

Received: 7 July 2026

Revised: 17 August 2026

Accepted: 25 August 2026

BEYOND DIVINE MANDATES: THE CONDITIONAL DYNAMICS OF RELIGIOSITY, SECULAR ETHICS, AND RULE COMPLIANCE

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(This article belongs to Theme 1: Law, Crime & Justice in the Age of AI)

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Abstract

This comprehensive review critically synthesizes empirical evidence from 2001 to 2025 to investigate the highly conditional relationship between religiosity, rule compliance, and societal order. By examining behaviors across familial, organizational, and broader macro-societal strata, the study challenges the pervasive assumption that religious adherence universally guarantees moral and law-abiding conduct. The findings clearly reveal that while intrinsic religiosity effectively deters specific deviances and fosters whistleblowing intentions, hierarchical and fundamentalist religious frameworks frequently normalize systemic corruption and legitimize domestic violence. Crucially, this relationship is not linear; eight distinct variables strictly moderate it, including intrinsic motivation, moral community structures, and the balance between civic and religious identities. Furthermore, contrary to widespread anti-atheist prejudices, evidence consistently demonstrates that robust secular societies achieve exceptional levels of legal compliance and social well-being through consequentialist ethics and highly effective secular surveillance. Ultimately, this research urges legal scholars, sociologists, and policymakers to move beyond simplistic religious paradigms. It instead advocates deliberately prioritizing high-quality secular institutions and inclusive civic governance frameworks to ensure equitable justice and human rights globally.

Keywords: Rule Compliance, Sociology of Religion, Secular Ethics, Legal Pluralism, Institutional Quality

Citation Information: Horakul, P., Wongmahesak, K., Sriyakul, T., & Singh, B. (2026). Beyond Divine Mandates: The Conditional Dynamics of Religiosity, Secular Ethics, and Rule Compliance. *Asian Crime and Society Review*, 13(2), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.14456/acsr.2026.10>

Introduction

Throughout human history, religion has often been regarded as one of the most fundamental mechanisms of social control, tasked with inculcating moral conduct and deterring deviant behavior among its adherents. This concept—deeply embedded in public discourse, political rhetoric, and legal philosophy—rests on the assumption that the religiously devout are inherently more law-abiding, honest, and socially responsible than those who are less religious or non-religious. For instance, former U.S. Attorney General William Barr (2019), in his 2019 speech at Notre Dame University, condemned secularism as a “social pathology” that destroys “moral order” and argued that, without belief in a “transcendent Supreme Being,” the “possibility of a healthy community life will collapse” (The Guardian, 2019).

This perspective is not limited to Western discourse but appears in societies worldwide. A Pew Research Center (2020) survey of 38,426 individuals across 34 countries found that approximately 44% of respondents overall believe that belief in God is a necessary prerequisite for morality, with this proportion exceeding 80% in some countries, such as Indonesia, Nigeria, and Turkey. In contemporary Thai society, questions such as “Are non-religious people bad?” (Visalo, 2011) or, slightly less intensely, “Can one be good without religion?” (The Matter, 2019) are still posed publicly. Opinions are widely expressed on modern social media platforms—for instance, on Reddit, where a post states, “Not having religion means there is nothing to stop bad people from doing bad things” (efkalsklkqiee, 2025). These sentiments were prevalent even in the last month of the first quarter of the 21st century.

However, such claims require rigorous examination through empirical evidence. The first quarter of the 21st century (2001-2025) has generated a substantial body of related empirical knowledge—including meta-analyses, systematic reviews, and large-scale cross-cultural experiments—that enables a more detailed and nuanced assessment of the relationship between religion and rule compliance.

The academic landscape on this issue reflects no straightforward consensus and is marked by complexity and contradiction (Johnson & Morris, 2008; Adamczyk et al., 2017; Jang & Johnson, 2017). Baier and Wright (2001), conducting a meta-analysis of 60 studies, found that religious beliefs and practices have a moderate inhibitory effect on crime, with an average effect size of $r = -0.12$. Meanwhile, Johnson and Jang (2012), in a review of 270 studies from 1944 to 2010, found that approximately 90% of the research indicated a significant deterrent effect of religiosity on antisocial behavior. However, a closer examination reveals substantial variability in these results. Hirschi and Stark (1969), in their classic work “Hellfire and Delinquency,” found no relationship between religious participation and juvenile delinquency, sparking decades of debate on whether and how religion genuinely influences rule compliance. Subsequently, Stark (1996) proposed the “moral communities hypothesis,” suggesting that religion's inhibitory effect on crime occurs only when a community possesses a high structural level of religiosity, forming a “moral community,” rather than merely individual faith (Regnerus, 2003).

More recently, Norenzayan (2013, 2014) introduced the concept of “Big Gods” within a cultural evolutionary framework, proposing that belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally concerned deity facilitates cooperation in large-scale societies through mechanisms of supernatural surveillance and punishment (Norenzayan et al., 2016). Concurrently, Saroglou (2011, 2013) proposed a framework of “four basic dimensions of religiosity”—believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging—and indicated that different dimensions of religiosity predict distinct behaviors, with the “behaving” dimension, related to moral self-regulation, being most strongly associated with rule compliance. At the same time, another research trend has questioned the positive generalization of religion. Gervais et al. (2017) presented evidence from 13 countries ($N = 3,256$) that intuitive moral prejudice against atheists is a global phenomenon, even in highly secular societies, and found that even non-religious individuals

harbor this bias against members of their own group. Meanwhile, Zuckerman (2009) compiled evidence indicating a high positive correlation between societal secularity and social well-being indicators, directly challenging the assumption that religion is a necessary condition for moral order.

Against this backdrop, this literature review addresses three main questions: (1) Is religiosity associated with rule compliance and/or rule violation, and how, across three levels of society: family, organization, and broader society? (2) What moderators, if any, alter the direction and/or magnitude of this relationship? (3) Does non-religious affiliation lead to non-compliance and/or rule violation to such an extent that non-religious individuals can be concluded to be “bad members of society”?

The objective of this literature review is to critically synthesize and analyze secondary data, including books, research studies, and articles published in indexed academic journals at national (e.g., TCI) and international (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and JSTOR) levels, as well as other global databases (e.g., PsycINFO and Google Scholar), covering the period 2001-2025. The synthesis will be presented in an analytical-descriptive format, aiming to provide empirical answers to the assumptions and discourse linking religion and law in contemporary multi-religious and multicultural societies.

Religiosity and Rule Compliance: Empirical Evidence Across Three Levels of Society

The Family Level: Family Norms, Family Law, and Child Rearing

At the family level, the relationship between religiosity and Rule Compliance exhibits a complex, dualistic pattern. A systematic review by Gonçalves et al. (2023), which synthesized 101 findings from various studies on religiosity/spirituality and interpersonal violence, found that religiosity was a significant protective factor in 55.4% of outcomes, while 38.6% showed no significant effect. When isolated to "physical aggression," the protective effect was small to moderate. In the context of domestic violence specifically, the aggregate results were often inconclusive or even reversed direction in certain subgroups, indicating that religion is not an automatic safeguard against family violence. Notably, in 6 outcomes (5.9%), religiosity was associated with an increased risk of violence, and 5 of these 6 outcomes were indicators of domestic violence. This pattern suggests that while religion, on the whole, may help deter violations of family norms, under certain conditions, it can be instrumentalized to justify or condone violence.

Qualitative research within faith communities further elucidates these mechanisms. A study of 64 participants from diverse religious backgrounds in Australia revealed that while informants generally agreed that their religion did not endorse violence, they also identified "religiously-intertwined cultural structures" that facilitated and condoned violence against women (Truong et al., 2022). The Australian Institute of Family Studies (2024) explicitly described religion as a "double-edged sword," where perpetrators weaponize religious rhetoric and scriptures to control victims, while faith simultaneously serves as a source of healing and hope for survivors. This phenomenon has been observed across Christian, Islamic, and Jewish contexts, demonstrating that it is not unique to any single religion.

In terms of marital fidelity, a global survey by DeRose et al. (2021) involving 9,920 individuals found no significant overall difference in infidelity rates between religious and secular couples. A notable exception emerged in the U.S. sample, where women in highly religious relationships had a significantly lower probability of infidelity, an effect not observed among men in the same group. Alfaro-Urquiola et al. (2025) explained this phenomenon through the mechanism of a sexual double standard within religious communities, where purity norms are demonstrably enforced more strictly for women than for men. This pattern also appears in broader deviance studies covering various family norm violations. Harrison (2005) and Carroll

et al. (2019) both found no significant overall difference in intimate partner violence rates among religious, interfaith, and secular couples. More notably, "nominally religious" couples, who claim religious affiliation without sincere practice, often exhibited the highest indicators of deviance across all groups, including violence and marital norm violations.

On the positive side, Volling et al. (2009)'s research on "sanctification of parenting" indicated that parents who perceive their child-rearing role as connected to the divine are more likely to employ positive moral socialization strategies, such as moral reasoning (inductive discipline), rather than relying solely on physical punishment or authoritarianism. Families in which both parents consistently used inductive discipline had children with significantly higher scores on moral behavior and conscience. Furthermore, religious socialization remains a crucial avenue for transmitting values related to law-abidingness and in-group/out-group biases to the next generation (Luria, 2024). Smith's (2020) work on intergenerational religious transmission highlighted that highly religious families often transmit both benevolence and exclusivist attitudes simultaneously. Mitchell's (2010) study on religious factors in domestic violence among American adults, using Hirschi's social control framework, found that among the four religious elements—faith, frequency of prayer, importance of religion, and religious service attendance—only the latter, "worship attendance" or "involvement," significantly predicted a reduction in domestic violence.

In summary, evidence from the first quarter of the 21st century clearly indicates that religiosity does not function as a linear "vaccine" against violations of family norms. Instead, it is a factor that can simultaneously increase and decrease risk, depending on whether religion is internalized as compassion and responsibility, or if it is tied to patriarchal ideologies, literal interpretations of scripture, and cultures that legitimize violence. Across several datasets, religious couples did not exhibit significantly lower rates of family violence and infidelity than secular couples. Simultaneously, "nominally religious" groups and those whose religiosity is strongly linked to fundamentalism showed the highest indicators of violence and certain family norm violations. This suggests that the crucial variable may not be simply "having/not having religion" but rather "what type of religion, under what ideologies and family structures."

The Organizational/Workplace Level: Ethics in the Workplace, Corruption, and Institutional Order

At the organizational and workplace level, the relationship between religiosity and compliance with organizational rules and regulations becomes significantly more complex, unfolding across two dimensions: individual workplace behavior and organizational structure and culture. In the former dimension, quantitative evidence consistently points in the same direction: employees with high religiosity or a strong religious work ethic tend to engage less in workplace deviant behavior. A study of employees across various Indonesian organizations by Wahyudi (2018) found that a religious work ethic negatively influenced workplace deviance, with this relationship mediated by the organization's ethical atmosphere. When the organization's ethical atmosphere takes an "instrumental" form, prioritizing self-interest and profit over other values, the protective effect of religiosity against deviant behavior is significantly diminished (Wnuk, 2025).

A study of higher education faculty in Nigeria by Abdullahi et al. (2023) found a negative correlation between religiosity and workplace deviance, and religiosity also moderated the relationship between organizational cynicism and deviance, shifting it from positive to negative. Similarly, Dora and Azim's (2019) research in Malaysia confirmed that religiosity moderates the relationship between emotional exhaustion and workplace deviance, meaning highly religious employees are less prone to deviance even when experiencing high emotional fatigue. This suggests that religious commitment provides psychological resources for self-regulation under stress. Similarly, Maulidi et al.'s (2024) Indonesian study found that religiosity

reduced corruption in the public sector, with the effect mediated by an ethical atmosphere and the development of responsibility values within organizations.

Specifically, within the context of Islamic work ethics, research confirms religion's role in reducing organizational deviant behavior. Hamid and Sattarov (2025) found that, among 235 employees, Islamic work ethics reduced deviance and increased employee voice, with moral disengagement serving as a mediator. However, this outcome is highly context-dependent; if the organization normalizes moral disengagement, religious ethics alone may be insufficient to prevent violations of organizational ethical rules (Bujang et al., 2024).

Another significant role of religiosity at the organizational level is promoting whistleblowing, or reporting internal corruption. Nopeanti et al. (2020) studied financial employees at a state university in East Java, Indonesia, and found that religiosity strongly moderates this relationship. When employees are highly religious, their intention to whistleblow is significantly deterred, thereby reducing their tendency to commit fraud. In other words, religion reinforces the courage to report misconduct and reduces the incentive to condone corruption. Setiawan's (2024) work further affirms that religiosity acts as an "individual moderator" that enhances the effect of individual morality in preventing corruption, meaning religion does not operate in isolation but alongside individual morality and the organizational atmosphere.

However, this positive role has important structural limitations. Cross-national research on corruption likely poses the strongest challenge to the assumption that "religious = rule-compliant." Santos and Lemes (2022) analyzed data from multiple countries. They found that "societal religiosity level" was positively correlated with corruption levels, meaning that the more religious a society is, the higher its structural corruption. A 102-country analysis by Zelekha and Avnimelech (2023) found that "hierarchical religions" such as Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, and Sunni Islam were positively correlated with structural corruption. They confirmed that these effects are transmitted through "cultural and institutional channels," in which hierarchical religions foster an organizational atmosphere that prioritizes obedience to leaders over accountability, thereby normalizing patron-client relationships and perpetuating corruption in public and private organizations. Conversely, non-hierarchical religions, such as Protestantism (especially the Calvinist tradition), were associated with lower levels of corruption, as they promote mutual accountability, transparency, and responsibility as religious values. This aligns with extensive prior research (Portilla, 2022). Although some contradictory findings exist (Shadabi, 2013), such as Maulidi et al.'s (2024) work showing that in the Indonesian context, organizations with cultures integrating religious values with integrity and robust monitoring systems can significantly reduce corruption tendencies, this only occurs when religion is integrated with institutional control mechanisms, not merely declared values. Weaver and Agle (2002) summarized these mechanisms within a symbolic interactionist framework, stating that the effect of religiosity on organizational ethical behavior is neither fixed nor direct but depends on both the salience of religious identity within the work context and the type of religious motivation (intrinsic vs. extrinsic). In short, religion requires a "space" within organizational contexts to operate effectively.

In summary, evidence at the organizational level reveals a consistent pattern across both levels. At the individual level, religiosity (especially intrinsic forms) generally reduces deviant behavior, corruption, and organizational rule violations through self-regulation, fostering an ethical atmosphere, and promoting whistleblowing. However, at the structural and cultural organizational levels, religions characterized by high hierarchy and power alignment may create environments conducive to corruption in the name of loyalty to leaders and groups. Thus, the variable that must always be considered is not just "religiosity" but "religious type + organizational power structure + quality of internal control systems."

The Broad Social Level: Criminal Law, State Law Compliance, and Social Trust

At the broad social level, evidence from criminology during the first quarter of the 21st century provides the strongest empirical base among the three levels studied. Baier and Wright (2001), in a meta-analysis of 60 studies, found an average effect size of $r = -0.12$ for the relationship between religiosity and criminal behavior and deviance. Later, Yeung et al.'s (2009) meta-analysis, covering 22 studies published between 1995 and 2007, found that religiosity played a role in preventing substance abuse across four categories: alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, and other illicit drugs. This aligns with Kelly et al.'s (2015) meta-analysis, which covered 193,656 adolescents from 62 studies and found the strongest inverse relationship in substance-related offenses—alcohol use ($r = -0.22$) and drug use ($r = -0.20$)—behaviors explicitly prohibited by many religions. The effects on general delinquency and violent crime were significantly smaller. Adamczyk et al. (2017) conducted a systematic review of research on religion and crime from 2004 to 2014 and found that most studies confirmed an inverse relationship between religiosity and crime. This is consistent with Jang and Johnson (2017), whose review of 290 studies concluded that approximately 90% of the research indicated a significant deterrent role of religiosity in antisocial behavior.

Research identifies several mechanisms for this outcome, including supernatural surveillance (within Norenzayan's (2013) Big Gods framework), building social bonds within norm-abiding communities (within social control theory), and promoting self-control through religious practice (Reisig et al., 2012). A study by Stansfield and Mowen (2018) using data from 1,362 ex-offenders found that community religiosity (county-level religious adherence) was negatively correlated with recidivism rates, even though individual religiosity alone did not have a significant effect, underscoring the importance of community context as a moral community.

One of the most evident dimensions reflecting "state law compliance" at the broad social level is tax payment behavior, a direct legal obligation of citizens to the state. Torgler (2003), in pioneering work using cross-national data, found that religiosity—measured by both belief and attendance—is positively associated with tax morale, or the intrinsic motivation to pay taxes. Religious individuals often perceive tax payment as a moral and civic duty rather than merely a legal obligation.

Recent research in developing countries, particularly Indonesia, confirms this pattern across various contexts. Anisykurlillah et al. (2025) found that religiosity positively influenced tax morale among business owners, leading to significant tax compliance. Similarly, Fadhilah's (2019) study among government officials found that religiosity reduced the intention to evade taxes. Tamale et al.'s (2025) study in Uganda found that religiosity mediated the relationship between tax knowledge and tax compliance. However, some studies, such as Budiarto et al.'s (2018) on private university personnel and Khalil & Sidani's (2022) in Lebanon, found no such effects when they controlled for personality and the perceived fairness of the tax system.

The most intriguing and challenging finding to conventional assumptions is that highly religious individuals, in some cases, exhibit higher rates of tax avoidance when they perceive the state's tax system as "unjust" or "illegitimate" according to their religious moral standards. Haribowo et al.'s (2025) analysis of SMEs in Java found that, after controlling for tax justice perception, the positive effect of religiosity on tax compliance was significantly diminished. This result aligns with Barak-Corren's (2013) Identity-Situation Model, which posits that when religious identity predominates over civic identity, evaluations of laws emphasize "legitimacy" rather than "obligation." If the tax system is perceived as conflicting with religious justice, the likelihood of non-compliance increases.

In the civic engagement dimension, Jang et al. (2023) found that religiosity, in both individual and public dimensions, predicted community engagement through "transcendent accountability"—a sense of responsibility to God for one's impact on others and society.

Religious ritual participation was the strongest predictor. This aligns with Putnam (2000, cited in Storm, 2015), who found that individual religiosity is as important as education in explaining social capital. Furthermore, ecological studies of crime, such as those by Beyerlein and Hipp (2005) and Seto and Su (2026), have shown that areas with a high density of religious institutions (congregational density) tend to have lower crime rates, especially in economically disadvantaged communities. This reflects the potential of religious institutions as community-level social capital to fill gaps left by the absence of state institutions.

However, Traunmüller's (2011) multilevel analysis of 97 regions in Germany found that while individual religiosity promoted social trust, a region's overall level of religiosity did not always increase trust in generalized others. In some cases, high religious homogeneity in a community may increase in-group trust but decrease out-group trust, leading to social division rather than cohesion. Gervais et al. (2017) confirmed that bias against atheists is a social phenomenon occurring in religious communities, which can lead to social exclusion of non-religious groups and, in turn, reduce their civic engagement.

In summary, empirical evidence at the broad social level indicates that religiosity generally promotes compliance with laws and civic norms, especially in deterring crimes explicitly prohibited by religious scriptures, increasing tax morale, and fostering community engagement. However, this relationship has significant limitations in scope and direction. The crime-preventive effects are small to moderate and concentrated in specific types of offenses. Moreover, the effect of religiosity on tax compliance significantly depends on the perceived fairness of the state's tax system. Most importantly, in the dimension of social trust, community-level religiosity may reinforce in-group trust among co-religionists but, conversely, reduce trust toward those of different faiths or no faith, leading to broader social fragmentation rather than societal cohesion. Therefore, a comprehensive assessment of this relationship requires consideration of the type of law studied, the quality of state institutions, and the characteristics of the religious community in that context.

The synthesis of empirical evidence across the three social levels (summarized in Table 1) collectively indicates that the relationship between religiosity and Rule Compliance cannot be reduced to a linear conclusion such as "religion promotes Rule Compliance" or "religion hinders Rule Compliance." Instead, the relationship varies in direction, magnitude, and conditions depending on the social level and the nature of the law under consideration. At the broad social level, the strongest evidence shows that religiosity helps deter criminal behavior and promotes compliance with civic duty. At the organizational level, organizational power structures and culture significantly moderate these effects. At the family level, religion acts as both a protective and a risk factor, depending on how it is internalized and the surrounding ideological context.

Table 1 Summary of Empirical Findings on Religiosity and Rule Compliance across Social Levels (2001-2025)

Social Level	Protective / Rule Compliance Mechanisms	Risk / Deviance-Enabling Mechanisms	Key Dynamics & Exceptions
Micro (Family)	Acts as a protective factor against interpersonal violence and deviance when integrated with positive moral values.	Can be weaponized to justify domestic violence, reinforce patriarchal control, or apply a sexual double standard.	"Nominally religious" couples often show the highest deviance. Impact depends on the theological framing of family roles.
Meso (Organization)	Intrinsic religiosity and religious work ethics reduce workplace deviance and increase whistleblowing intentions.	Hierarchical religious structures can foster systemic corruption by prioritizing loyalty/patronage over accountability.	Effectiveness depends heavily on an organization's ethical climate; religious ethics fail in purely "instrumental" work cultures.
Macro (Society)	Provides supernatural surveillance, builds social bonds, and deters specific victimless crimes (e.g., substance abuse).	High religious homogeneity can increase in-group trust but decrease out-group trust, fostering social division.	Tax compliance increases globally but drops significantly if the state's tax system is perceived as religiously "unjust."

Eight Dimensions of Moderation: What Moderates the Relationship Between Religiosity and Rule Compliance?

The synthesis of empirical evidence from the first quarter of the 21st century unequivocally demonstrates that the relationship between religiosity and Rule Compliance is not a simple "main effect." Instead, multiple variables modulate it. Our literature review identifies at least eight such dimensions that significantly alter both the direction and magnitude of this relationship.

Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Religious Orientation

Gordon Allport's framework, which distinguishes between intrinsic religiosity (holding religion as an end in itself, deeply internalized) and extrinsic religiosity (using religion as a means to other ends, such as status or security), remains one of the most powerful moderators. Individuals with intrinsic religious motivation tend to comply with rules based on internal conviction. In contrast, those with extrinsic motivation are more likely to comply only when external incentives—such as social acceptance or religious rewards—are highly salient (Hood, 1998; O'Brien, 2025). However, an experimental study by Dwenger et al. (2016) on tax compliance found that only about 20% of individuals are intrinsically motivated to pay taxes, while the remaining 80% attempt to evade taxes. In this context, intrinsic motivation did not significantly solve the problem, whereas extrinsic motivation could be effective. This aligns with Damayanti's (2018) empirical findings, which indicated that intrinsic religiosity did not lead to stronger tax compliance, while extrinsic religiosity did.

Fundamentalism and Right-Wing Authoritarianism

Religious fundamentalism (RF) interacts with right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) in a complex manner, often leading to negative outcomes for the relationship between religion and rule compliance. Laythe et al. (2022) developed a two-component model. They found that RF

predicts higher levels of ethnic and moral prejudice, whereas pure orthodoxy (when controlling for RWA) is associated with lower prejudice. Other studies, such as Johnson et al. (2011) and Brandt & Reyna (2014), confirmed that RF, mediated by RWA, significantly predicts prejudice across multiple dimensions. In terms of Rule Compliance, fundamentalist religiosity can lead to strict adherence to “religious law” while simultaneously opposing or rejecting “state law” perceived as conflicting with religious tenets. This landscape has significant implications for societies with legal pluralist systems.

Parochial Prosociality: The In-Group/Out-Group Divide

Saroglou (2006, 2013) coined the term "minimal prosociality" to describe religion's tendency to foster help primarily within the in-group. Several experimental studies confirm this pattern. For example, Cowgill et al. (2017) found that Christian participants in a Dictator Game were more likely to allocate resources to fellow Christians than to atheists or followers of other religions. However, Pasek et al.'s (2023) study across multiple countries (N = 4,753) found that merely "thinking about God" (God priming) increased monetary donations to strangers by approximately 11%, and this increase occurred equally for both in-group and out-group recipients. This suggests that religion's cognitive component may transcend group boundaries, while its social and institutional components continue to maintain and reinforce them.

Moral Communities Hypothesis

Stark's (1996) moral communities hypothesis posits that religion's crime-detering effect depends on the overall level of religiosity within a community. Empirical testing by Regnerus (2003), using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, found that areas with a high proportion of conservative Protestants had lower rates of theft and minor deviance. Furthermore, the interaction between individual religiosity and community religious homogeneity further reduced the likelihood of committing offenses. Hur et al.'s (2019) study on twin adolescents in Nigeria also found that participation in religious activities moderated the environmental effects on prosocial behavior, reflecting that community religiosity frames individual behavior. The key implication is that religion operates more as a social-communal phenomenon than as a purely individual psychological one.

Religious Identity vs. Civic Identity

Barak-Corren (2013) proposed the Identity-Situation Model to explain decisions regarding legal compliance in contexts where state regulations conflict with religious norms. This model suggests that when individuals strongly identify with both religious and civic identities, they tend to use a “legitimacy-based analysis” of the law. That is, if state laws are perceived as fair, transparent, and participatory, legal compliance will be high, even if the content conflicts with some personal beliefs. However, when religious identity is much more salient and civic identity is weak, individuals often conduct a cost-benefit analysis and conclude that violating state law carries a lower “cost” than violating religious commandments, leading to higher rates of noncompliance. This framework helps explain patterns of legal compliance/violation in areas where state and religious law overlap, such as family law and personal status law within legal pluralism systems (Hofri-Winogradow, 2010; Neo, 2020; Schlesinger, 2025).

Education and Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Education and socioeconomic status (SES) function as both confounders and moderators. Li et al.'s (2025) research on moral development in adolescents indicates that youth from high-SES families exhibit more sophisticated moral reasoning. In contrast, those from vulnerable economic backgrounds often prioritize survival- and group-loyalty-related moral reasoning. Moral Foundations Theory also suggests that highly educated individuals in WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) societies primarily rely on harm/care and fairness foundations. In contrast, groups with lower education or collectivist societies emphasize loyalty, authority, and purity, which are foundations more closely linked to religious morality (Graham et al., 2011). Since religiosity is negatively correlated with education in many

contexts, failure to control for SES and education in synthesis could lead to the erroneous conclusion that "religion's effects" are actually results of "educational and economic inequality."

Quality of Secular Institutions and Secular Alternatives

Perhaps the most policy-relevant moderator is the "quality of secular institutions." Tsang et al.'s (2020) work showed that priming individuals to think about secular institutions such as courts, police, and democratic governance can increase prosocial behavior to a degree comparable to religious priming. Norenzayan (2014) himself acknowledged that the presence of "secular sources of prosociality" is a key explanation for why Scandinavian societies maintain high levels of cooperation and trust despite low religiosity. An agent-based model study by Galen et al. (2021), using World Values Survey data, found that prosociality is more closely related to group membership and social network density than to worldview beliefs alone. The significant implication is that in societies with robust rule-of-law mechanisms, accessible justice systems, and transparent administration, religion's specific role in fostering legal compliance may be greatly reduced or even superseded by effective secular institutions.

Type of Rule or Law Violated

The magnitude of religiosity's deterrent effect varies significantly by offense type. Kelly et al. (2015) found that the inverse relationship was strongest for substance-related offenses—alcohol and drug use—behaviors explicitly prohibited by many religions. The effect on general delinquency was smaller. Tittle and Welch (1983, cited in Kelly et al., 2015) proposed that religion is most effective in preventing offenses construed as "sins" primarily within a religious context. In contrast, crimes universally deemed wrong, such as murder, assault, and theft, do not receive additional deterrence from religion because secular standards already exist. Reisig et al. (2012) found that low self-control mediates the relationship between religiosity and crime, suggesting that religion may reduce crime by promoting self-control rather than by establishing unique moral standards.

The analysis of these moderators reveals crucial theoretical and practical findings (as illustrated in Figure 1). Specifically, the relationship between religiosity and rule compliance is not a constant, universal "main effect." Instead, it results from interactions among at least eight moderating dimensions, encompassing individual psychology, social ideology, communal structures, and institutional quality. These dimensions do not operate in isolation and often overlap, reinforcing or counteracting one another in different contexts. Notably, some moderators, such as the quality of secular institutions and the type of law violated, can reverse the relationship from positive to negative, or from significant to non-significant. This underscores that any conclusion about the relationship between religion and law compliance that does not specify these conditions risks exaggeration or misdirection.

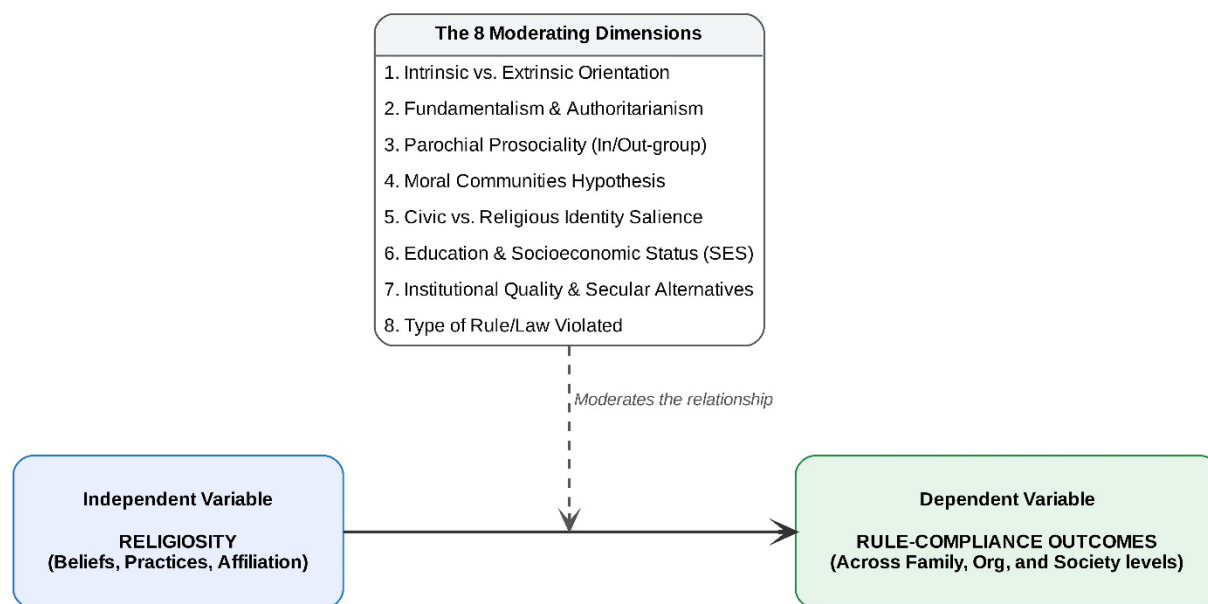


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of the Conditional Dynamics between Religiosity and Rule Compliance

Beyond Conventional Assumptions: Secular Ethics and the Social Standing of the Non-Religious

Global Prejudice Against Atheists - What Behavioral Evidence Reveals

One of the most significant impediments to a fair assessment of non-religious individuals is the “intuitive moral prejudice” directed at this group. Gervais et al. (2017) demonstrated that among a sample of 3,256 individuals from 13 countries, a significant number of respondents were more inclined to associate extreme moral transgressions, such as serial murder, with the “image of atheists” than with other religious groups. More strikingly, this prejudice also appeared among non-religious individuals. In earlier work, Gervais (2014) found, across five experiments ($N = 1,152$), that American participants were more likely to link various moral offenses—from serial murder and consensual incest to cannibalism—with atheists than with 11 other religious or cultural groups. This evidence reflects a cognitive heuristic that automatically links “belief in God” with “goodness,” independent of observed behavior in the world.

Behavioral Evidence: Non-Religious Individuals and Rule Compliance

Contrary to such prejudices, the overall behavioral evidence does not support the assumption that non-religious individuals are inferior members in terms of Rule Compliance. Zuckerman (2009) presented extensive sociological evidence demonstrating a positive correlation between secularism and atheism and societal well-being. Highly secular countries—such as the Scandinavian nations—typically have lower crime rates, greater transparency, better education, more stable economies, and stronger democratic freedoms than significantly more religious countries. In other words, higher societal secularism not only does not undermine moral order but, in many cases, is associated with a more robust moral order (Zuckerman, 2019).

At the individual level, DeCamp and Smith's (2019) study of 8th- and 11th-graders across the United States found that although religious youth tended to commit fewer types of offenses than non-religious youth, the differences between these groups were not statistically significant. Moreover, when controlling for other protective factors and demographic data, religion became non-significant for most deviant behaviors/offenses. Furthermore, for religious effects that remained significant, the findings indicated that religious youth were, paradoxically, more likely to cheat on exams and consume alcohol than non-religious youth.

This directly contradicts the assumption that a lack of religion leads to higher rates of legal transgression.

In an experimental context, Cowgill et al. (2017) found that when atheists believed their interaction partner knew their religious identity, they behaved in a "hyper-impartial" manner, distributing resources equally between in-group and out-group members, whereas Christians tended to favor their in-group. The researchers interpreted this behavior as stemming from reputational concerns, leading atheists to strive to act contrary to negative stereotypes. When anonymity was introduced, these differences disappeared, suggesting that the determining factor was not a moral deficiency but rather the "perception of how one is viewed" in society.

The Corruption Enigma: Lower Corruption in Secular Societies Compared to Religious Ones

Cross-national comparative evidence on corruption challenges the notion that "religion is a shield against legal transgression." Santos and Lemes (2022) found that societal religiosity, rather than religious affiliation, was the strongest predictor of corruption levels, and that the relationship was positive. Specifically, more religious societies tended to report higher corruption levels. The most acute challenge to mainstream assumptions about religion's role in curbing corruption comes from data comparing Transparency International's (2026) Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) with population-level religiosity indices, which reveal a striking contradiction. Specifically, countries with the lowest levels of belief in God and religious practice globally, such as Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, consistently rank among the least corrupt and possess the strictest rule of law worldwide. Conversely, countries known as "countries of believers," with some of the highest levels of religious adherence among their populations, such as Nigeria, India (Marquette, 2012), and Indonesia (Yudithadewi & Parikesit, 2020), scored significantly lower than the global average on the CPI.

Evidence from societies with large or predominantly non-religious populations indicates that non-religious individuals do not lack moral mechanisms to deter legal transgressions; rather, they operate through different value systems and mechanisms. Norenzayan and Gervais (2015) found that in countries with a robust rule of law, "secular surveillance" mechanisms—such as the police, courts, and judicial systems—are as effective in regulating prosocial behavior and legal compliance as "supernatural surveillance" mechanisms in highly religious societies. Theoretically, when secular institutions are sufficiently credible and effective, belief in an omniscient God becomes unnecessary for fostering large-scale social cooperation. Ståhl's (2021) cross-cultural analysis comparing the United States and Sweden found that non-religious individuals in Sweden, a country with one of the highest proportions of non-religious people globally, tended to employ consequentialist reasoning in moral judgments. This means they evaluate actions based on their outcomes for others and society as a whole, rather than adhering to rigid divine commandments. This pattern of moral reasoning reflects a framework of "secular ethics" consistent with utilitarian ethical philosophy, forming the value foundation that supports legal compliance and civic norms in such societies. Similarly, Pedersen's (2024) case study of Denmark found that the foundation of anti-corruption in Denmark does not originate from religion but from deeply ingrained norms of "neutrality and impartiality in public administration," which create a shared assumption that "no one should accept bribes if others do not," without requiring divine command.

The "corruption enigma," along with behavioral evidence from secular societies worldwide (as summarized in Table 2 of the original document), indicates that legal compliance in non-religious societies does not arise from a moral vacuum. Instead, secular moral mechanisms underpin it and, in many contexts, are more effective than religious mechanisms, particularly when secular institutions are strong and credible. This finding not only challenges the conclusion that "non-religious people are bad members of society" but also reveals that such an assumption reflects "religious out-group bias" rather than empirical reality.

Table 2 Comparative Mechanisms of Moral Order and Rule Compliance: Religious vs. Secular Contexts

Dimension of Social Control	Religious / High-Religiosity Contexts	Secular / Low-Religiosity Contexts	Key Literature Evidence
Primary Deterrent	Supernatural Surveillance (Fear of divine punishment or karma).	Secular Surveillance (Efficient police, courts, and transparent justice systems).	Norenzayan & Gervais (2015)
Basis of Moral Judgment	Deontological/Dogmatic (Adherence to absolute divine commandments).	Consequentialist Ethics (Evaluating actions based on societal harm/benefit).	Ståhl (2021)
Trust Mechanism	In-group Parochial Trust (High trust among co-religionists, potential out-group bias).	Generalized Institutional Trust (Trust in state institutions and the social contract).	Trautmüller (2011); Pedersen (2024)
Corruption Vulnerability	Often higher; hierarchical structures can foster patron-client loyalty over objective accountability.	Consistently lower; egalitarian norms and strict public administration standards deter bribery.	Santos & Lemes (2022)

Lessons from Retracted Studies and the Importance of Methodological Rigor

Beyond social perception biases, methodological biases in research design also contribute to inaccurate understandings and stereotypes about the non-religious. Decety et al.'s (2015) retracted study, which claimed that children raised in religious households were less altruistic than those from non-religious households, serves as a crucial cautionary tale for interpreting research findings. The media widely publicized this issue. However, Current Biology later retracted the article after Shariff et al. (2016) identified a severe coding error: "country" was treated as a continuous variable rather than as dummy variables to separate countries, skewing the analysis. Once the analysis was corrected, the results that had previously supported the assumption that "religious children are less altruistic" disappeared.

The Decety et al. case has significant implications for synthesizing the literature in this research area at three distinct levels. First, at the specific claim level, the conclusion that "non-religious children are less prosocial than religious children," widely used in public discourse and cited by many researchers, lacks valid empirical support due to the original study's retraction. Second, at the methodological level, this case shows that in cross-national or cross-cultural research—central to the empirical study of religion and social behavior—proper control of contextual variables (country, culture, SES) is not merely an option but an essential condition for reliability. Third, at the theoretical level, the corrected findings from the re-analysis indicate that "country" or "cultural and institutional context" variables have a stronger influence than "religion" in predicting children's prosocial behavior. This finding is consistent with McKay and Whitehouse's (2015) proposition that religion and morality have distinct evolutionary roots and developmental trajectories, making it impossible to assume a unidirectional relationship between the two without specifying the context.

The evidence synthesis in this section reveals a complex picture that, in several significant respects, contradicts mainstream assumptions. Findings from highly non-religious societies indicate that legal compliance and the rule of law do not require a religious foundation. Instead,

secular moral mechanisms can effectively substitute for religious ones when secular institutions are robust. Concurrently, cross-national data do not support the claim that highly religious societies have low corruption, and the "corruption enigma" highlights that variables such as the Human Development Index and institutional quality explain more than macro-level religiosity. Moreover, the retraction of the Decety et al. study underscores that seemingly credible and widely disseminated conclusions can rest on serious methodological errors.

Conclusion: Implications for Law and Religion, and Recommendations

Based on the synthesis of evidence from 2001-2025, three main findings consistent with the sub-research questions can be summarized: First, religiosity is associated with rule compliance at the family, organizational, and broad societal levels, but this relationship is generally small to moderate and varies significantly depending on the measurement method used (self-report vs. behavioral measures). Second, this relationship is moderated by at least eight key dimensions, including the type of religiosity (intrinsic/extrinsic), levels of fundamentalism and authoritarianism, the parochial nature of prosociality, community-level religiosity (moral communities), the balance between religious and civic identity, education and socioeconomic status (SES), the quality of secular institutions, and the type of rule or law under consideration. Third, the conclusion that "non-religious individuals are inferior members" is not supported by behavioral evidence, and countries with high levels of secularism consistently exhibit high standards of rule of law and overall well-being.

These findings carry significant implications for the field of law and religion in several dimensions. Firstly, they challenge the "religiosity-as-social-control" framework, which views religion as a linear and universal mechanism for behavioral regulation (Marcus & McCullough, 2021; Wang, 2022). The evidence instead points to a "conditional model," in which religion's impact on rule compliance is contingent on specific conditions. These include cases where religiosity is intrinsic, the surrounding community is highly religious, secular institutions are not yet robust, or the rules in question directly align with religious tenets. When these conditions are absent, religion may have little or no deterrent effect. Furthermore, in some contexts—particularly fundamentalism and hierarchical religious institutions—religion can even reverse its effect and contribute to structural violations of law, such as corruption.

For legal scholars and policymakers, a crucial takeaway is that religion is neither a "guarantee" nor a "meaningless variable" in assessing compliance with the law. In contexts of legal pluralism, where state law coexists with religious legal systems or religious courts in various dimensions (e.g., family law, inheritance law, personal status law), the Identity-Situation Model suggests that an individual's compliance with state law during normative conflicts depends as much on the strength of their civic identity as on their religiosity. Research on legal pluralism further warns that the formal institutionalization of religious courts may reinforce both religion's capabilities and its limitations as a mechanism for social ordering. While religious courts may alleviate the state's burden and increase community acceptance in some contexts, in others they may become spaces detached from fundamental human rights and legal equality (Abdelnour, 2025).

Regarding the discourse equating "religiosity = good social member" and "non-religiosity = social menace," all evidence indicates that such narratives cannot be upheld as empirical facts. To maintain academic rigor, these must be replaced with a more nuanced understanding: "religion can promote law compliance and peaceful coexistence, but this occurs under specific conditions and through certain mechanisms," while "not having religion does not equate to lacking morality," and "secular societies can create and maintain moral order through secular institutions and culture." Gervais et al. (2017) show that moral prejudice against atheists is a cognitive heuristic rather than a reflection of real-world behavior. Allowing such prejudice to influence laws and policies risks institutionalizing baseless discrimination and rhetoric.

Consequently, from a methodological perspective, future research should prioritize: (1) the use of behavioral measures over self-reports to reduce evaluation biases often found among religious adherents; (2) multi-level research designs that integrate data at individual, community, and political/legal institutional levels; (3) cross-religious comparative designs to explore how different religious traditions and institutional structures impact law compliance; and (4) longitudinal research, which helps disentangle whether "individuals predisposed to obey laws are drawn to religion" or "religion itself causes behavioral change."

From a policy perspective, the evidence gathered in this study cautions against both extremes: using religion as a "panacea for crime and legal violations" on the one hand, and stigmatizing "non-religious individuals as a social threat" or even concluding that "religion is always good" or "religion is unnecessary" on the other. Neither extreme is fully supported by empirical evidence. On the one hand, investing in strong, transparent, and just secular institutions remains an indispensable prerequisite for promoting the rule of law in multicultural societies. Evidence from secular societies clearly shows that quality secular institutions can create and maintain legal compliance norms without relying on religious incentives. On the other hand, evidence from individual and community levels across all three social strata consistently confirms that intrinsic religiosity—stemming from internal motivation and not linked to hierarchical power structures or exclusionary ideologies—plays a genuine role in deterring antisocial behavior and fostering civic engagement. Therefore, comprehensive policies should encourage religion to play a positive, neutral, and optional role for those who desire it, without compelling or incentivizing religious adherence for social benefit. Such compulsion would render religion an extrinsic tool and diminish its true effectiveness, while also controlling undesirable side effects such as promoting in-group exclusion, linking religion to corrupt power structures, and using religious doctrines to diminish the rights of different identity groups. In conclusion, the policy goal should not be to achieve "a more religious society" or "a less religious society," but to foster a society with strong institutions, clear civic norms, and space for both religious and non-religious individuals to be good members.

Acknowledgement

This article is part of the research project titled "Religiosity and Rule Compliance Across Multiple Social Levels: A Documentary Synthesis of Evidence from the First Quarter of the 21st Century and Its Implications for Law and Religion." The Association of Legal & Political Studies funded the project through a research promotion and support grant under contract number ALPS. 3/2569, with a total funding amount of 50,000 Thai Baht.

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Declaration of Author Contributions: Conceptualization, P.H., K.W., T.S. and B.S.; Methodology, P.H. and K.W.; Software, P.H. and K.W.; Validation, P.H. and K.W.; Formal Analysis, P.H. and K.W.; Investigation, P.H. and K.W.; Resources, P.H. and K.W.; Data Curation, P.H. and K.W.; Writing - Original Draft Preparation, P.H., K.W., T.S. and B.S.; Writing - Review & Editing, P.H., K.W., T.S. and B.S.; Visualization, K.W.; Supervision, T.S.; Project Administration, K.W.; Funding Acquisition, P.H.

Declaration of AI Use: The authors declare that the Artificial Intelligence (AI) tool Grammarly was used in preparing this manuscript only for language editing, grammar correction, and improving readability. The authors take full responsibility for the content, interpretation, and conclusions of this work.

Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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