Thai Arts and Culture Review

Original Research Article

Received: 17 December 2025 **Revised:** 6 January 2026 **Accepted:** 7 January 2026

RELIGIOUS ADHERENCE AND GOOD CITIZENSHIP: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF THEIR DYNAMIC INTERPLAY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Handling Editor:
Professor Dr.Ismail Suardi WEKKE UM BARRU, Indonesia
(This article belongs to the Theme 2: Heritage and Wisdom in the Digital Age)

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Abstract

This systematic review investigates the complex relationship between being a "good religious adherent" and a "good citizen" in contemporary society. Drawing on 21st-century empirical literature from diverse academic databases (Scopus, WoS, PubMed, JSTOR, TCI, and Google Scholar) across multiple disciplines—including philosophy, religious studies, political science, sociology, anthropology, and psychology—this study synthesizes definitions, measurements, and the dynamic interplay of these constructs. Findings reveal both roles are multidimensional and context-dependent. While religiosity frequently correlates positively with prosocial and civic behaviors, this relationship is neither universal nor straightforward, and moral frameworks and social networks mediate it. The study highlights that non-religious individuals can exhibit high civic engagement, and certain forms of intense religiosity may lead to intolerance. Key moderating factors include religiosity type, socio-political context, and religious diversity. We emphasize fostering inclusive religious interpretations and integrating religious values with democratic principles to harness religion's potential for societal good while mitigating its divisive tendencies. Future research should prioritize longitudinal and cross-cultural investigations into underlying mechanisms and the impact of contemporary social changes.

Keywords: Religiosity, Civic Behavior, Systematic Review, Social Capital, Multiculturalism

Citation Information: Joemsittiprasert, W., Bunmon, P., Vipaporn, T., & Kumar, V. (2025). Religious Adherence and Good Citizenship: A Systematic Review of Their Dynamic Interplay in Contemporary Society. *Thai Arts and Culture Review, 1*(1), Article 3. https://doi.org/10.14456/tacr.2025.3

Introduction

The question of what constitutes a "good person" has been debated since the dawn of human civilization, whether in the context of religion attempting to define appropriate adherents or in the context of political society striving to cultivate responsible citizens (Banshong, 2021). However, a crucial question that remains largely unanswered is whether "goodness" is a universal concept or context-dependent, varying across cultures, societies, and religions. Cross-cultural anthropological and psychological research indicates that although some moral values, such as honesty, compassion, and justice, are found in most societies (Graham et al., 2013), their interpretation and application vary significantly across cultural contexts (Vignoles et al., 2016).

Within the religious context, a "good adherent" is often defined by dimensions of belief, practice, spiritual experience, and religious identity, as evidenced by adherence to religious doctrines and ethics (Huber & Huber, 2012; Koenig et al., 2012). Concurrently, in the political societal context, a "good citizen" is typically defined by political participation, social responsibility, respect for laws and norms (legal compliance), and civic virtue that promotes the well-being of society (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Dalton, 2008).

An intriguing and much-debated academic question concerns the relationship between a "good adherent" and a "good citizen." Does being a good religious adherent invariably lead to good citizenship? Or, in some instances, might religious adherence, as defined by religious principles, conflict with the tenets of good citizenship in a political society? Some scholars argue that religion is a crucial source of moral values and social capital that fosters positive civic behavior, such as volunteering, community aid, and trust in others (Ruiter & De Graaf, 2006; Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Conversely, other scholars point out that certain forms of intense religious adherence, particularly fundamentalism, can lead to group segregation, intolerance towards differences, and even political violence (Scheepers et al., 2002; Ginges et al., 2009).

The complexity of this relationship has prompted 21st-century empirical research to understand under what conditions, through what mechanisms, and via what mediating factors being a good religious adherent promotes or hinders good citizenship. This study, therefore, aims to review and synthesize empirical literature from the 21st century to address three key questions: (1) How is "good adherent" defined and measured? (2) How is "good citizen" defined and measured? and (3) Does being a good religious adherent always relate to and/or lead to good citizenship? This study employs a systematic literature review approach, drawing from various academic databases, both international (e.g., Scopus, WoS, PubMed, and JSTOR) and national (e.g., TCI and other widely recognized academic databases such as Google Scholar). It selected empirical studies published between 2000 and the present (2025) across relevant disciplines, including philosophy, religious studies, political science, public administration, sociology, anthropology, and psychology, to foster a comprehensive and interdisciplinary understanding of this issue.

The Good Adherent: Dimensions, Definitions, and Indicators

The concept of a "good adherent" is complex and varied, shaped by religious, cultural, and societal contexts. A review of the literature reveals that scholars across various disciplines have proposed diverse conceptual frameworks and measurement tools for religiosity. However, a common thread among them is the recognition that religiosity is a multidimensional phenomenon that a single variable cannot capture.

Huber & Huber (2012) developed the Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS), a widely recognized measurement instrument. This scale divides religiosity into five core dimensions: (1) an intellectual dimension, related to knowledge and understanding of religious teachings; (2) an ideological dimension, about belief in core religious doctrines; (3) a public practice

dimension, involving participation in public religious activities; (4) a private practice dimension, concerning personal religious observances such as meditation and prayer; and (5) an experiential dimension, related to spiritual experiences or the perception of connection with the divine.

Similarly, Saroglou's (2011) study indicates that a good adherent is not solely defined by adherence to religious rituals but also by the manifestation of psychological attributes reflecting core religious values, such as compassion, honesty, patience, and forgiveness. Furthermore, research by Pargament et al. (2013) suggests that true religiosity should be reflected through "sacred moments," or periods when individuals feel a sense of holiness and profound meaning in everyday life, leading to constructive decisions and behaviors.

However, the definition of a good adherent varies significantly across religious and cultural contexts. In Abrahamic religions (e.g., Christianity, Islam, and Judaism), good adherents are often defined by their belief in a monotheistic God, adherence to commandments, and living according to ethical principles outlined in sacred texts (Graham & Haidt, 2010). In contrast, Eastern religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism typically emphasize mental development, liberation from suffering, and living in harmony with nature and society, without necessarily adhering to beliefs in deities or supernatural beings (Roeser & Peck, 2009).

Cross-cultural differences are also apparent in the measurement of religiosity. A study by Cohen et al. (2017) found that in individualistic Western societies, a good adherent often emphasizes a personal relationship with God and selective adherence to personal beliefs. Conversely, in collectivistic Eastern societies, a good adherent tends to prioritize community involvement, adherence to group norms, and maintaining religious harmony. Additionally, research by Voas & Doebler (2011) highlights significant regional variations in religiosity intensity, with countries in Africa and the Middle East showing substantially higher levels than Western European and East Asian countries.

Based on the synthesis of relevant literature, the authors propose that a "good adherent" can be defined through six key components: (1) deep and genuine belief in religious doctrines, (2) consistent public and private religious practice, (3) knowledge and understanding of religious doctrines and values, (4) meaningful spiritual experiences, (5) a stable religious identity that influences one's life, and (6) the manifestation of virtues and ethics according to religious principles. These components can be measured using various tools such as the CRS, Duke University Religion Index (DUREL), and Religious Commitment Inventory, provided they are adapted to the specific religious and cultural context of the sample.

Table 1 Components and Indicators of a Good Adherent

Component	Indicator	Example Behaviors
Belief	Belief in core doctrines	Acceptance of the sacred, afterlife, and karma
Practice	Frequency of religious practices	Attending temples/churches/mosques, prayer/supplication, observing precepts
Knowledge	Understanding of doctrines	Studying scriptures, understanding dharma, seeking religious knowledge
Experience	Spiritual experience	Feeling connected to the sacred, inner peace, enlightenment
Identity	Importance of religion to self	Self-identification through religion, displaying religious symbols
Virtue	Manifestation of ethics	Compassion, honesty, forgiveness, self-sacrifice

The Good Citizen: Dimensions, Definitions, and Indicators

The concept of a "good citizen" has been a long-standing subject of debate in political science and political philosophy, dating back to Aristotle's proposal that good citizens possess civic virtue and participate in the governance of the polis, extending to modern concepts emphasizing the rights and duties of citizens in democratic systems (Heater, 2013). Nevertheless, the meaning of good citizenship varies according to political, social, and cultural contexts (Villalobos et al., 2021).

Dalton (2008) proposed a framework that divides citizenship into two main types: (1) duty-based citizenship, which emphasizes adherence to laws, respect for authority, voting, and paying taxes, and (2) engaged citizenship, which focuses on active participation in public activities, scrutinizing government, and addressing social problems. Dalton's cross-national study found that in developed countries, younger citizens tend to emphasize engaged citizenship, while older citizens still adhere to duty-based citizenship.

Westheimer & Kahne (2004) expanded this framework by classifying citizens into three types: (1) personally responsible citizens who obey laws, work hard, and help others when opportunities arise, (2) participatory citizens who engage in community activities and organizations to address social issues, and (3) justice-oriented citizens who seek to understand the root causes of social problems and transform unjust structures. This perspective highlights that good citizenship extends beyond mere rule-following to include a conscious effort and actions aimed at improving society.

Measuring good citizenship is diverse, depending on the dimensions of interest. Adler and Goggin (2005) developed the Civic Engagement Scale, which measures four main dimensions: (1) political participation (e.g., voting, following political news, contacting political representatives), (2) community involvement (e.g., volunteering, joining community groups), (3) civic knowledge (e.g., understanding the political system, citizen rights and duties), and (4) civic skills (e.g., creative argumentation, teamwork, and problem-solving).

Good citizenship also varies according to governing systems and cultural contexts. In liberal democracies, good citizens are often defined by their exercise of rights and freedoms, respect for others' rights, and participation in political decision-making processes (Pharcharuen, 2019; Goodman, 2025). In contrast, in societies that emphasize collectivism and harmony, such as Thailand and Singapore in Southeast Asia, good citizens may prioritize community harmony, respect for leaders, and maintaining social peace over the exercise of individual rights and freedoms (Tan, 2008; Leksuntarakorn et al., 2023).

Research by Hoskins et al. (2015), which conducted comparative studies in European countries, identified key indicators of good citizenship, including: (1) democratic values, such as respect for the rule of law, acceptance of diversity, and protection of human rights; (2) active participation, such as voting, engaging in protests, and involvement in civil society organizations; (3) social responsibility, such as volunteering, charitable giving, and environmental care; and (4) civic and social knowledge, such as understanding political, economic, and social systems.

Furthermore, the concept of global citizenship, which emerged in the 21st century, extends the meaning of good citizenship to a transnational dimension. It emphasizes responsibility towards humanity and the planet, respect for cultural diversity, and engagement in addressing global challenges such as climate change, poverty, and conflict (Schattle, 2008).

Based on the synthesis of relevant literature, the authors propose that a "good citizen" can be defined through six main components: (1) knowledge and understanding of political and social systems, along with civic rights and duties; (2) respect for laws, social norms, and the rights of others; (3) constructive political participation; (4) engagement in community and social activities; (5) social and environmental responsibility; and (6) civic virtues such as justice, respect for diversity, and public spiritedness.

Table 2 Components and Indicators of a Good Citizen

Component	Indicator	Example Behaviors
Civic Knowledge	Understanding of political and social systems	Knowledge of the constitution, laws, and government structure
Legal Compliance	Adherence to laws and norms	Obeying laws, respecting others' rights, and paying taxes
Political Participation	Frequency and forms of participation	Voting, following the news, and political engagement
Social Participation	Community engagement	Volunteering, helping the community, and charitable giving
Responsibility	Social responsibility	Environmental care, attention to public issues
Civic Virtue	Manifestation of ethics	Justice, respect, diversity, public spiritedness

Empirical Relationship: The Good Adherent and the Good Citizen

The question of whether being a good religious adherent relates to being a good citizen has attracted significant interest among scholars across disciplines. Empirical evidence from the 21st century reveals a complex, conditional picture, demonstrating both positive and negative relationships, as well as contingent ones mediated and moderated by mediating and moderating factors.

A meta-analysis by Kelly et al. (2024), synthesizing over 60 years of empirical research, found a moderate positive relationship between religiosity and prosocial behavior. However, this relationship was stronger when measured by self-report than by objective behavioral measures, and stronger when beneficiaries were members of the same religious in-group than of outgroups. These findings align with Putnam & Campbell's (2010) research, which showed that individuals who regularly participate in religious activities are more likely to volunteer, donate money, and engage in community activities than those who do not. This suggests that religious communities serve as a source of social capital that fosters good civic behavior.

Research by Ruiter & De Graaf (2006) in a European context found that the impact of religiosity on social participation operates through social network mechanisms. Specifically, participation in religious activities creates opportunities for people to meet, build trust, and develop social skills essential for civic engagement. Moreover, most religious teachings emphasize values of compassion, giving, and helping others, which are consistent with good civic behavior. A study by Lim & MacGregor (2012) further indicated that religiosity promotes psychological well-being, a crucial factor that motivates individuals to participate in social activities and help others.

Nevertheless, empirical evidence also points to negative relationships or limitations of religiosity concerning civic behavior, especially when religiosity manifests as rigid beliefs (fundamentalism) or sectarianism. A study by Scheepers et al. (2002) in a European context found that individuals with conservative and inflexible religious beliefs tend to hold negative attitudes towards those of different religions, ethnicities, and cultures, which contradicts the principles of citizenship in multicultural societies emphasizing respect and acceptance of diversity. Research by Ginges et al. (2009) on the relationship between religiosity and support for political violence in the Middle East found that frequent religious attendance was positively associated with supporting suicide attacks against religious enemies. This suggests that in certain contexts, religiosity can be instrumentalized to guide and endorse behaviors that conflict with peaceful civic principles.

Key factors moderating the relationship between religiosity and civic behavior include: (1) Type of religiosity: Intrinsic religiosity, which emphasizes genuinely living according to religious principles, is positively associated with civic behavior, whereas extrinsic religiosity, focused on using religion for personal gain, shows a weak or non-significant relationship (Joseph, 2000; Burris & Navara, 2002). (2) Political and social context: In stable democratic societies, religiosity tends to promote positive civic behavior. However, in societies marked by religious or political conflict, religiosity can be exploited to reinforce segregation and conflict (Basedau et al., 2016; Unser, 2021). (3) Level of religious diversity in society: In highly religiously diverse societies, religiosity can either foster mutual respect and understanding or lead to competition and conflict between religious groups, depending on whether society has mechanisms for creatively managing diversity (Grim & Finke, 2010; Cesari, 2025).

The mechanisms linking religiosity to civic behavior are multidimensional. In terms of cognitive mechanisms, religion provides a moral framework that helps define right and wrong, good and evil, thereby influencing decision-making and behavior (Graham et al., 2013). At the affective level, religious practice fosters empathy, compassion, and a sense of connection with others, which are fundamental to prosocial behavior (Pargament et al., 2013). Regarding social mechanisms, religious communities serve as platforms for network building, the development of social skills, and the reinforcement of social norms that encourage cooperation and mutual aid (Ruiter & De Graaf, 2006). Finally, in terms of behavioral mechanisms, consistent religious practice cultivates habits and discipline that promote responsible and consistent behavior, key attributes of a good citizen (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009).

Conclusion, Discussion, and Recommendation

From the review and synthesis of empirical literature in the 21st century regarding the relationship between "good adherent" and "good citizen," it can be clearly concluded that being a good religious adherent is positively associated with being a good citizen. However, this relationship is neither simple nor universally straightforward; rather, it is complex, contingent on specific conditions, mediating mechanisms, and significant exceptions.

Firstly, being a good religious adherent is not a necessary condition for good citizenship. Empirical evidence clearly shows that individuals who are non-religious or have low levels of religiosity can still be good citizens, actively engaged in society, ethical, and socially responsible (Zuckerman, 2009). The Scandinavian countries, with some of the lowest religiosity rates globally but among the highest levels of good citizenship, social trust, and well-being, serve as a clear example that religion is not the sole or indispensable source of virtue and civic behavior.

Secondly, being a good religious adherent is also not a sufficient condition for good citizenship. Adherence to religious principles does not guarantee that an individual will be a good citizen, particularly when religiosity takes the form of rigid and divisive beliefs. Empirical evidence indicates that highly religious individuals, in certain instances, may hold negative attitudes towards those of different religions, cultures, or sexual orientations, and may even support discriminatory policies or violence against out-groups (Scheepers et al., 2002; Ginges et al., 2009). Thus, religiosity can be a double-edged sword, either fostering or impeding good citizenship, depending on its specific nature and the prevailing context.

A significant implication of this study for social development and public policy is the recognition that religion can be an important source of moral values and social capital that promotes civic behavior. However, it is simultaneously crucial to be cautious and prevent religion from being used as a tool for group segregation or conflict. In the multicultural societies of the 21st century, it is essential to develop mechanisms that encourage inclusive interpretations of religion, embracing diversity through interfaith understanding, and integrating religious values with democratic principles and human rights (Modood, 2019).

Another important discussion point is the role of religious communities as public spheres for developing civic skills and fostering social participation. In an era where traditional social institutions, such as labor unions, community associations, and political parties, are weakening, religious communities remain strong and influential institutions for bringing people together, building social networks, and promoting public engagement (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). However, for religious communities to effectively fulfill this role, they must adapt to changing social contexts, particularly by embracing diversity, promoting the participation of younger generations, and utilizing digital technologies for communication and activities.

Recommendations for future research include several key areas. Firstly, there is a need for more in-depth longitudinal studies to clarify the causal relationship between religiosity and civic behavior, as most current research is cross-sectional and cannot definitively establish the direction of the relationship. Secondly, more cross-cultural and inter-religious comparative studies are warranted, given that the relationship between religion and citizenship can vary significantly across different contexts. Thirdly, it is essential to explore more specific mediating mechanisms, such as the role of religious education, religious leaders, and the structure of religious communities, in promoting or hindering civic behavior. Finally, research should examine the impact of 21st-century social changes, such as the proliferation of digital technology, transnational migration, and evolving family structures, on the relationship between religion and citizenship.

In summary, this study highlights that the relationship between "good adherent" and "good citizen" is complex, not linear or universal, but contingent on various contexts, conditions, and mechanisms. Understanding this complexity is vital for developing policies and practices that promote both religious freedom and good citizenship in multicultural societies.

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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 without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.