

Moral Grounds Without God: Moral Reasoning, Meaning, and the Social Life of Nonbelievers in Pakistan¹

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ABSTRACT

Atheists are often judged not only by what they disbelieve but by what their disbelief is presumed to remove: an authoritative basis for moral obligation. This article is an exploratory qualitative study of five nonbelievers in Pakistan and reads the interview material alongside a comparative body of qualitative research on atheism and nonreligion. The original face-to-face, semi-structured interviews lasted about 90 minutes and covered deconversion, morality, sexuality, death, grief, and meaning. The primary analysis rests on preserved participant quotations and the interpretive summaries contained in the original interview transcripts. Ten qualitative studies, comprising 198 interview participants and 30 published deconversion testimonies, were used as a comparative corpus rather than as an extension of the Pakistani sample. The analysis traces six recurring concerns: the gradual erosion of religious belief, the grounding of moral obligation in human relations, sexual ethics organized around consent and responsibility, uncertainty around death, self-authored meaning, and the social management of nonbelief. The interviews suggest that abandoning divine command did not leave participants without moral constraint. Their accounts instead located moral reasons in reciprocity, harm, autonomy, rights, and accountability. The paper develops this pattern cautiously through the idea of horizontal moral authorization while retaining the inconsistencies and limits of a small archival dataset.

Keywords: *atheism; nonbeliever; morality; Pakistan; deconversion; qualitative research; secular morality*

INTRODUCTION

The familiar question, can a person be good without God, carries more assumptions than it first appears to. It treats belief as if it were a proxy for several different things at once: moral concern, judgment, motivation, behavior, and the authority granted to moral rules. Those dimensions do not necessarily travel together. A person may reject divine command and still regard cruelty, deception, coercion, or betrayal as binding moral concerns. For psychology, the more interesting problem lies in the reasoning that follows: when divine authority is no longer taken for granted, what kinds of reasons continue to obligate a person, and how are those reasons experienced as more than private preference?

That question is sharpened by the social reputation of atheism. Atheists are frequently distrusted before their conduct is known. Gervais (2013, 2014) locates much anti-atheist prejudice in moral distrust rather than ordinary interpersonal dislike, and Gervais et al. (2017) found across 13 countries that severe moral violations were often judged as more characteristic of atheists than of believers. In many settings, religious belief therefore functions as a shorthand for moral restraint: a person who believes in a morally concerned, watchful deity is assumed to answer to an authority beyond immediate self-interest. Disbelief can then be interpreted, quite apart from actual behavior, as the removal of that restraint.

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Empirical work on moral values is less tidy than this stereotype. Ståhl (2021) reported relatively small believer-disbeliever differences on concerns such as harm and fairness, with clearer differences in loyalty, authority, purity, and consequentialist reasoning. Reviews of religion and morality likewise caution against treating religiosity as a general measure of moral goodness. Its associations are stronger and more consistent for purity, authority, loyalty, and rule-based moralization than for care itself, while claims about religious prosociality depend heavily on how prosociality is measured (Galen, 2012; McKay & Whitehouse, 2015; Saroglou & Craninx, 2021). Developmental work adds a further complication: helping, sympathy, fairness, and sensitivity to norms are visible early in life and can be studied without assuming formal theological instruction (Tomasello & Vaish, 2013; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006). Religion may profoundly shape the content and authority of moral life without being reducible to a simple increase or decrease in morality.

Atheism, in turn, tells us less about a person's ethics than is often assumed. In its narrow sense it names the absence or rejection of belief in gods; it does not specify whether a person is a moral realist, relativist, consequentialist, deontologist, humanist, conservative, communitarian, or individualist. Nonbelievers can disagree sharply about all of these questions. For that reason, the present study does not treat atheism as a coherent moral ideology. Its concern is narrower and more empirical: how did these particular nonbelievers describe the moral and existential consequences of no longer accepting religious authority?

The social setting matters. Much of the psychology and sociology of nonreligion has been developed in Euro-American contexts where atheist identity, although still stigmatized in some settings, can often be named publicly. South Asian nonbelief is frequently more situational.

People may privately reject theological belief while continuing to participate in inherited Muslim or Hindu social worlds, or may avoid the label 'atheist' even when it describes their metaphysical position (Quack & Schulz, 2023). In Pakistan, Faysal et al. (2021) interviewed 19 self-identified atheists and emphasized the intellectual, social, and experiential routes through which young people came to disbelief. Their study offers an important local point of reference. It leaves open a different set of questions, however, about the moral and existential life that follows disbelief: how right and wrong are reasoned about, how sexual conduct is judged, what becomes of death and grief, and how a nonbeliever remains socially intelligible where religion is closely tied to respectability.

The present paper grew out of an earlier interview project that originally included five nonbelievers and three believers. In revisiting that material, we narrowed the analysis to the five nonbelieving participants because the comparative design was too weak to sustain claims about believer-atheist differences: the groups were very small and also confounded by gender. The revised question is therefore not comparative. It asks what can be learned from the nonbelievers' own accounts of moral obligation, sexuality, suffering, death, and purpose. The surviving primary material is limited, and we do not try to conceal that limitation. Instead, the archival record is placed alongside published qualitative studies to see where the Pakistani accounts resonate with, depart from, or complicate patterns described elsewhere.

Four questions guide the analysis: (1) How did the participants describe the source and limits of moral obligation after leaving religious belief? (2) How did that reasoning appear in their accounts of sexuality, death, grief, and meaning? (3) How did they narrate the movement from inherited religion to nonbelief and the social management of that identity? (4) Where do these accounts converge with published qualitative research, and where does the Pakistani setting appear to matter?

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

A useful starting point is the persistent association between belief and moral trust. When God is imagined as guarantor, witness, and judge of moral conduct, disbelief may be taken to remove both surveillance and sanction. Gervais's work shows how readily this inference can operate even when respondents do not explicitly describe themselves as prejudiced (Gervais, 2013, 2014; Gervais et al., 2017). What is being questioned in such judgments is not necessarily

the atheist's capacity for empathy or moral reasoning. It is whether anything remains that can make a moral demand authoritative when divine command is rejected. The distinction matters because reputation, psychological capacity, and moral justification are easily collapsed in public understandings of atheism.

Secular ethical reasoning offers several possible answers to that problem: harm, reciprocity, rights, autonomy, human flourishing, contractual expectations, and the requirements of cooperative life. Psychological research suggests that nonbelievers do not simply occupy a lower point on a single moral continuum. Ståhl (2021) found differences that were concentrated more strongly in group-binding values and consequentialist reasoning than in harm and fairness. Saroglou and Craninx's (2021) meta-analysis similarly found stronger associations between religiosity and purity, authority, and loyalty than between religiosity and care. These findings are compatible with the possibility that religious and nonreligious moralities differ partly in emphasis and justification rather than in the presence or absence of moral concern.

Qualitative research is particularly useful here because moral life is also narrated and defended. Sumerau and Cragun (2016), in 30 interviews with nonreligious Americans, found that participants often separated morality from religious conformity and described alternative sources of meaning. Their respondents were not only explaining private ethical commitments; they were also answering a cultural suspicion that nonreligious people lacked them. Under conditions of stigma, an account of one's morality becomes an account of what kind of person one is.

The same biographical complexity appears in research on deconversion. Smith (2011), LeDrew (2013), and Pérez and Vallières (2019) describe atheism as something that takes shape through social experience and personal history rather than through one decisive intellectual event. Pérez and Vallières identified reason and enquiry, criticism and discontent, and personal development as interlocking processes across former-clergy testimonies and atheist interviews. Moral objections to religion were part of those trajectories, not merely retrospective decoration. Tülek and Boratav's (2026) interviews with 10 former-Muslim atheists in Türkiye are especially relevant to the present study because they show identity change unfolding through conflict between Islam and self, the experience of becoming one's own person, and the renegotiation of inherited identities. Such accounts resist a clean separation between intellectual doubt, moral disillusionment, emotion, and relationship.

These processes are also shaped by what disbelief costs socially. Faysal et al. (2021) describe Pakistani atheism as context-dependent, and Tülek and Boratav (2026) document concealment and stigma among former-Muslim atheists in Türkiye. Quack and Schulz (2023), working in India and Bangladesh, further show that nonbelief and religious identity can coexist in ways that are difficult to capture with categorical labels. A person may reject belief in gods yet remain culturally Muslim or Hindu, participate in ritual, or avoid public atheist identification. In South Asia, then, disbelief may be lived less as a discrete identity than as an ongoing negotiation with family, ritual, belonging, and respectability.

Sexuality offers a particularly useful window into these negotiations because it reveals what a moral system treats as morally salient. Religious traditions often attach importance to marital status, chastity, gendered sexual roles, and the sacred legitimacy of particular forms of intimacy. Cross-national research links religious affiliation and religious culture to attitudes and behavior concerning sex outside marriage (Adamczyk & Hayes, 2012); religiosity has also been associated with sexual inhibition and guilt in Christian and Muslim samples (Rigo & Saroglou, 2018), and with more negative attitudes toward homosexuality, although the strength and form of that association varies (Jäckle & Wenzelburger, 2015; Whitley, 2009). For someone who no longer accepts a religious prohibition as decisive, moral attention may move toward consent, welfare, trust, deception, and autonomy. Whether that shift occurs consistently is an empirical question rather than an assumption built into atheism.

Death and meaning are less easily organized. Religions can provide narratives of post-mortem continuity and of purpose that precedes the individual. Nonbelief removes those particular answers but does not settle the psychological questions to which they respond. Studies of atheists and other nonbelievers show considerable variation in death anxiety and acceptance (Sawyer et al., 2021), and Schnell and Keenan (2011) identify distinct patterns of meaning-making rather than a uniform deficit. Speed et al. (2018) likewise found that atheists were more likely to describe

meaning as self-produced without showing a general increase in fatalism or nihilism. Qualitative work makes the ambivalence clearer: Popper and van Hout (2016) describe both freedom and emptiness, while Mueller's (2012) participants continued to wrestle actively with life, death, morality, and purpose after religious belief had receded.

One idea became useful while reading the Pakistani material against this literature.

Several accounts seemed to locate the force of moral claims in relations among persons: suffering, reciprocity, consent, trust, responsibility, and rights. We use the phrase horizontal moral authorization as an interpretive shorthand for this pattern. It is not offered as a general theory of atheist morality, and the word 'horizontal' should not be read as synonymous with subjective or relativistic. It simply marks a shift in the participants' stated reasons for moral obligation, away from a transcendent source and toward claims that arise between persons. The adequacy of that concept is necessarily provisional, especially given the small and incomplete archive on which it rests.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study design and analytic stance

Research study contains direct participant quotations, descriptive accounts of the interviews, and the researchers' thematic interpretations. The study treated those materials situated evidence: useful enough to support careful examinations. The reading was contextualist in the broad sense that participants' accounts were understood as situated within family, religion, and Pakistani social life. Interpretive claims were kept close to what the archival record could actually support and were checked against published qualitative work where comparison was possible.

Primary participants

The original project recruited adults: five nonbelievers. The present analysis includes only the five nonbelieving participants, three females and two males. The report gives an age range of 21 to 53 years for the full five-person sample. The study indicates that the nonbelieving participants had been raised in strongly Muslim families before moving away from inherited religious belief.

Recruitment and interview procedure

Participants were contacted through personal networks, referrals, and acquaintances who knew people willing to discuss atheism. In practice this amounted to a combination of opportunity and chain-referral recruitment, a pragmatic choice in a setting where open atheist identification can carry social costs. Interviews were conducted face to face in private or otherwise comfortable settings and lasted approximately 90 minutes on average. The semi-structured guide began with religious background and life history before moving into morality, death and grieving, premarital and extramarital sex, masturbation, homosexuality, and meaning in life. Interviewers were free to follow participants' narratives rather than preserve a fixed question order. Participants were informed that they could decline questions or recording, and the original report documents informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw.

Ethics

The interview project received institutional approval before data collection, and participants provided informed consent

Constructing the primary material

The material repeatedly, grouped observations by the domains actually discussed in the interviews, and then examined where those domains overlapped. The resulting themes are therefore best understood as a construction of a qualitative record.

Comparative qualitative corpus

For the comparative component, the study conducted a purposive scholarly search in August 2023 for qualitative studies addressing deconversion, moral identity, meaning, death, stigma or concealment, and post-religious identity. Search terms combined nonbelief, deconversion, morality, moral identity, meaning, death, stigma, qualitative, interview, grounded theory, phenomenology, Pakistan, South Asia, and former Muslim. We prioritized peer-reviewed studies that described their qualitative sample and analytic approach clearly and that reported findings specific to atheists or nonreligious participants. This was designed as a focused comparative review rather than a systematic review, and we do not use it to estimate prevalence or effect size.

Ten studies formed the core comparative corpus (Table 1). Together they included 198 interview participants and, in Pérez and Vallières (2019), 30 additional published deconversion testimonies. These numbers describe the secondary literature only; the Pakistani primary sample remains $n = 5$. We extracted reported themes and, where available, participant accounts relevant to the present domains. Full findings sections were used when accessible; when we had only a detailed abstract or repository record, we retained only what the authors explicitly reported. We also read sources in light of their own standpoint. Faysal et al. (2021), for example, frame atheism normatively as a problem to be countered. Their study is therefore useful here for participant-derived descriptions of Pakistani context and pathways to nonbelief, not for its theological conclusions.

Analytic integration

The published studies were used as a counterpoint to the archival findings rather than as a second pool of participants. After identifying patterns in the Pakistani material, we examined the comparative corpus for resonance, disconfirmation, and contextual difference. Some themes travelled easily across studies; others did not. The study paid particular attention to places where the Pakistani accounts seemed more constrained by family, religious normativity, or concealment than accounts from Western samples. This procedure borrows from thematic synthesis in moving between descriptive findings and broader interpretation (Thomas & Harden, 2008), but it remains intentionally less formal than a systematic qualitative meta-synthesis. JARS-Qual principles informed the emphasis on transparency about what material was and was not available (Levitt et al., 2018).

TABLE 01: COMPARATIVE QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE CORPUS

Study	Qualitative sample and context	Analytic relevance
Smith (2011)	United States; 40 self-avowed atheists; in-depth interviews plus participant observation	Questioning, rejection of theism, atheist identity formation, coming out
Mueller (2012)	United States; 16 self-identified atheist undergraduate/graduate students; qualitative interviews	Loss of faith, morality, death, meaning, campus life
Mann (2015)	United States; 19 atheist organization affiliates; in-depth interviews within a qualitative-dominant mixed-method study	Stigma, identity, community, family disclosure
Sumerau & Cragun (2016)	United States; 30 nonreligious adults; in-depth interviews	Moral identity, distinction between religious obedience and morality, prejudice, alternative sources of meaning
Popper & van Hout (2016)	Netherlands; 10 nonreligious students aged 18-25; in-depth interviews	Freedom and emptiness, critical awareness, self-created purpose
Pérez & Vallières (2019)	Ireland and other contexts; 6 atheist interviews plus 30 former-clergy testimonies	Reason and enquiry, criticism and discontent, personal development, gradual deconversion

Study	Qualitative sample and context	Analytic relevance
Abbott et al. (2020)	United States; 17 atheists of color; critical feminist phenomenology	Identity development, discrimination, isolation, cultural expectations, strategic outness
Faysal et al. (2021)	Pakistan; 19 self-identified atheist university students; semi-structured qualitative interviews	Contextual pathways to atheism, social/intellectual influences, marginalized identity
Abbott & Anaya (2022)	United States; 31 atheist-identified women; critical grounded theory	Liberation, patriarchal conflict, conformity pressure, concealment/disclosure
Tülek & Boratav (2026)	Türkiye; 10 former-Muslim atheists; in-depth interviews and thematic analysis	Former-Muslim identity, conflict between Islam and self, autonomy, rethinking inherited identities, stigma

Note. The secondary studies contextualize and triangulate the archival themes. Their participants are not added to the primary Pakistani sample, which remains $n = 5$.

FINDINGS

The findings are organized into six themes, although the boundaries between them are porous. Doubt about religion was sometimes also a moral judgment about religion; discussions of death slid into questions of meaning; and sexual ethics repeatedly returned to the broader question of what counts as harm. The archival evidence is uneven across themes, and the study has preserved that unevenness rather than treating each theme as equally saturated.

Theme 1: Doubt accumulated through questioning, suffering, and disillusionment

One of the clearest preserved accounts explicitly rejects a dramatic conversion narrative: 'I don't think there was any one particular moment where I just woke up and became an atheist.' He described coming across critical material about religion and following the question further. The specific books and public intellectuals mattered in his story, but the more striking feature is the slow permission to doubt. Religious claims that had previously functioned as givens became claims that could be inspected, compared, and rejected. The archive suggests a process rather than an event, although it does not allow us to reconstruct that process with equal detail for all five men.

Questioning was not purely intellectual. The surviving accounts also contain anger at religious hypocrisy, hostility toward doubt, fear-based teaching, restrictions placed on women, and the problem of severe human suffering. One participant described religious actors as morally inconsistent with the authority they claimed; elsewhere the report records difficulty reconciling suffering with an omnipotent and compassionate God. These observations matter because they show truth and morality becoming entangled in deconversion. For at least some participants, a religion could lose plausibility partly because its explanations no longer persuaded and partly because the moral order attached to those explanations became difficult to respect. Published studies make that combination less idiosyncratic. Pérez and Vallières (2019) separate 'reason and enquiry' from 'criticism and discontent' while showing that the two frequently overlap, and Smith (2011) likewise describes questioning as biographical rather than instantaneous. Faysal et al. (2021) report intellectual, social, and experiential influences among Pakistani atheists; Tülek and Boratav (2026) describe former-Muslim participants negotiating conflict between Islam and self. The present material fits comfortably within that broader pattern, but its small size does not justify a single model of Pakistani deconversion. What it does show is that disbelief, in these accounts, cannot be reduced to an isolated argument about whether God exists.

Theme 2: Moral obligation without divine command

When participants were asked where morality comes from without religion, the clearest preserved answer was strikingly ordinary: 'I treat others with respect because I want to be treated respectfully.' The same participant spoke about 'basic human decency' and fundamental rights.

Across the original summaries, reciprocity, respect, avoiding harm, and maintaining decent relations with other people appear repeatedly. These are not elaborated philosophical systems. They are practical moral reasons, expressed in the language of everyday obligation rather than theology. The participants did not describe disbelief as permission to act according to whatever preference happened to be strongest. Their reasoning invoked limits. Harm, coercion, betrayal, unequal treatment, and disregard for another person's agency remained morally relevant. In several passages, the justificatory question seems to move from 'is this forbidden?' toward 'what does this do to another person?'

Sumerau and Cragun's (2016) participants similarly distinguished morality from conformity and obedience while constructing a credible nonreligious moral identity. At a different level of analysis, Ståhl (2021) found relatively small differences between believers and disbelievers on harm and fairness and larger differences on binding foundations and consequentialist reasoning. Developmental research also makes it unnecessary to posit religious instruction as the origin of every capacity for empathy, reciprocity, or norm sensitivity (Tomasello & Vaish, 2013). The study uses horizontal moral authorization as a tentative label for the pattern in the Pakistani accounts: moral demands were most readily justified through obligations among persons.

Theme 3: Sexual conduct was judged through consent, honesty, and harm

Participants treated consensual premarital sex as potentially acceptable, described masturbation as a private sexual behavior rather than an intrinsic moral transgression, and approached homosexuality through individuality, rights, and non-harm. The terms that recur most clearly are consent, honesty, responsibility, and the consequences of an act for other people.

This does suggest a change in moral emphasis. Marital status or scriptural prohibition no longer appeared sufficient, by themselves, to make a sexual act wrong. Participants were more concerned with coercion, deception, exploitation, health risk, and responsibility. Yet the archive contains too few concrete dilemmas to establish how consistently these principles would be applied when they conflicted with loyalty, family expectations, jealousy, or personal desire. That absence is analytically important. A principle such as consent can organize a stated ethic without telling how a person reasons through morally ambiguous situations. The present data are strongest on what participants rejected and on the language they preferred, and weaker on how that language operated under conflict.

The comparative literature helps place these responses without reproducing several scientific errors in the original report. Homosexuality should not be described as learned deviance, and sexual desire is not itself evidence of pathology. What the literature does establish is that religious culture can shape norms around sex outside marriage (Adamczyk & Hayes, 2012), that religiosity may be associated with sexual guilt and inhibition in Christian and Muslim samples (Rigo & Saroglou, 2018), and that more negative attitudes toward homosexuality are often associated with religiosity, with substantial variation across traditions and social contexts (Jäckle & Wenzelburger, 2015; Whitley, 2009). Tülek and Boratav's (2026) former-Muslim participants also describe sexuality, gender, and selfhood as sites of conflict during identity change. The Pakistani material belongs in that conversation, but it cannot establish that atheism itself causes sexual liberalism.

Theme 4: Death remained unsettled even after the afterlife was rejected

The archival material is thinner here and, importantly, less internally tidy. Participants generally rejected a conventional religious afterlife and treated biological death as the end of the person as an organized conscious being. Research among atheists and other nonbelievers shows wide variation in death anxiety and acceptance (Sawyer et al., 2021), while Mueller's (2012) participants continued to reflect on mortality after leaving religion. The Pakistani

accounts are best read as evidence that a conventional afterlife had lost credibility, while the emotional and symbolic work of making sense of death remained open.

Theme 5: Meaning had to be made rather than received

The transcriptions repeatedly attribute value to love, close relationships, humanitarian concern, thought, self-development, and the freedom to construct personal priorities. The central participant position is recognizable: rejecting a divinely assigned purpose did not make life purposeless. Meaning was described as something located in relationships, projects, attachments, and chosen commitments.

The secondary literature supports that possibility while also complicating any celebratory account of self-authorship. Speed et al. (2018) found that atheists were more likely to describe meaning as self-produced without showing a general increase in nihilism or fatalism; Schnell and Keenan (2011) identified heterogeneous meaning profiles among atheists. Popper and van Hout's (2016) interviews are useful precisely because they preserve ambivalence: the freedom to make one's own meaning can be experienced as liberating and as burdensome. That tension is easy to miss when secular autonomy is written as an uncomplicated gain.

Theme 6: Nonbelief had to be managed socially

A participant described meeting other people who also questioned religion and feeling a sense of recognition, then added that 'all of us are marginalized here and we have to obey Muslim rules.' The wording is broad and should not be treated as a sociological description of Pakistan as a whole. What it makes visible is the participant's felt position: nonbelief was not only an answer to a metaphysical question. It was something that had to be negotiated in relation to family, public norms, and the anticipated consequences of being known.

This theme has substantial resonance in the comparative corpus. Mann (2015) links atheist identity with stigma, community, and family disclosure; Abbott et al. (2020) describe discrimination, isolation, cultural expectations, and strategic decisions about being 'out' among atheists of color; and Abbott and Anaya (2022) show atheist women calibrating disclosure in response to Christian normativity. Tülek and Boratav (2026) report comparable concealment dilemmas among former-Muslim atheists in Türkiye. Quack and Schulz's (2023) South Asian work is especially relevant because it shows that disbelief, culture, and public identity do not map neatly onto one another. People can cease to believe without ceasing to inhabit the social world of religion.

The Pakistani material adds a specifically moral dimension to this management of identity. Where religious belonging is taken as evidence of respectability, a nonbeliever may need to make his moral character legible to others. The participant who emphasized reciprocal respect was therefore doing more than stating a familiar ethical maxim; in context, such language may also answer the suspicion that someone without religious belief is unconstrained. Study refer to this as a problem of moral legibility rather than as a fixed trait of Pakistani atheism. The concept is useful because it captures the double task visible in the archive: developing an ethic for oneself while also living under the possibility that one's moral credibility will be doubted.

DISCUSSION

The strongest thread running through these interviews is not a rejection of morality but a dispute about what is allowed to count as a moral reason. Participants continued to speak in the language of obligation: respect, harm, honesty, consent, rights, responsibility. Religious prohibition, however, no longer carried authority simply because it was religious. This was clearest in sexual ethics, but it also appeared in discussions of suffering, hypocrisy, and everyday decency. The shift is best understood cautiously. Five interviews cannot establish a distinct Pakistani atheist moral system, and the participants themselves did not present one. What they did offer were recurrent justificatory habits in which the effects of conduct on persons mattered more than conformity to sacred categories.

Horizontal moral authorization is our attempt to name that recurring habit without giving it more coherence than the data can bear. The phrase refers to moral reasons that acquire force through relations among persons: suffering, fairness, consent, dignity, reciprocity, trust, and responsibility. It does not imply that every nonreligious judgment is relational, that secular ethics lack absolutes, or that religious people do not reason in these terms. Nor should the term obscure the ordinary quality of the participants' language. Their moral vocabulary was not philosophical in the technical sense. Its significance lies precisely in how familiar it was: treating someone decently, not causing harm, being honest, respecting another person's agency.

Sexuality shows both the usefulness and the limits of this interpretation. Once scriptural prohibition and the sacred status of marriage ceased to be decisive, participants emphasized consent, honesty, and non-harm. A consensual act outside marriage could therefore be acceptable, while deception or coercion remained objectionable. Yet the archive does not contain enough detailed moral dilemmas to show what happened when these principles collided with family loyalty, jealousy, reputation, or unequal power. The finding is therefore about stated grounds of judgment, not demonstrated moral consistency. That distinction matters if the concept of horizontal moral authorization is to remain an empirical proposition rather than a flattering description of secular ethics.

Moral foundations research offers one useful comparison, although mapping the interviews directly onto that framework would be too neat. Ståhl (2021) and Saroglou and Craninx (2021) report more consistent believer-disbeliever differences in binding concerns such as authority and purity than in care or fairness. The Pakistani interviews sound compatible with that pattern because participants repeatedly questioned whether authority deserved obedience and evaluated conduct through its human consequences. But they were not completing a moral-foundations inventory, and their accounts contain little evidence about loyalty, fairness conflicts, or moral objectivism. The qualitative contribution is therefore not to reproduce a quantitative structure in miniature. It is to show how the legitimacy of authority itself became part of moral reasoning after deconversion.

The deconversion narratives make this especially clear. Reading, scepticism, and exposure to criticism of religion mattered, but so did perceived hypocrisy, gender restriction, fear-based teaching, and the problem of suffering. In retrospect, participants narrated a religion whose truth claims and moral claims had become difficult to sustain together. Such retrospective coherence should itself be treated carefully; people often tell the story of major identity change from the standpoint they eventually reached. Even with that qualification, the archive suggests that leaving religion was not experienced as a purely intellectual correction. It also involved deciding that certain forms of authority no longer merited deference.

Death complicates any simple story of rational secularization. The same archive that rejects the conventional afterlife also reaches, in places, for the language of conserved energy. Scientifically, that language cannot support continuity of consciousness. Psychologically, its presence is more interesting than a cleaned-up account would be. It suggests that a person may reject one metaphysics without immediately losing the wish, image, or intuition that something of the person continues. Meaning shows a related ambiguity. Participants described love, relationship, humanitarian concern, and chosen goals as sources of purpose, while other qualitative studies show that self-authorship can carry both freedom and weight (Popper & van Hout, 2016; Schnell & Keenan, 2011; Speed et al., 2018). A secular worldview can therefore be coherent without being emotionally simple.

The Pakistani setting gives these negotiations a different social texture from many Western accounts of atheist 'coming out.' In South Asia, religious identity can remain embedded in family membership, ritual participation, and public respectability even after theological belief has weakened (Quack & Schulz, 2023). Faysal et al. (2021) likewise emphasize the contextual character of atheism in Pakistan. The participant who described marginalization and the need to

'obey Muslim rules' speaks from within that dense social field. His nonbelief may have been privately clear while its public expression remained constrained. This is one reason categorical labels alone tell us little about how nonreligion is actually lived.

The idea of moral legibility follows from that constraint. Gervais's research shows that atheists are often imagined as people who lack the surveillance and sanctions assumed to keep others moral. In such a context, saying 'I treat others with respect because I want to be treated respectfully' can carry more than one meaning. It states an ethic, but it may also protect a social self against the accusation that disbelief has made the person dangerous or untrustworthy. We cannot know from the archival material whether participants consciously intended that defensive function. The possibility nevertheless deserves attention because moral identity is formed not only through what one believes, but also through the judgments one anticipates from others.

The comparative literature gives these small Pakistani accounts a wider frame without resolving their limitations. Gradual deconversion, criticism of religious authority, self-authored meaning, concealment, and the effort to construct a credible nonreligious identity recur in studies from the United States, Europe, Türkiye, and Pakistan (Abbott et al., 2020; Abbott & Anaya, 2022; Pérez & Vallières, 2019; Smith, 2011; Sumerau & Cragun, 2016; Tülek & Boratav, 2026). Resonance across studies strengthens the plausibility of the themes; it does not turn five interviews into a representative sample. The value of the Pakistani material lies elsewhere, in showing how familiar processes of deconversion and secular meaning-making are lived inside a setting where religion remains socially dense and public nonbelief may be costly.

METHODOLOGICAL LIMITS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The sample itself is small and narrow: five nonbelievers. The interviews were lengthy, which increases the amount of information available from each case, and qualitative adequacy cannot be reduced to a universal numeric threshold (Malterud et al., 2016). Even so, the original interview guide covered many large domains. A 90-minute interview that moves across deconversion, morality, sexuality, grief, death, and meaning cannot provide the same depth in each area as a study designed around one of them. The present findings should therefore be read as concept-generating and context-specific.

Recruitment also matters. Participants were reached through personal networks and referrals, so people willing to sit for a face-to-face interview about atheism may differ from those who remain entirely concealed. They may be more secure in their nonbelief, more connected to other nonbelievers, more willing to question religious authority publicly, or simply more comfortable with the researchers. The archive gives us little leverage for judging those possibilities. It should not be treated as a demographic cross-section of Pakistani nonbelief.

The comparative corpus broadens the conversation but introduces a different set of limits.

Studies were chosen purposively for conceptual relevance rather than through a preregistered systematic-review protocol, and they vary in country, age, gender, race, former religious affiliation, and intensity of atheist identification. In several cases the full text was available; in others, only explicitly reported themes from detailed abstracts or repository records could be used. The synthesis is therefore strongest as a way of asking whether an interpretation is recognizable elsewhere. It cannot establish prevalence, universality, or a common developmental sequence, and it remains several interpretive steps removed from the secondary participants themselves (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003; Thomas & Harden, 2008).

A further limitation is interpretive position. The participants were former members of religious families speaking retrospectively from a nonbelieving standpoint. Their accounts of religion tell us how religion appeared within their deconversion narratives; they are not neutral descriptions of believers or of Islam. The same caution applies to the study's reconstruction. Future work should therefore include explicit reflexive documentation of the research team's relation to religion and nonbelief, as well as full transcription and participant-level demographic records.

A stronger follow-up study would use purposive maximum-variation sampling across gender, age, education, socioeconomic position, region, and degree of concealment. The interview guide should also become narrower and more demanding. Rather than asking only for opinions about premarital sex, homosexuality, or morality in the abstract, participants could be asked to reason through concrete conflicts involving consent, loyalty, family obligation,

deception, care, unequal power, and harm. A quantitative component could then examine moral foundations, moral objectivism, meaning in life, death attitudes, perceived stigma, and concealment. Such a design would allow horizontal moral authorization to be challenged, refined, or discarded on the basis of new data.

Concealment deserves particular attention in Pakistan. It is not merely an obstacle to recruitment; it may be one of the central psychological conditions of nonbelief. Future interviews should examine disclosure, family belonging, ritual participation, online and offline identity, fear of moral judgment, and the emotional work involved in outward conformity. South Asian research already suggests that nonreligion is often situational (Quack & Schulz, 2023). The important question may therefore be less who 'counts' as an atheist than how nonbelief becomes possible, speakable, or unspeakable across different relationships and settings.

CONCLUSION

The five men whose accounts survive in this study continued to describe obligations after religious belief had weakened: respect, reciprocity, consent, responsibility, rights, and the avoidance of harm. Their explanations did not amount to a single secular moral philosophy, and the available material is too limited to claim one. What recurs is a practical tendency to justify moral judgment through what conduct does to other people rather than through the sacred status of a rule. Sexuality made that tendency especially visible, while discussions of death and meaning showed that leaving religion did not resolve every metaphysical or emotional question.

Published qualitative work suggests that several features of these accounts are recognizable beyond this sample. Gradual deconversion, moral criticism of religious authority, self-authored meaning, concealment, and the effort to remain socially credible recur across nonreligious populations in the United States, Europe, Türkiye, and Pakistan. The local contribution of the present material lies in the density of the religious social world around the participant. In such a setting, disbelief can remain private even when it is personally settled, and morality may have to be lived under the additional pressure of proving that disbelief has not made one morally suspect.

These interviews therefore leave us with a question of moral authority rather than a verdict on whether atheists are 'moral.' For these participants, divine command had ceased to settle the matter. Reasons still had to be given, and the reasons that survived most clearly concerned other human beings: what could harm them, deceive them, constrain them, respect them, or make reciprocal life possible.

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