

Religious Culture as Informal Governance in Public Schools: Rethinking Normativity, Institutional Neutrality, and Everyday Regulation

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to examine how religious culture operates as a form of informal governance within public school institutions. Rather than treating religiosity as a pedagogical or moral variable, the article reframes religious culture as a normative system that structures behavior, authority, and compliance in everyday institutional life. The study interrogates how such informal norms interact with the principle of institutional neutrality that formally characterizes public education.

Method: The research adopts a qualitative socio-legal approach, combining document analysis, institutional observations, and semi-structured interviews with school administrators, teachers, and students. Data are analyzed through thematic coding informed by theories of normativity, informal regulation, and legal pluralism. This approach allows the study to trace how cultural norms are translated into routine practices without being codified as formal rules.

Findings: The findings reveal that religious culture functions as an effective regulatory mechanism that shapes conduct, expectations, and disciplinary practices within public schools. Although these norms lack formal legal status, they operate with a high degree of compliance and moral authority. The study identifies a dynamic tension between formal claims of neutrality and the everyday enforcement of religiously informed norms, demonstrating how informal governance fills regulatory gaps left by formal law.

Significance: This study contributes to socio-legal scholarship by expanding the understanding of governance beyond formal legal frameworks. It highlights how culture-based normativity operates as a parallel regulatory system in public institutions, offering a nuanced perspective on law-culture interaction. The findings are significant for debates on legal pluralism, institutional neutrality, and the regulation of everyday life in multicultural societies.

INTRODUCTION

Public schools are commonly understood as institutions governed by formal legal frameworks that emphasize neutrality, inclusivity, and administrative objectivity, particularly in culturally diverse societies. However, socio-legal scholars such as Higgins et al., (2022) and Sasaki & Baba, (2024) have shown that law rarely operates in isolation from cultural norms that shape everyday institutional behavior. Within public education, religious culture often emerges not merely as a symbolic presence but as a practical system of expectations that guides conduct and interaction. Studies on everyday regulation, including those discussed by Govindan, (2022) and Kalkstein et al., (2023), suggest that informal norms frequently regulate behavior more effectively than written rules. This

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phenomenon raises critical questions about how neutrality is practiced rather than proclaimed. In many contexts, religiously informed routines subtly influence discipline, authority, and moral evaluation within schools. Such dynamics complicate the assumption that public institutions operate solely through formal legal mechanisms. Consequently, examining religious culture as a mode of informal governance becomes an urgent analytical task.

The urgency of this research is further amplified by global debates on legal pluralism and institutional governance in multicultural settings. Baronchelli, (2024) and Wallis, (2022) argues that alternative normative systems often coexist with formal law, shaping institutional outcomes without explicit recognition. In public schools, religious culture may function as a parallel regulatory order that structures daily life while remaining legally invisible. This condition creates a tension between formal commitments to neutrality and lived institutional practices. Stoffelen, (2022) demonstrate how cultural norms embedded in public spaces can generate geopolitical and moral effects beyond formal regulation. When such norms are normalized, they gain regulatory force without democratic scrutiny. This study addresses a critical gap by interrogating how religious culture operates as governance rather than belief. Understanding this dynamic is essential for reassessing the limits of law in regulating everyday institutional life.

The rationale of this study lies in its departure from conventional educational or theological analyses of religiosity in schools. Rather than evaluating religious culture in terms of moral outcomes or pedagogical effectiveness, this research situates it within socio-legal debates on normativity and governance. Agung et al., (2024) emphasizes that religious practices historically function as systems of order that structure social interaction. Applying this insight to public schools allows for a reinterpretation of religious culture as a regulatory mechanism. Existing studies often overlook how informal norms gain authority precisely because they are perceived as cultural rather than legal. As Bosse, (2022) illustrates in her work on interpretive agency, individuals comply with norms they perceive as morally legitimate even in the absence of formal sanctions. This study builds on such insights to examine compliance, authority, and discipline in public schools. By doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of governance beyond law. The rationale is therefore both theoretical and empirical.

Socio-legal literature has long recognized that law operates alongside informal systems of regulation that shape everyday behavior. Zorkin, (2018) conceptualizes law as inseparable from social consciousness, a view that opens space for analyzing cultural normativity. Brigg, (2017) further demonstrates how informal dispute resolution mechanisms reveal the regulatory power of culture. In historical contexts, Lyubimova, (2017) shows how religious traditions structured labor practices without formal legal codification. Pislegin, (2016) provides empirical evidence of everyday regulation functioning through customary norms. Benn, (2015) documents how religious rituals historically governed social order in non-legal ways. These studies collectively highlight the importance of informal norm systems. However, they rarely focus on contemporary public educational institutions. This study extends their insights into a new institutional domain.

More recent scholarship explores how cultural norms intersect with public institutions in modern societies. Evered & Evered, (2016) analyze how moral debates embedded in public spaces generate regulatory effects. Abildinova et al., (2023) demonstrate how religious dimensions continue to shape leisure and social practices in post-pandemic contexts. Hirsch, (2008) emphasizes the role of interpretive agency in sustaining norm compliance. Nelson, (2015) discusses material religion as a structuring force in public life. Sumerau & Schrock, (2011) highlight how normative visibility reinforces moral authority. Despite these contributions, there is limited research on how religious culture functions as informal governance within public schools. The existing literature tends to fragment culture, law, and education into separate analytical domains. This fragmentation leaves a critical gap that this study seeks to address.

Although previous studies have explored religious culture, legal pluralism, and everyday regulation, few have examined their intersection within public school governance. Existing research often treats religious culture as symbolic or pedagogical rather than regulatory. The socio-legal implications of informal norm enforcement in educational institutions remain underdeveloped. Moreover, neutrality is typically analyzed as a legal principle rather than an institutional practice shaped by culture. Studies rarely investigate how compliance emerges without formal sanctions. The literature also lacks empirical attention to how authority is negotiated through cultural norms. This gap limits our understanding of governance beyond formal law. Addressing this gap allows for a reconceptualization of public institutions. The present study responds directly to this theoretical and empirical absence.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how religious culture operates as a form of informal governance within public schools. It seeks to examine how cultural norms acquire regulatory authority in everyday institutional practices. The study aims to explore the tension between formal neutrality and informal norm enforcement. By adopting a socio-legal perspective, it investigates compliance mechanisms beyond written rules. The research also aims to contribute to debates on legal pluralism and cultural normativity. It further seeks to expand the conceptual boundaries of governance studies. Through empirical analysis, the study offers a grounded understanding of institutional regulation. Ultimately, it aims to reposition religious culture within broader discussions of law, culture, and governance.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative socio-legal research design to examine religious culture as a form of informal governance within public school institutions. Rather than adopting a pedagogical or evaluative framework, the research is grounded in socio-legal traditions that conceptualize governance as operating through both formal and informal normative systems, as discussed by (Canfield, 2025; Casanovas et al., 2022). The design is informed by legal pluralism, which recognizes the coexistence of multiple normative orders within a single institutional space, following insights articulated by (Konciewicz, 2024; Spandler, 2025). A case-based interpretive approach is adopted to capture how religious norms are enacted in everyday institutional practices. This design allows the

study to trace regulatory effects without presuming the presence of formal legal authority. Qualitative inquiry is particularly suitable for examining normativity that operates through moral legitimacy rather than coercive sanction, as highlighted by (Ackerly et al., 2024; Bosse, 2022). The research prioritizes depth of institutional understanding over statistical generalization. Through this design, the study situates public schools as sites of everyday regulation rather than neutral administrative arenas.

Participants

Participants in this study consist of school administrators, teachers, and senior students selected through purposive sampling to reflect varied positions of institutional authority and norm compliance. Administrators were included to examine how institutional neutrality is articulated and managed at the policy level, a concern raised in socio-legal analyses by (Evered and Evered, 2016). Teachers were selected to explore how religious norms are translated into routine practices and informal disciplinary expectations. Students participated to provide insight into how compliance and moral evaluation are experienced by institutional subjects, an approach consistent with interpretive agency perspectives described by (Brickhill et al., 2025; Klemsdal & Wittusen, 2023). The selection prioritized participants with sustained engagement in school life to ensure experiential depth. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, aligning with ethical standards of qualitative socio-legal research. Diversity in gender and religious background was considered to capture normative variation. This participant structure enables triangulation across institutional roles.

Instruments

Data were collected using three primary instruments: semi-structured interviews, institutional document analysis, and non-participant observation. Semi-structured interviews were designed to elicit narratives about everyday norms, authority, and perceptions of neutrality, drawing on interview techniques recommended in socio-legal qualitative research by (Afiouni et al., 2025; Dizon, 2024). Document analysis included school regulations, codes of conduct, and public statements to identify formal claims of neutrality. Observations focused on routine practices such as assemblies, classroom interactions, and disciplinary encounters where religious norms were implicitly enacted. These instruments were selected to capture both articulated norms and lived practices, following the methodological insights of Boéri & Giustini, (2024) on everyday regulation. Interview guides were flexible to allow participants to frame norms in their own terms. Observational notes emphasized repetition and normalization of practices rather than exceptional events. The combined use of instruments strengthens interpretive validity.

Table 1. Data Collection Instruments and Analytical Focus

Instrument	Data Source	Analytical Focus
Semi-structured interviews	Administrators, teachers, students	Norm articulation, authority, compliance
Document analysis	School regulations, public texts	Formal neutrality and institutional claims
Observation	Daily school practices	Informal norm enforcement and routines

Table 1 outlines the alignment between data collection instruments and the analytical dimensions of informal governance examined in this study. Each instrument is deliberately selected to capture a distinct layer of normativity operating within public school institutions. Semi-structured interviews provide access to how institutional actors articulate religious norms, justify authority, and interpret expectations of compliance in their own words. This instrument is essential for revealing the moral reasoning through which informal norms gain legitimacy beyond formal regulation. Document analysis serves a complementary function by mapping the formal discursive layer of the institution, particularly official claims regarding neutrality and governance. By examining these texts alongside interview data, the study is able to identify discrepancies between formal institutional narratives and everyday regulatory practices. Observational data focus on the enactment of norms in routine settings, allowing the research to trace how religious culture is reproduced through repetition rather than explicit enforcement. Together, these instruments enable a multi-layered analysis of informal governance that integrates discourse, practice, and institutional structure into a coherent socio-legal interpretation.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis followed a thematic coding process informed by theories of normativity, informal regulation, and legal pluralism. Interview transcripts, documents, and observation notes were coded iteratively to identify recurring patterns of normative expectation, moral authority, and compliance, following analytical strategies outlined by (Parsons Leigh et al., 2023). Initial open coding captured participants' own descriptions of norms and practices. Axial coding then linked these descriptions to broader categories of informal governance, as conceptualized by (Artis et al., 2025). Particular attention was paid to moments where formal neutrality was invoked yet contradicted by practice, echoing concerns raised by (Sivonen & Syväterä, 2023). The analysis avoided moral evaluation and instead focused on regulatory function. Triangulation across data sources enhanced analytical robustness. Through this process, religious culture was analytically reconstructed as an operative normative system rather than a symbolic attribute.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Religious Culture as an Informal Regulatory System

The findings indicate that religious culture operates as an informal regulatory system within public schools, shaping everyday behavior without formal legal codification. Administrators frequently described normative expectations using moral language rather than institutional policy, a pattern consistent with socio-legal observations by Zorkin (2018) regarding norm internalization. Teachers articulated compliance as a matter of appropriateness rather than obligation, revealing how authority is exercised through cultural legitimacy rather than formal sanction. Students similarly reported adjusting behavior based on perceived moral expectations rather than written rules, echoing Hirsch's (2008) analysis of interpretive agency. These findings suggest that regulation occurs through shared understandings rather than explicit enforcement. The absence of

formal penalties did not weaken compliance. Instead, moral visibility reinforced conformity in daily practice. Religious culture thus functioned as a stable normative order.

Tension Between Formal Neutrality and Everyday Practice

The data further reveal a persistent tension between formal claims of institutional neutrality and everyday regulatory practices. Official documents emphasized inclusivity and neutrality, yet daily routines reflected religiously informed norms, a contradiction also noted by Brigg (2017) in institutional governance studies. Administrators often framed neutrality as non-interference rather than absence of normativity. Teachers navigated this tension by normalizing religious practices as cultural rather than regulatory acts. Students interpreted neutrality pragmatically, distinguishing between official rules and lived expectations. This duality produced a layered governance structure. Formal neutrality remained intact at the policy level. Informal governance dominated daily interaction.

Mechanisms of Compliance Without Formal Sanction

A key result concerns how compliance is produced in the absence of formal enforcement mechanisms. Participants consistently described compliance as emerging from moral alignment rather than fear of punishment. This aligns with Pislegin’s (2016) findings on everyday regulation through repetition and normalization. Observational data showed that deviation from norms triggered social correction rather than institutional discipline. Such correction was subtle yet effective. Repetition of practices reinforced expectations over time. Moral legitimacy replaced legal authority as the basis of regulation. Informal sanctions operated through social visibility. Compliance was therefore relational rather than coercive.

Table 2. Core Empirical Themes Identified in the Results

Theme	Description	Regulatory Function
Normative legitimacy	Moral framing of expectations	Generates voluntary compliance
Institutional duality	Neutral policy vs normative practice	Maintains formal legality
Social correction	Peer-based norm enforcement	Replaces formal sanctions

Table 2 summarizes the central empirical themes emerging from the analysis and clarifies their regulatory functions. The table demonstrates how informal governance operates through moral legitimacy, institutional duality, and social correction rather than formal legal mechanisms.

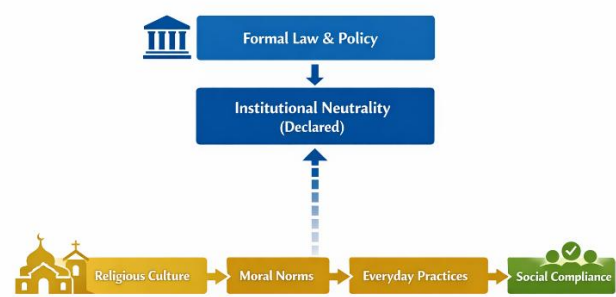


Figure 1. Conceptual Diagram of Informal Governance in Public Schools (Textual Description)

Figure 1 illustrates how informal governance operates parallel to formal law. While neutrality is formally declared through policy, everyday regulation is driven by religious culture that translates moral norms into routine practices, producing compliance without legal enforcement.

Discussion

These findings extend socio-legal debates on governance by demonstrating that regulation in public schools cannot be understood solely through formal law. As Zorkin (2018) argues, normativity often precedes legal articulation. The operation of religious culture as governance confirms Brigg's (2017) assertion that informal orders coexist with formal institutions. This coexistence does not necessarily undermine legality. Instead, it fills regulatory gaps left by formal neutrality. The findings challenge assumptions that neutrality implies normative absence. They show neutrality functions as a legal stance rather than a lived condition. Religious culture thus becomes a governance resource. This reframing contributes to legal pluralism theory.

The study also deepens understanding of compliance mechanisms beyond coercion. Hirsch (2008) emphasizes interpretive agency in sustaining normative orders, a dynamic clearly visible in the findings. Compliance emerged through moral alignment rather than institutional fear. This supports Pislegin's (2016) claim that everyday regulation operates through normalization. The absence of formal sanctions did not weaken governance. Instead, social visibility strengthened it. Such findings complicate classical legal assumptions about enforcement. They suggest governance is relational and symbolic. This insight is crucial for socio-legal analysis of public institutions.

The tension between neutrality and practice highlights a structural paradox in public governance. Evered and Evered (2016) demonstrate how moral norms embedded in public spaces generate political effects. Similarly, this study shows neutrality functions as a discursive shield rather than an operational reality. Institutions maintain legal legitimacy while allowing informal governance to operate. This dual structure preserves stability. However, it also obscures accountability. Informal norms remain powerful yet unregulated. This condition raises normative questions about transparency. It situates religious culture within governance rather than belief.

The findings also resonate with historical analyses of cultural regulation. Benn (2015) documents how religious rituals historically structured social order without legal codification. The present study shows continuity of this function in modern institutions. Nelson (2015) similarly highlights material religion as a structuring force in public life. Religious culture in schools operates materially through routines and symbols. These practices shape behavior implicitly. Their power lies in repetition rather than declaration. This challenges modernist assumptions of secular governance. It demonstrates cultural endurance within legal modernity.

Finally, this study contributes to the literature by repositioning public schools as sites of everyday governance. Sumerau and Schrock (2011) argue that norm visibility reinforces moral authority. The findings confirm this mechanism within educational institutions. Governance emerges through shared expectations rather than formal commands. This insight expands socio-legal inquiry into education. It also aligns with legal pluralism

perspectives that recognize multiple normative orders. The study thus bridges law, culture, and institutional practice. It offers a framework applicable beyond education. Such integration is rare in existing Scopus literature.

Implications

The findings imply that governance in public institutions extends beyond formal law into cultural normativity. Policymakers should recognize that neutrality operates discursively rather than practically. Ignoring informal governance risks misinterpreting institutional power. Legal scholars may need to rethink regulation as relational rather than coercive. Educational administrators should acknowledge normative dynamics shaping behavior. Transparency about informal norms may enhance accountability. This perspective enriches law-culture analysis. It also informs debates on pluralism and governance. The implications extend across public institutions.

Limitations

This study is limited by its qualitative scope and institutional focus. Findings are not intended for statistical generalization. The research concentrates on public schools, limiting cross-institutional comparison. Cultural specificity may influence norm formation. Observer presence may have shaped participant responses. Document analysis reflects official discourse rather than hidden practices. Time constraints limited longitudinal observation. Despite triangulation, interpretation remains contextual. These limitations suggest cautious extrapolation.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should examine informal governance across different public institutions. Comparative studies could explore variation across cultural contexts. Longitudinal designs may capture normative change over time. Quantitative approaches could complement qualitative insights. Research could also examine resistance to informal norms. Legal analysis may explore accountability mechanisms. Interdisciplinary approaches are encouraged. Expanding the framework may deepen governance theory.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that governance in public schools extends beyond formal legal frameworks and operates significantly through informal normative systems embedded in religious culture. By conceptualizing religious culture as informal governance, the study challenges the assumption that institutional neutrality implies the absence of normativity. The findings reveal that moral legitimacy, rather than formal sanction, constitutes the primary mechanism through which compliance is produced and maintained in everyday school life. This condition illustrates how legal neutrality functions discursively, while regulation is enacted through culturally grounded routines and expectations. The coexistence of formal law and informal governance reflects a plural normative order that sustains institutional stability while obscuring regulatory accountability. By situating public schools as sites of everyday regulation, this study expands socio-legal understandings of how authority and order are negotiated in public institutions. The analysis contributes to law-and-culture scholarship by bridging governance theory with empirical insights into institutional practice. Ultimately, the study

underscores the need to rethink governance not merely as a legal arrangement, but as a culturally mediated process shaping the lived reality of public institutions.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Leni Levana conceptualized the study, developed the theoretical framework, and led the research design and data collection process. She conducted the primary data analysis, interpreted the findings within a socio-legal perspective, and drafted the initial manuscript, including the Results, Discussion, and Conclusion sections. Sumiarti contributed to refining the research rationale, strengthening the literature review, and ensuring theoretical coherence with law-and-culture scholarship. She also reviewed and revised the manuscript critically for intellectual content, particularly in relation to governance theory, normativity, and institutional analysis. Both authors collaboratively discussed the results, approved the final version of the manuscript, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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