

Project Title:Tele-guiding: Religion and Television in Contemporary Pakistan

Abstract:

This project explores the relationship between television and the formation of subjectivity in urban Pakistan. More particularly, I seek to understand the ways in which religious cable television programming re/mediates the process of spiritual guidance and reconfigures viewers' relationship to religious authority in urban Pakistan. Although broadly conceived, taking into account Pakistan's larger religious-ethical framework in which religious shows and channels are operating; the project focuses on the genre of Islamic call-in advice shows that appear on Pakistan's local cable television. The success of this genre has increased exponentially signaling a new ephemeral form of mediation that interlaces normative understandings of religion and affective dimensions of viewers. The kinds of questions callers most often ask are a clue to what callers and viewers are searching for, "Why is there no peace in my heart (dil mein be sukuni)?" "Why does our house not have grace (barkat)?" The callers deliver their suffering, disease, sorrow, and unhappiness while in return the religious scholars and hosts offer grace, comfort, joy, and peace. Television mediates this exchange of affects and facilitates the rise of a new type of religious leader, like Amir Liaquat, Junaid Jamshed, and Farhat Hashmi who by virtue of their media performance - voices, demeanor, or devotional singing (na't, nasheed) - attract a broad constituency of believers. I posit that these exchanges offered by television hosts are remediating previous processes of religious guidance, and subsequently the relationship between religious experts and the faithful. This research on how the pervasiveness of private cable television is re-shaping religious experience in Pakistan is a timely study, and speaks to the broader theoretical issues of religion in globalized modernity as well as visuality, affect, and subjectivity.