

**RESEARCH PAPER****The Pursuit of Health through Faith Healing: An Anthropological Analysis of Personalistic Belief System****<sup>1</sup>Bisma Ayub, <sup>2</sup>Aiman Ali Syed and <sup>3</sup>Humaira Zulfqar**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study describes the phenomenon of faith healing by investigating various factors that motivate people to seek treatment and cure through faith. This ethnographic study has been conducted at HMC Housing Colony Taxila. The researcher has used purposive sampling technique to conduct this research. In-depth interviews have been taken with the colony residents as well as visitors at the shrine Baba Musafir Shah at HMC Colony Taxila. The findings of this research reveal that religious rituals bind individuals together. Media, including print or electronic and religious scholars play a vital role in making people attentive of the fact that faith healing helps an individual for healing. All aspects of one's life go through significant changes as a result of modernization, globalization, and social change. This research will contribute to the existing knowledge by providing evidence based faith healing practices, and hence will provide bases for the future researchers to integrate faith healing into mainstream healthcare, promoting a holistic approach to wellness.

**Keywords:** Faith Healing, Health, Personalistic Belief System, Religion**Introduction**

The practice of healing through faith is known as faith healing. Believers in this practice have come to believe that their diseases and ailments can be cured or relieved by praying, believing, and having good intentions (Hutchinson, 2018). It is a type of healing that is performed through prayer and religious convictions rather than through medical interventions. People are undeniably aspiring to achieve optimal well-being, which is also described as a condition free from illnesses and other disorders, and being able to enjoy health and an active body, mind, and spirit. The ability of a person to operate mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually is referred to as being in good health. The topic focuses on how people's attitudes about their health can be influenced by their religious beliefs and practices. To understand how and why people seek alternative treatments (faith healing), as well as to learn about people's attitudes and perceptions of religious healing, it emphasizes the connection between health and religion. This has become essential because faith healing practice is a significant area but also neglected in health care literature. Medical pluralism refers to the availability of various medical modalities, procedures, and institutions that people might utilize in their pursuit of wellness, such as biomedicine, religious healing, and over-the-counter medications (Venera, 2021).

The relationship between religion and healing, while emphasizing an anthropological viewpoint, considers categories such as worldviews, religious beliefs, religious and spiritual activities, rituals, deities, and symbols rather than science. According to anthropology of religion, every religion articulates a coherent worldview that purposefully organizes human life (Suolinna & Banton, 1970). According to Durkheim, religion is about community because it brings people together (social cohesion), encourages

behavioral consistency (social control), and gives people strength through difficult times in life (Ron McGivern, 2016).

Each historically recognized religion has its own set of doctrines, rites, and practices. Religions are founded, revised, and maintained because through them groups of persons make sense of inevitably baneful and tragic events of life natural disasters, illness, suffering and death, etc. It functions as a system of control and checks on what is moral and ethical. (Levin and Vander Pool, 1987). A significant component of a culture's ideological resources for health care is religion. It has played a crucial part in the healing process by keeping hope in one's ability to recover despite the stark medical truth that predicts a dismal prognosis for recovery (Winkelman, 2009). Groups of people from many cultures frequently engage in traditional folk healing practices including spiritual and religious healing. According to Popoola (2015), since the dawn of civilization, leaders in every culture have frequently looked for traditional natural remedies to improve the health of their constituents. Various scientific studies have demonstrated that there is a substantial correlation between faith and healing, such that those who have confidence in the Supreme Being can heal themselves and recover from certain illnesses fast and effortlessly. (Mc Johnson, 2016). The medical anthropology literature explains how people turn to religion for treatment and see health as a gift from God. In terms of how people construct their identities, religion is crucial. Life has structure and significance because of religious beliefs and practices like praying, going to religious services, participating in religious ceremonies, etc. Religion offers a safe explanation for mysterious occurrences. It gives people a foundation on which to construct justifications for the ordinary facts of their lives within the context of "holy" and "supernatural". It facilitates the creation of a meaningful framework that makes the situation easier to modify, comprehend, or accept. Additionally, it influences a person's existence and establishes their identity. It integrates a person into a community or collectivity. (Rai, 2016).

According to this research, visitors daily performed various rituals for healing purposes at the Baba Musafir Shah shrine. In this shrine, many people also come just for paying respect, and not to perform any ritual related to healing purposes. For them, this shrine is the generational place of worship. Ursula Sharma, an anthropologist, has connected the history of local shrines, as well as the generational practice of worshipping with some dominant castes and families. Also, South Asian anthropologists have studied shrines and their connections to human groups, their kinship, history, politics, king and royal generosity, and their reciprocal relationship with deities and patronage, religious system, village social organization, community-village making, place-making, communal struggle to assert their belonging and territorial claim, and so on (Rai, 2016).

## **Literature Review**

Religion has long been seen as a tool for preserving and reaffirming a person's sense of self in society. These very social networks or health networks serve as the central support system for the sick individual throughout their sickness experiences. Religious practices and beliefs are created over time, with the important effect of others on their creation and use in terms of how people approach their pursuit of health. For the majority of individuals, religion has always had a significant impact on their lives. Like any other social institution, religion plays a part in upholding social order and providing context for events that occur in the lives of those who adhere to it. It promotes group cohesion on a social level, and on a personal level, it gives significance to everyday experiences within a sacred context. There are several ways to evaluate religion's influence on society. The goal of this anthropological research is to better understand the role of religion in peoples' health-seeking behaviors. In essence, the goal was to comprehend how religion manifests itself in preserving the framework of a society and events for those who adhere to it. Understanding how people feel about religion and its influence on their health-seeking behavior is essential to understanding how religion and its related beliefs and practices affect people's behavior. It

is important to comprehend how people come to believe in their religion and how that belief ultimately affects how their lives unfold. At the Baba Musafir Shah Shrine, many things placed are sacred for visitors like salt, Holy oil etc. Indeed, all things which were used for healing purposes in this shrine are considered sacred for visitors. Durkheim believed that understanding the role of religion in society required the discovery of the relationship between sacred symbols and what they represent (Thompson, 2018).

## Material and Methods

In this study, an ethnographic research methodology has been used. Ethnography is a method of studying social groups' beliefs, social relationships, and behaviors by observing participants for extended periods in the field and then interpreting the data collected (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Reeves, et.al, 2008; Berry, 1991).

In this study, unstructured in-depth interviews were conducted with the respondents as the ethnographic research extensively relies on in-depth interviewing (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). The sampling technique that was used in this research is the 'Purposive Sampling Technique' in which a researcher chooses participants on their own (Lavrakas, 2008). For the research study, a sample of different participants was taken from the target population. The total sample taken was 26 between the age limit of 20-60 years. This sample included 13 males and 13 females. Respondents with diverse educational, socio-economic groups and sects were interviewed to get heterogeneous information. To get in-depth knowledge my sample included 20 respondents (ie. 10 males and 10 females) who regularly visited shrines as well as 06 respondents (ie. 03 males and 03 females) who did not visit shrines, but still performed extensive religious rituals related to faith healing at their households. All the research participants were able to respond to me easily according to my requirements. The scale of this diverse age range helped the researcher look deeply into different perspectives and experiences.

Another technique that extensively helped the researcher to build rapport was participant observation. According to this technique, the researchers have to immerse themselves in a particular social environment or group for monitoring the participants' behaviors, interactions, and practices (George, 2023). Respondents' anonymity and confidentiality were fully protected by not disclosing their names or personal information during data analysis, reporting, and dissemination. As a result, the names of the respondents are kept private and are not disclosed. Instead, they were given a pseudonym of their own choice. Musafir Baba Darbaar is a religious site at Heavy Mechanical Complex (HMC) Colony, Taxila, Rawalpindi, and Punjab, Pakistan. It is located in the housing society (HMC Taxila). This shrine is fully decorated with petals, lights, shining sheets, and green flags. Also, there is a dense plantation around this shrine and many rituals like thread hanging and flag hangings etc. are performed at this site.

**Table 1**  
**Demographic Profile**

	<b>Demographic</b>	<b>No. of Participants</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Male	13
	Female	13
<b>Occupation</b>	Employ at HMC Taxila	03
	Student	04
	Shopkeeper	03
	Housewife	07
	Security Guard	02
	Teacher	02
	Businessman	01
	Day Care Caretaker	02

	Unemployed	02
<b>Age Group</b>	18-35	13
	40-60	13
<b>Education</b>	Matric	07
	Middle	06
	Intermediate	03
	Bs	03
	Master	03
	Illiterate	04

## Results and Discussion

Islam is a way of life, and it places a strong emphasis on the need to maintain good health. Additionally, it guides how to deal with illness. Faith and practice, or what the Qur'an called "righteous deeds," are inextricably linked. Faith healing entails prayer, going to a religious site, or just having a strong belief in a supreme power (Ateeq et al., 2018). Praying for health is an important part of the Islamic culture. Religious places play a vital role in healing purposes.

According to this study, the followers of Islam viewed faith healing in two ways; the application of what the Holy Quran says about healing and the consultation of Islamic leaders for instructions and prescriptions as to how to go about dealing with a health problem. A male respondent named Shabbir Ahmed, who was 55 years old, responded that: Allah has the power to heal. It's all a matter of belief. If someone has a strong belief in God, then he/she overcomes all bad situations. As Dr. Muhammad Ateeq explained in his article *Faith Healing; Modern Health Care* we as Muslims believe in one Allah SubhanaTalah and the Holy Quran (Ateeq et al., 2018). According to the respondents, certain individuals and places like religious institutions have sacred powers which may also heal people and their illnesses. The respondents attributed the source of this power to the divine through prayers. A respondent named, Kalsoom who was 45 years old, stated that

We have been visiting Baba Musafir Shah Shrine since long. Almost every two days, we go in the evening and lighten the shrine with candles because we believe in this shrine.

According to the respondents, socioeconomic challenge is the biggest barrier to the adaptation of medical methods. The respondents had so much pain in their voices when they explained their crucial life due to poverty, inflation, and unemployment. If I compare it with a cross-cultural context, a study is conducted to find out the reason for not choosing other methods instead of faith healing. Then the results of the study demonstrated that in Africa folk healing techniques such as spiritual healing, holistic and preventive medicine, herbalism, homeopathy, supernatural belief, creative healers, and symbolic healing rituals are very common. This is a result of both the need for medical care and poverty. In this culture, many people believe that these religious healing methods create a chain of communication between a worshipper and the Almighty God. However, it is thought that these conventional treatments can help with a variety of medical and health issues (Popoola, 2015). Pakistan is facing such a painful condition where poverty and unemployment issues are at their peak. According to the statistics, Poverty is anticipated to rise to 37.2% by 2023 (World Bank, 2023). Hospitals increase their charges, medicines become more expensive and this is the main reason that people move toward traditional healing methods.

The term supernatural describes things or beings that are beyond the natural laws. Although the idea of the supernatural varies depending on culture, some things encourage belief in extraordinary forces. The term supernatural experiences refer to the feelings that directly confirm occult ideas. Supernatural encounters are significant because they provide the philosophies that promote occult healing techniques (McClenon, 2017). Culturally

diverse anthropological investigations show that humans do not embrace or employ scientific and supernatural explanations in a way that is mutually exclusive or binary. Instead, it is widespread throughout cultures to reconcile natural and supernatural explanations. At Baba Musafir Shah Shrine, the majority of visitors who thought they or their family members were impacted by supernatural forces. They were categorizing indicators of suffering depending upon the categories of difficulties like magic spells, possession by evil spirits, or evil eye. Evil spirit possessions were regarded as chronic issues requiring prolonged treatment, but black magic was thought to be extremely serious and it could lead quickly to death if appropriate treatment was not sought in time (Pirani et al., 2008). At the shrine, most people believed that when someone is diagnosed with magic or witchcraft, then these holy places are the sites of healing because no medicine can heal supernatural diseases and these cannot exist to the best of scientific knowledge. Due to the religious activities or *Dumm* etc. patients can overcome unbearable circumstances. The disease theory system, stated by G. M. Foster, demonstrates that peoples' ideas about the origins of illness not only provide an explanation for why the illness has happened but also serve as a means of sanctioning social and moral norms.

Religion is a cohesive system of sacred laws, principles, ideals, and objects. Religion has a significant impact on how people live their lives, behave, and interact in every society. People consult their religion and live their lives by its teachings in every aspect. Globalization, social transformation, and modernity are currently causing very significant changes in every aspect of life. (Menhas et al., 2015). Modernization is the process of secularization, which systematically challenges religious institutions, beliefs, and practices in favor of those based on reason and science. Modernization causes a separation from religious beliefs and practices. Religion loses its convincing power and plays a significant role in the entire social order after the human mind goes through this process (Aydin, 2001).

One of my respondents namely Ghulam Mustafa, who was 50 years old, responded that:

The more modern we are getting, the more we are getting away from our religion. God has given the solution to every problem and every disease but due to the modern age, we don't follow it, especially the young generation.

According to the above respondent, modernization has come to create changes. Here modern means the emergence of new medical techniques, machinery, lots of hospitals, and clinics that were not present in the past. But now these advancements made us modern. According to him, every religion has its own opinions and point of views that eventually shape up the belief system, but due to modernization, mostly people don't relate with these discourses. As the work of Durkheim and Weber highlighted that modernization created a gap between a person and his religion. People are manipulating the religious aspect according to feasibility and viability (Ibrahim, 2022). Due to the modernization process, change occurs quite quickly in the industrialized world. Nowadays, the world is becoming more secular, logical, and accepting of religious reform (Menhas et al., 2015). The views about the nature of health and illness as well as the methods of treatment have also changed in the modern era. According to the respondents, media like Islamic channels are the best source of religious and moral training for all the people of the world. The above respondent stated that she relies on this channel or program because Mufti Hassan Attari tells the Quranic solution of every remedy. The social media team of such channels also strives to spread the message of Islam and to call toward righteousness through social media platforms.

In this study, it is observed that majority of people believed in various rituals related to spiritual/faith healing. The practice of faith healing practices were seen more frequently in females as compared to males. Socioeconomic challenge is also one significant barrier to the adaptation of medical methods. People from financially weak backgrounds were more

indulged in these practices. Few of the respondents believed that due to inflation, they were not able to bear the expenses of hospitals and medicines. Most of the respondents whose age groups were between 40-60 years believed that modernization creates a drastic change in every aspect of life. As traditions fade and people have more and more freedom to choose for themselves, modernization encourages a more logical, scientific viewpoint. Also diverse views and behaviors are fostered by the growth of cities and interactions of people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds (Berger, 1977).

People from different walks of life including businessmen, students, daily wage labors, factory workers as well as housewives visited the shrine. A huge difference was found in the opinion of highly educated and illiterate people about their perceptions regarding shrines and different rituals performed for seeking health. Overall people visited that shrine for multiple reasons such as for satisfying their spiritual needs, and also their economic needs. Findings of the study showed that the visitors of this shrine have this belief that coming to this shrine, praying here and eating sacred food would help them for curing their diseases. The participants highlighted that by blessings of that shrine, people get rid of many diseases. On probe, it was revealed that the sacred eatable items like salt, sugar, *Dam Wala Pani* (Holy verses read on water) have been considered to treat many diseases.

Since some diseases lack a scientific explanation, a personalistic belief system aids in that situation. For example, in this study few of the respondents believe that religious rituals are quite significant in order to cope up with those diseases that have no scientific explanations, like magic or witchcraft. At the shrine, mostly respondents believe that when someone is diagnosed with magic or witchcraft, these religious rituals or holy places are the sites of healing. Over there, the visitors perform various rituals. One of the rituals performed in this shrine is nail hanging on wooden blocks. There is a big wooden block lying in this shrine. The visitors believe that the person who inserts the nail in the wood will heal from tooth pain. The believers in this ritual believe that this is a very old ritual performed in this shrine. Many people heal after practicing this ritual, which is the main reason that this ritual is practiced today. Most of the female visitors performed the barefooted ritual. In this ritual, visitors believe that their desires will be fulfilled if they come barefooted to a shrine, pray, and then return home barefooted. Among the other rituals some are, recitation of the holy Quran near the grave, touching the entrance walls and grave base, bowing to the grave and embracing it, touching the surface with eyes, laying *chaddar* (grave spread) and rose garlands over the grave. Some people rub their bodies with stones that rest on the grave. In addition, many visitors tie threads or small padlocks to the screen round the grave, tie threads in the trees, light candles, take oil from the burning oil lamps and apply that to their bodies especially in case of any disease. They also taste the ash called *khake shifa* (ashes for curing diseases) from fire that is permanently burning.

Religious rituals are used in the process of recovering from a personalistic belief system to aid in healing and to give inner satisfaction. Many Muslims identify strongly with their religion and traditions, which give their lives shape and significance through prayers and performing other religious actions.

The current research indicates that religion holds different meanings for individuals even if they are followers of the same religion. Some people believe that in the process of regaining normalcy, visits to religious sites play a significant role. These practices have their origins in the deeply embedded belief systems of people. Not only are physical ailments sought to be healed through prayers, but also religion plays a significant role in the fulfillment of hopes and desires. Humans always try to find significance in the things that happen to them and the experiences they have in life. Things like health events are often interpreted within the framework of religious beliefs and worldviews in order to give some sense to enduring questions like "why me" or how to handle such situations. Justifications based on religion and the conviction that a supernatural entity, usually God, can solve all of life's problems indicate that there may be more going on than just the mundane world.

Patients were also persuaded to fully engage in the treatment process by their observations and experiences regarding the effectiveness and success of the healing procedure. Religious and cultural/traditional beliefs also had a direct effect on people because of their prior knowledge of the development of religion and religious healing practices in society. Strong believers in mystical phenomena and extraordinary abilities were also more likely to be motivated to seek out perplexing treatment methods as they held the notion that there are some aspects of the universe for which modern science is unable to provide conclusive explanations. Some individuals were motivated to determine tolerable treatment because they were afraid of undergoing medical treatments. However, due to the perception that standard medical procedures are expensive means to obtain quality care, some people also resorted to traditional and alternative practices like faith healing when facing financial difficulties. Additionally, those who had previously encountered the inefficacy of various modern medical procedures were more likely to be inspired to turn to faith and religious healing approaches as a last resort. Finally, the intrinsic desire to attain holistic health is one of the most important elements that drive the majority of patients to pursue effective treatment.

### **Conclusion**

Religious rites have a crucial role in the healing process, particularly when there is no scientific explanation for a sickness. These rituals, which have their roots in personalistic belief systems, and help people reestablish normalcy for giving them a sense of inner fulfillment. They are seen as channels for realizing aspirations and goals in addition to being ways to treat medical conditions. Many people use religion as a framework to understand and provide meaning to life's occurrences, frequently attributing them to a supernatural being like God. The current study therefore, analyzed the perceptions and beliefs of people regarding faith healing, to provide a basis for future researches, on the connection of faith healing and bio-medical healthcare. The study also contributes to the existing knowledge of health seeking behaviors, and thus can also be beneficial for professionals to incorporate patients' religious views into their treatment regimens. As the participants of research elaborate the significance of religious rituals in healing therefore, sensitizing medical practitioners about multiple belief systems and cultural diversity can be beneficial to better assist patients from different backgrounds. Therefore, training programs for medical practitioners including cultural competence and sensitivity to multiple belief systems as well as normalizing and endorsing the religious ceremonies along with the medical treatments should be introduced, so as to provide holistic care to individuals.

### **Recommendations**

The Recommendations of the research are as follows:

- Create policies that formally acknowledge faith healing as a complimentary therapy.
- Support and promote studies aimed at confirming the effectiveness and safety of spiritual healing methods.
- Incorporate spiritual healers into interdisciplinary medical teams, particularly for the treatment of chronic illness, mental health issues and chronic disease management.
- Provide continuing education opportunities for healthcare professionals to learn about integrating spiritual healing into their practice.

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