsibility, trust, mercy, and accountability. These themes are especially relevant to student life because universities are communities of shared resources and relationships. Academic honesty, respectful disagreement, responsible use of social media, care for vulnerable peers, and avoidance of rumor are not separate from religious ethics; they are practical contexts in which moral identity becomes visible.

Mechanisms Linking Religious Identity to Socio-Political Attitudes

Religious identity influences socio-political attitudes through mechanisms of socialization rather than through a single direct causal pathway. Family is often the first institutional environment in which children learn religious vocabulary, authority patterns, moral judgments, and interpretations of social difference. Parents may communicate political attitudes explicitly through conversation, voting behavior, or party affiliation, but they may also transmit them indirectly through everyday comments about justice, leadership, minority groups, gender, or social class. The family therefore provides an initial interpretive framework through which later university experiences are understood.

Peer networks constitute a second mechanism. University students spend substantial time with classmates and friends whose political and religious perspectives may differ from those of their families. Interaction can strengthen identity through group solidarity, but it can also produce reflexivity. A student may encounter a different interpretation of Islam and be required to articulate why he or she holds a particular position. In this sense, disagreement can become an educational experience when institutions provide a safe environment for reasoned discussion.

Educational institutions form a third mechanism. Universities do not only transmit disciplinary knowledge; they socialize students into norms concerning evidence, argument, authority, citizenship, and public debate. Kataria's study shows that higher education can influence political awareness and participation while also revealing gaps in political knowledge and trust. The implication for religious identity is that students need opportunities to distinguish textual claims, scholarly interpretations, political propaganda, and personal opinion. Religious literacy and civic literacy can reinforce each other when both encourage careful reading and responsible judgment.

Digital media form a fourth mechanism that is increasingly important. Social media platforms allow students to encounter religious teaching, political commentary, sectarian debate, activism, and misinformation within the same information environment. Digital communication can broaden access to scholarship and create new forms of civic participation, but it can also reward emotionally charged content. The speed of circulation can weaken contextual reading and make partial quotations appear authoritative. Religious identity may consequently become more salient through highly simplified narratives of "us"

and "them." Universities can respond by teaching source evaluation, media literacy, and ethical digital communication.

Political institutions and public discourse constitute a fifth mechanism. Students observe whether political leaders act consistently with the values they publicly claim. Perceived hypocrisy can produce cynicism, while credible examples of accountability can strengthen political trust. Buzdar and Fatima's research indicates that young people's political motivation is shaped within a context in which institutional performance and the treatment of religious and ethnic minorities remain important concerns. This suggests that students do not evaluate political participation only in abstract ideological terms; they also respond to their perceptions of whether institutions are fair and effective.

Finally, personal experiences can mediate the relationship between identity and attitude. A student who experiences friendship across sectarian or religious boundaries may develop a more complex understanding of difference than a student whose social world is highly homogeneous. Similarly, direct experiences of discrimination, exclusion, or unfair treatment may alter political attitudes. Religious identity therefore operates within biographies. It provides interpretive resources, but those resources are activated and reshaped by lived experience.

Religious Identity, Tolerance, and Inclusive Citizenship

One of the most important questions in the Pakistani context concerns the relationship between religious commitment and tolerance. It is misleading to assume that strong religious identity automatically produces either tolerance or intolerance. The empirical literature points toward a more contextual relationship. Nadeem, Akhter, and Buzdar found that the students they interviewed generally supported religious harmony and opposed sectarianism, while their religiousness was expressed through manners and everyday conduct. The 2025 study by Ahmad, Safdar, and Akbar similarly reports pluralistic and adaptive orientations among interviewed Muslim youth, even while identifying tensions between inherited practices and contemporary realities.

From an Islamic normative perspective, tolerance should not be confused with indifference to religious truth. A person may hold strong theological convictions while recognizing the dignity and rights of people who do not share them. The Qur'anic emphasis on justice and human diversity provides a basis for this distinction. The Qur'an commands believers to stand firmly for justice and not allow hostility toward a people to lead them away from fairness. Such a principle is directly relevant to the evaluation of political attitudes because it places moral limits on collective prejudice.

An inclusive model of citizenship therefore requires students to understand the difference between disagreement and exclusion. Democratic societies necessarily contain disagreement over religion, policy, morality, and political priorities. The ethical challenge is to maintain disagreement without turning political opponents into enemies who are denied dignity. In a university, this means creating spaces in which students can debate controversial questions without intimidation, personal abuse, or the assumption that disagreement proves moral corruption.

This model also has implications for minority relations. Buzdar and Fatima's research shows that religious affiliation can be related to political motivation among young people, while their findings also raise concerns about the political environment experienced by religious and ethnic minorities. An ethical approach to Islamic citizenship must therefore include attention to the security, dignity, and civic inclusion of those who are socially vulnerable. The Qur'anic principle of justice cannot be applied only when it benefits the majority or the in-group.

Implications for Pakistani Universities and Future Research

The analysis suggests several practical implications for higher education. First, universities should treat religious literacy and civic education as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Students should be able to study Islamic concepts such as justice, consultation, accountability, moderation, and human dignity alongside constitutional principles, democratic institutions, and contemporary debates about citizenship. Such an approach would neither impose a single political interpretation of Islam nor remove religion from academic discussion (Jamilah, 2021; Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2024; Yasmin, 2020).

Second, universities can strengthen structured dialogue. Student forums, moderated debates, interfaith and intrafaith discussions, public lectures, and academic societies can provide opportunities for disagreement without hostility. The objective should not be to eliminate difference but to develop the skills required to manage difference ethically. Such programs are especially valuable when they teach students to support claims with evidence, distinguish interpretation from fact, and listen before responding.

Third, digital literacy should be integrated into student development. Religious and political misinformation can circulate rapidly through social media. Students need practical skills for checking sources, identifying manipulated quotations, distinguishing scholarly authority from popularity, and recognizing emotionally provocative content. Ethical digital citizenship should include avoidance of rumor, respect for privacy, and responsibility for the consequences of forwarding unverified claims.

Fourth, universities should encourage research that disaggregates religiosity rather than treating it as a single variable. Future studies could examine ritual practice, ethical orientation, communal identity, political ideology, civic knowledge, tolerance, and media use separately. Mixed-method research would be especially valuable because surveys can identify patterns while interviews can explain how students interpret their experiences.

Finally, future research should include greater regional, socioeconomic, gender, and institutional diversity. Existing studies provide valuable evidence, but their samples are not sufficient to represent all Pakistani university students. Comparative research across public and private universities, urban and rural institutions, and different provinces could clarify which aspects of religious identity are stable and which are shaped by institutional context. Longitudinal studies would also help determine how students' religious and political orientations change during and after university education.

Discussion

The interdisciplinary analysis developed in this article leads to several broader conclusions. First, Islamic identity among university students should not be understood merely as a private matter of belief or ritual. It is a social identity that influences relationships, moral judgments, political perceptions, and conceptions of citizenship. At the same time, its effects cannot be predicted from religious affiliation alone.

Second, religious identity has both integrative and boundary-producing capacities. It can create solidarity, encourage charity, strengthen moral responsibility, and motivate civic participation. Yet it can also produce exclusion when religious belonging is constructed primarily through antagonism toward other groups. This dual potential is not unique to Islam; it is a general characteristic of collective identities. What matters is the normative and institutional framework within which identity is expressed.

Third, the Islamic normative tradition contains substantial resources for a constructive model of citizenship. Justice, consultation, human dignity, trust, moderation, compassion, and social responsibility provide principles that can connect religious commitment with public ethics. These principles do not prescribe one contemporary political system mechanically, but they provide ethical standards by which political behavior can be evaluated.

Fourth, the university has an important role in transforming inherited identity into reflective identity. Students should be able to study Islam seriously while also engaging sociology, political theory, history, law, economics, and philosophy. Interdisciplinary education can help students distinguish between the Islamic tradition itself and particular historical or political interpretations of that tradition.

Fifth, the relationship between religiosity and tolerance is contextual. Existing research on Pakistani university students and Muslim youth indicates that religious thinking and social attitudes are related to everyday conduct, social harmony, and broader socialization processes rather than functioning as a simple one-dimensional relationship (Ahmad et al., 2025; Ashfaq, 2021; Hanif et al., 2020). This suggests that future empirical research should measure different dimensions of religious identity separately rather than using a single religiosity score.

Future studies could examine, for example, whether intrinsic religious commitment predicts social responsibility differently from sectarian identification; whether exposure to Islamic Studies courses affects attitudes toward political participation; whether social-media religious consumption is associated with political polarization; and whether university environments with greater ideological diversity produce different forms of religious identity.

The article also suggests that political participation should not be evaluated only through conventional electoral behavior. Students may express civic responsibility through volunteering, charitable work, community organizations, political discussion, advocacy, student societies, online activism, and public-interest initiatives. A comprehensive understanding of Islamic political socialization should therefore include these forms of participation.

Finally, the study highlights the importance of distinguishing religious identity from religious extremism. Strong religious commitment and extremism are not synonymous categories. A student may possess a deep Islamic identity while supporting peaceful political participation, pluralistic citizenship, academic debate, and social cooperation. Conversely, political extremism may emerge from ideological, socioeconomic, historical, or psychological factors that cannot be reduced to religiosity. Analytical precision is therefore essential.

Conclusion

Islamic religious identity occupies a powerful position in the social formation of university students in Pakistan. It provides a framework through which many young people understand morality, belonging, responsibility, social relationships, and public life. Yet religious identity is not a uniform or deterministic force. Its socio-political consequences depend upon the way Islam is interpreted, transmitted, institutionalized, and connected with everyday experience.

From a sociological perspective, university students are located at an important intersection of multiple socializing institutions. Family, religious institutions, schools, universities, peer groups, political organizations, and digital media all contribute to the formation and reformulation of identity. The university period can therefore become a stage at which inherited religious identities are either reinforced or critically reconstructed.

From an Islamic Studies perspective, the normative tradition provides important resources for evaluating the social consequences of religious identity. Qur'anic principles of justice, consultation, human dignity, moderation, and recognition of human diversity offer a framework in which religious commitment can be connected with responsible citizenship. Islamic identity, in this interpretation, is not exhausted by ritual or group membership; it includes ethical obligations toward other human beings.

The most constructive form of Islamic religious identity among university students is therefore one that combines conviction with ethical responsibility, religious commitment with intellectual humility, communal belonging with respect for human dignity, and political

engagement with justice. Such an identity does not require the abandonment of religious particularity. Rather, it demonstrates that particular religious commitment can coexist with responsible participation in a diverse society.

For Pakistan, this issue is especially important because university students constitute a significant part of the country's future professional, intellectual, administrative, political, and social leadership. The attitudes developed during university years may influence future approaches to citizenship, governance, social justice, minority relations, political participation, and public morality. Universities therefore have a responsibility to cultivate environments in which students can study religion seriously, engage political questions critically, and interact with disagreement without hostility.

The relationship between Islamic identity and socio-political attitudes should consequently be understood neither through the assumption that religiosity automatically produces social harmony nor through the opposite assumption that religious commitment inevitably generates political intolerance. Both positions are sociologically inadequate. A more persuasive interpretation recognizes that religious identity is mediated by socialization, interpretation, institutional context, political experience, and individual agency.

The central conclusion of this article is that Islamic religious identity can become a significant resource for constructive socio-political engagement when it is interpreted through the ethical principles of justice, consultation, compassion, accountability, moderation, and human dignity. The challenge for Pakistani higher education is therefore not to secularize religious identity or to politicize it, but to cultivate the intellectual and ethical capacities through which students can translate religious commitment into responsible citizenship, peaceful participation, social justice, and respect for legitimate diversity.

Author Contributions

Sajjad Hussain contributed to the conceptualization, development of the interdisciplinary framework, literature review, investigation and synthesis of sociological theory, analysis of Islamic normative sources, interpretation of existing empirical literature, and preparation of the manuscript. The author was responsible for writing—original draft and writing—review and editing, read and approved the final version of the manuscript, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no financial, professional, institutional, political, religious, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the analysis, interpretation, or conclusions presented in this article.

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Data Availability

No new primary or empirical dataset was generated or analysed in this study. The article is based on published academic literature, existing empirical studies, sociological theories, Qur'anic sources, Hadith literature, and other publicly available materials cited in the manuscript.

Informed Consent

Not applicable. The study did not involve direct participation by human subjects or the collection of primary personal data.

Use of Generative AI

The author declares that no generative artificial intelligence tools were used to generate the scholarly content, conduct the analysis, interpret the literature or Islamic sources, or formulate the conclusions presented in this article.

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