

Practice and Exploration of Strict School Governance Education in Religious Colleges

An Educational Pathway of “Studying Laws and Regulations, Observing Precepts, Cultivating Moral Practice, and Establishing a Good Image”

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Abstract: This study examines the practice of strict school governance education in religious colleges, with particular attention to the fourfold educational pathway of “studying laws and regulations, observing precepts, cultivating moral practice, and establishing a good image.” In the context of the increasingly standardized and law-based governance of religious affairs in China, religious colleges function as key institutions for cultivating qualified religious personnel. Their educational quality, internal management, and value orientation are directly related to the healthy inheritance of religious traditions and their constructive adaptation to society. Through document analysis, policy-text interpretation, and case-oriented synthesis, this paper analyzes the background, theoretical meaning, educational logic, implementation strategies, and practical effects of strict school governance education. The study argues that legal education provides the institutional foundation, precept education offers the religious-disciplinary guarantee, moral cultivation forms the internal core of character development, and public-image construction constitutes the external goal of educational effectiveness. The paper further proposes that the pathway should be integrated into curriculum design, routine administration, teacher development, campus culture, and social-service practice. Such an approach can strengthen the rule-of-law awareness, disciplinary consciousness, moral self-cultivation, and social responsibility of teachers and students in religious colleges. It also provides a practical reference for advancing the Sinicization of religion, improving the governance capacity of religious colleges, and promoting the high-quality development of religious education.

Keywords: Religious Colleges; Strict School Governance; Studying Laws and Regulations; Observing Precepts; Moral Cultivation; Public Image; Sinicization of Religion

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In recent years, the governance of religious affairs in China has entered a stage characterized by stronger rule-of-law orientation, institutional standardization, and the continuous advancement of the Sinicization of religion. Religious colleges are not only educational institutions for transmitting religious knowledge, but also important sites for cultivating religious personnel who possess correct faith, sound moral character, legal awareness, and the capacity to serve society. Against this background, strict school governance has become a necessary means of improving the quality of religious education and ensuring the healthy inheritance of religious traditions.

The educational activity summarized as “studying laws and regulations, observing precepts, cultivating moral practice, and establishing a good image” has been developed as a systematic educational initiative in the religious field. Published reports and journal articles indicate that this activity has been carried out widely in Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic communities, and has gradually become an important platform for strengthening self-education, self-management, and self-improvement within religious circles^[1-3]. For religious colleges, this initiative is especially significant because the formation of students’ legal consciousness, disciplinary habits, moral cultivation, and public responsibility is inseparable from daily teaching, campus administration, and the ethos of religious practice.

The fourfold formulation is not a set of isolated slogans. Rather, it reflects an integrated educational logic. “Studying laws and regulations” emphasizes that religious education must operate within the constitutional, legal, and policy framework of the state. “Observing precepts” emphasizes that religious personnel must maintain the internal disciplines and ethical norms of their own traditions. “Cultivating moral practice” points to the transformation of knowledge and discipline into self-cultivation, character formation, and religious integrity. “Establishing a good image” highlights the public responsibility of religious communities and the need to demonstrate constructive, disciplined, and socially beneficial conduct. Together, these elements form a coherent pathway for religious colleges to implement strict governance while preserving the internal spiritual resources of religious education.

1.2 Research Significance

The study of strict school governance education has theoretical and practical significance. At the theoretical level, it responds to the need to construct a religious-education discourse that integrates rule-of-law governance, religious discipline, moral cultivation, and social responsibility. Existing studies and public discussions often focus on policy interpretation or activity summaries, whereas systematic analysis of the educational mechanism underlying the fourfold pathway remains limited. By organizing the pathway into a conceptual framework, this paper seeks to clarify how legal norms, religious precepts, moral self-cultivation, and public-image construction can be integrated into a complete educational process.

At the practical level, strict school governance is directly related to the quality of talent cultivation in religious colleges. Religious colleges must not only teach scriptures, doctrines, rituals, and history, but also cultivate personnel capable of understanding national law, maintaining religious discipline, serving believers responsibly, communicating with society, and participating in public life in an orderly manner. The implementation of “studying laws and regulations, observing precepts, cultivating moral practice, and establishing a good image” can help religious colleges address weaknesses in teaching order, student management, teacher conduct, and campus culture. It can also strengthen the social credibility of religious education and support the healthy development of religious communities^[4-7].

For Buddhist colleges in particular, this pathway has a distinctive doctrinal foundation. Buddhist education has always emphasized the unity of learning, discipline, cultivation, and compassionate action. Legal education and public responsibility can be connected with the Buddhist ideals of benefiting sentient beings, adorning the Pure Land, and maintaining right faith and right conduct. Precept education is not merely a matter of institutional management but also a basic condition for monastic dignity and the transmission of the Dharma. Therefore, strict school governance, when properly understood, does not weaken religious education; it strengthens its ethical foundation and social function.

1.3 Literature Review

Recent Chinese-language studies and journal reports have paid increasing attention to the educational activity of “studying

laws and regulations, observing precepts, cultivating moral practice, and establishing a good image.” Relevant materials in Fayin, Tianfeng, China Religion, and China Muslim indicate that the activity is regarded as an important measure for promoting law-based religious governance, strengthening religious self-discipline, correcting unhealthy tendencies, and shaping a positive public image^[1-5]. Dai Yao’s reports on the Buddhist community emphasize the organizational promotion of the activity and its relationship with the healthy transmission of Buddhism^[8,16]. Yanjue interprets the activity from the Buddhist perspective of guarding body, speech, and mind, stressing that precept-based discipline is foundational to monastic learning and cultivation^[14]. Mu Kefa and Mi Liang discuss parallel experiences in the Islamic community, especially the relationship among legal learning, moral self-cultivation, and the formation of religious personnel^[10,13]. Xu Xiaohong, Lin Manhong, and Li Hua analyze the Christian community’s participation in this activity and its significance for self-renewal, thrift, correct faith, and good public conduct^[5,6,19,20].

These studies and reports provide valuable policy references and practical descriptions. They show that the fourfold activity is not confined to one religious tradition, but has become a shared educational theme across different religious communities. They also demonstrate that religious education in the new era requires a balance between external institutional regulation and internal ethical cultivation.

Nevertheless, several limitations remain. First, much of the existing discussion is descriptive and activity-based, with relatively limited theoretical modeling of the fourfold pathway. Second, the relationship between national legal norms and religious disciplinary systems has not always been analyzed in educational terms. Third, the evaluation of practical outcomes is still developing and often lacks stable indicators, continuous tracking, and mechanisms for feedback. Fourth, comparative study among different types of religious colleges remains insufficient. This paper responds to these gaps by constructing an educational framework for religious colleges and by proposing practical mechanisms for integrating the fourfold pathway into curriculum, administration, cultivation, and social practice.

1.4 Research Methods and Innovation

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on document analysis, policy-text interpretation, and case-oriented synthesis. Document analysis is used to examine relevant journal reports, policy-oriented materials, and published reflections on the fourfold educational activity. Policy-text interpretation is used to clarify the normative logic of law-based governance, religious self-discipline, and the healthy development of religious education. Case-oriented synthesis is used to summarize practices reported by Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic institutions and to extract educational mechanisms that can be applied to religious colleges.

The innovation of this study lies in three aspects. First, it treats “studying laws and regulations, observing precepts, cultivating moral practice, and establishing a good image” as an integrated educational pathway rather than as four separate tasks. Second, it clarifies the inner sequence of the pathway: law provides the external norm, precepts provide the religious discipline, cultivation provides the internal transformation, and public image provides the social expression. Third, it situates strict school governance within the broader project of religious talent cultivation, arguing that governance is not only an administrative issue but also an educational process that shapes knowledge, conduct, character, and responsibility.

2. Conceptual Framework of the Fourfold Educational Pathway

2.1 Studying Laws and Regulations: Institutional Foundation

“Studying laws and regulations” is the starting point of strict school governance. For religious colleges, legal learning includes knowledge of the Constitution, laws and regulations related to religious affairs, rules on religious education, requirements for religious personnel, and institutional norms governing campus administration. Its purpose is not limited to memorizing provisions, but lies in helping teachers and students understand the boundaries, rights, obligations, and responsibilities of religious activities in a law-based society.

The value of legal education is evident in at least three dimensions. First, it strengthens political and legal awareness among teachers and students, enabling them to understand that religious education must be carried out within the framework of national law. Second, it provides a clear basis for school governance, including teaching management, student affairs, religious practice, public communication, and the handling of emergencies. Third, it helps religious colleges improve their

public credibility by demonstrating that religious education is orderly, transparent, and compatible with social governance. In practice, legal education should be incorporated into the formal curriculum and daily administration of religious colleges. It may include specialized courses, thematic lectures, case studies, reading groups, examinations, and scenario-based exercises. More importantly, legal education should be connected with real issues in campus life, such as student conduct, classroom discipline, ritual activities, online communication, and institutional responsibility. Only when legal knowledge is transformed into practical awareness can “studying laws and regulations” function as an effective foundation for strict school governance^[9-11].

2.2 Observing Precepts: Religious-Disciplinary Guarantee

“Observing precepts” refers to the internal disciplinary dimension of religious education. In Buddhist colleges, precepts are not merely formal rules but fundamental norms for monastic identity, religious dignity, and spiritual cultivation. They regulate conduct, language, mental intention, communal life, and the relationship between individual practice and the Sangha. For other religious colleges, this dimension similarly refers to the observance of doctrinal norms, ethical disciplines, and professional expectations for religious personnel.

Precept education differs from ordinary administrative discipline. Administrative rules can regulate external behavior, but precept education also aims at internal transformation. It guides students to understand why self-restraint, respect, integrity, humility, and responsibility are essential to religious life. In Buddhist terms, the guarding of body, speech, and mind is not only a moral requirement but also the basis of right faith and right practice^[14]. Therefore, observing precepts should be taught through a combination of doctrinal explanation, communal practice, model demonstration, and personal reflection.

The practical logic of observing precepts includes institutional constraint and behavioral guidance. On the one hand, religious colleges need clear rules concerning daily routine, classroom order, residence life, ritual participation, attire, speech, and online behavior. On the other hand, teachers and administrators must lead by example. Students learn discipline not only from written rules but also from the conduct of their teachers, preceptors, and senior students. A sustainable precept education system should include regular instruction, mentoring, self-examination, peer supervision, and timely correction. In this way, precepts become a living educational resource rather than a formal requirement.

2.3 Cultivating Moral Practice: Internal Core of Education

“Cultivating moral practice” is the internal core that connects legal learning and precept observance with character formation. Without moral cultivation, legal norms may remain external constraints, and precepts may become formalistic. Religious colleges must therefore guide students to transform knowledge and discipline into personal virtue, religious integrity, and social responsibility.

Moral cultivation in religious colleges includes several levels. At the personal level, it requires sincerity, humility, frugality, diligence, self-examination, and the correction of improper habits. At the communal level, it requires respect for teachers, harmony among classmates, care for the public environment, and responsibility for collective life. At the social level, it requires an awareness that religious personnel should serve believers, care for society, and respond to public expectations with disciplined and compassionate conduct.

The principle of cultivating moral practice also responds to current concerns over religious style and public trust. Published discussions on thrift, correct faith, and proper conduct emphasize that religious personnel should avoid extravagance, sensationalism, utilitarian behavior, and any conduct that damages the image of religion^[5,21]. Religious colleges should therefore make moral cultivation an explicit part of talent training. This can be achieved through self-cultivation courses, reflection diaries, teacher-student dialogues, voluntary service, ceremonial education, and the evaluation of daily conduct. The aim is to cultivate religious personnel who possess not only knowledge and skills but also integrity, responsibility, and credibility.

2.4 Establishing a Good Image: Public Expression of Educational Effectiveness

“Establishing a good image” is the outward expression of strict school governance education. A religious college’s public image is shaped by its teaching quality, campus order, teacher conduct, student behavior, ritual dignity, social service, and public communication. It is also shaped by whether the institution can respond to social concerns, maintain transparency, and demonstrate a constructive role in society.

A good image should not be understood as mere superficial publicity. It is the result of sustained governance, ethical cultivation, and disciplined practice. When students speak appropriately, dress properly, participate in rituals reverently, serve society sincerely, and observe the rules of the college, the institution's image is naturally strengthened. Conversely, if internal management is weak or conduct is disorderly, public communication alone cannot establish credibility.

For religious colleges, image construction should be integrated with education rather than separated from it. Media releases, cultural activities, public lectures, social-service programs, and online communication should all reflect the standards of correct faith, proper conduct, legal compliance, and social responsibility. In this sense, establishing a good image is not merely a public-relations task; it is a comprehensive educational outcome.

2.5 The Integrated Logic of the Fourfold Pathway

The four components of the pathway form a progressive and mutually reinforcing structure. Legal learning clarifies the external boundary of religious education; precept observance strengthens religious discipline; moral cultivation internalizes norms into character; public-image construction manifests the educational results in society. Their relationship can be summarized as follows:

Table 1: Conceptual structure of the fourfold educational pathway

Component	Educational focus	Governance function	Expected outcome
Studying laws and regulations	Learning state laws, religious policies, and college rules	Clarifies external boundaries and institutional responsibilities	Rule-of-law awareness
Observing precepts	Learning and practicing religious disciplines and ethical norms	Strengthens self-discipline and communal order	Correct faith and proper conduct
Cultivating moral practice	Developing virtue, humility, frugality, and responsibility	Transforms norms into character and self-cultivation	Religious integrity
Establishing a good image	Demonstrating disciplined conduct, service, and credible public communication	Connects campus governance with social responsibility	Positive public trust

This framework indicates that strict school governance is not simply a matter of administrative control. It is a comprehensive educational process that links institutional norms, religious discipline, moral cultivation, and public responsibility. For this reason, religious colleges should avoid treating the four components merely as campaign-style tasks. Instead, they should transform them into a stable curriculum system, an administrative mechanism, a cultivation program, and a campus culture.

3. Practical Exploration of the Educational Pathway

3.1 Constructing a Systematic Educational Content System

Constructing a systematic educational content framework is the foundation of effective implementation. The fourfold pathway requires religious colleges to integrate legal education, precept education, moral education, and image education into a coherent curriculum and training framework. Legal education should include national laws and regulations concerning religious affairs, rules governing religious colleges, regulations on religious personnel, and basic knowledge of civic responsibility. Precept education should include the doctrinal basis, historical development, practical requirements, and contemporary meaning of religious discipline. Moral-cultivation education should focus on personal integrity, frugality, responsibility, self-restraint, and social service. Image education should address public communication, campus etiquette, online conduct, and the social role of religious personnel.

The content system should be layered according to students' stages of learning. For beginning-level students, the focus may be basic legal knowledge, campus rules, religious etiquette, and habits of daily discipline. For intermediate-level students, the focus may shift to doctrinal interpretation, case analysis, self-cultivation, and community life. For advanced-level students, the system should emphasize institutional governance, social engagement, public communication, and the ability to guide believers responsibly.

The content system should also reflect the distinctive characteristics of each religious tradition. In Buddhist colleges, for example, legal education can be connected with the Buddhist tradition of adapting to society and benefiting sentient beings;

precept education can be linked to Vinaya studies and monastic discipline; moral cultivation can be connected with the bodhisattva path, compassion, and wisdom; image education can be connected with the dignity of the Sangha and the public role of Buddhist culture. Such integration prevents the fourfold pathway from becoming externally imposed and allows it to draw strength from the internal resources of religious education.

3.2 Diversifying Educational Forms

Educational forms directly affect the effectiveness of strict school governance. Classroom teaching remains the basic form. Religious colleges should offer systematic courses, thematic lectures, case-based instruction, and group discussions. Case-based teaching is particularly useful because it enables students to connect abstract rules with concrete situations. For example, issues such as inappropriate online speech, ritual irregularities, campus discipline, or public-service conduct can be analyzed in class so that students understand both the normative basis and the practical consequences of behavior.

Social practice is another important form. Students should be encouraged to participate in community service, cultural exchange, charitable work, environmental protection, elderly care, disaster-relief support, and other public-interest activities. Such practice allows students to transform legal awareness, precept consciousness, and moral cultivation into concrete action. It also helps them recognize that the public image of religion is shaped through service and responsibility, not merely through discourse^[17,18].

Model-based education also plays an important role. Religious colleges should introduce exemplary teachers, senior monastics, and advanced students as models of learning, discipline, cultivation, and service. Model education is effective because it transforms abstract requirements into visible examples. Students can learn what it means to speak carefully, act properly, maintain humility, observe discipline, and serve the public. At the same time, model education must avoid formalism. It should be linked with real stories, daily conduct, and sustained mentorship.

3.3 Embedding the Pathway into Routine Governance

Strict school governance becomes effective only when it is embedded in routine governance. Religious colleges should not treat the fourfold activity as a temporary campaign. Instead, they should integrate it into institutional documents, course syllabi, student handbooks, teacher evaluation, class meetings, dormitory management, ritual practice, and annual assessment. A routine governance mechanism may comprise four layers. The first is organizational leadership: the college should establish clear responsibilities among administrators, teachers, class mentors, and student leaders. The second is curriculum integration: relevant content should be included in required courses and thematic activities. The third is daily supervision: rules should be implemented in study, residence, rituals, public activities, and online conduct. The fourth is feedback and correction: problems discovered in practice should be discussed, corrected, and transformed into educational cases.

This routine mechanism helps prevent the educational activity from becoming fragmented. It also ensures that teachers and students encounter the fourfold pathway repeatedly in different settings, gradually forming stable awareness and habits.

4. Educational Effectiveness and Reflection

4.1 Establishing an Evaluation Mechanism

Evaluation is necessary for understanding the real effectiveness of strict school governance education. A complete evaluation mechanism should encompass knowledge, behavior, cultivation, and public image. Knowledge evaluation examines whether students understand laws, regulations, institutional rules, and basic religious disciplines. It can be conducted through written tests, oral examinations, case analysis, and classroom participation. Behavior evaluation examines whether students observe campus rules, ritual requirements, etiquette, and communal responsibilities. It requires daily records, teacher observations, class assessments, and peer feedback.

Cultivation evaluation is more complex because moral growth cannot be measured solely by examination scores. Religious colleges may use reflective writing, mentor interviews, self-assessment, service records, and long-term observation to evaluate whether students demonstrate sincerity, self-discipline, humility, responsibility, and improvement. Public-image evaluation can be conducted through the review of social-service activities, media communication, public feedback, and the quality of institutional outreach.

Evaluation should not become a punitive mechanism alone. Its primary function is educational improvement. The college

should identify weak areas, adjust teaching strategies, provide targeted counseling, and improve institutional arrangements. A constructive evaluation system enables strict governance to become a process of continuous improvement rather than one-time inspection.

4.2 Existing Problems in Practice

Although the fourfold pathway has yielded positive results in many religious communities, several problems still need attention. First, some institutions may not attach sufficient importance to the educational activity, leading to inconsistent implementation and weak continuity. Second, some educational content may be disconnected from the real conditions of religious colleges, especially when legal provisions are taught without cases or when precepts are explained without relation to daily life. Third, educational forms may become monotonous, relying too heavily on meetings and lectures while lacking interaction, practice, and reflection. Fourth, assessment mechanisms may remain underdeveloped, making it difficult to judge whether students' awareness, conduct, and cultivation have truly improved.

A further problem is the risk of formalism. If strict governance is understood only as document production, attendance checking, or short-term mobilization, it may fail to transform students' conduct and institutional culture. Religious colleges must therefore shift from activity-based implementation to system-based cultivation. The key is to make the fourfold pathway part of the normal rhythm of teaching, management, religious practice, and campus life.

4.3 Improvement Directions

To improve implementation, religious colleges should strengthen organizational leadership and clarify responsibilities. Administrators should design annual plans, teachers should incorporate relevant content into courses, class mentors should supervise daily conduct, and students should participate in self-management. Second, colleges should update educational content according to new legal requirements, social issues, and campus realities. Third, they should improve teaching methods by introducing case analysis, scenario simulation, group discussion, service learning, and reflective practice. Fourth, they should strengthen teacher development, because the effectiveness of strict governance depends heavily on teachers' own legal awareness, religious discipline, and moral example.

In addition, religious colleges should build a long-term evaluation and feedback mechanism. Problems discovered in evaluation should be addressed through counseling, curriculum adjustment, institutional revision, and teacher-student dialogue. Good practices should be summarized and institutionalized. Only through such continuous improvement can the fourfold pathway become a stable mechanism for high-quality religious education.

5. Discussion: From Strict Governance to High-Quality Religious Education

5.1 The Unity of Law-Based Governance and Religious Self-Discipline

The fourfold pathway reveals that law-based governance and religious self-discipline are not opposed. Law-based governance provides the public framework within which religious education can operate safely and orderly. Religious self-discipline provides the internal ethical resources that enable religious education to maintain dignity and vitality. When these two dimensions are integrated, religious colleges can cultivate personnel who understand both public responsibility and religious commitment.

For Buddhist education, this unity is especially meaningful. Buddhist precepts emphasize restraint, mindfulness, respect, and compassion. These values can support compliance with law and social norms. At the same time, the law-based framework helps Buddhist colleges clarify their institutional responsibilities and avoid disorderly or irregular operation. Thus, strict school governance can be understood as an educational form in which external norms and internal cultivation reinforce each other.

5.2 Talent Cultivation as the Core of Strict School Governance

The ultimate purpose of strict school governance is talent cultivation. Religious colleges should avoid reducing governance to control. The deeper goal is to cultivate religious personnel who are knowledgeable, disciplined, morally credible, socially responsible, and capable of serving believers and society. The fourfold pathway corresponds to the four basic qualities required of religious personnel: legal literacy, disciplinary integrity, moral character, and public responsibility.

This understanding also helps religious colleges evaluate their own educational quality. A college is successful not only

when students pass examinations but also when they develop stable habits of lawful conduct, religious discipline, moral self-cultivation, and responsible service. Therefore, strict governance should be integrated with academic teaching, religious practice, and social education.

5.3 Normalization and Institutionalization

Public reports indicate that the fourfold educational activity has been widely promoted across religious communities^[1-3,12,15,22,23]. The next step is to transition from broad mobilization to normalization and institutionalization. Normalization means that legal education, precept education, moral cultivation, and image construction should become regular parts of campus life. Institutionalization means that these tasks should be supported by rules, curricula, personnel arrangements, evaluation standards, and accountability mechanisms.

Normalization and institutionalization are also necessary for avoiding short-termism. If strict governance depends only on temporary campaigns, its effects will be limited. If it becomes part of the educational structure of religious colleges, it can gradually shape school ethos and student identity.

6. Conclusion

This paper has analyzed strict school governance education in religious colleges through the fourfold pathway of “studying laws and regulations, observing precepts, cultivating moral practice, and establishing a good image.” The study demonstrates that this pathway follows an integrated educational logic: legal learning is the institutional foundation, precept observance is the religious-disciplinary guarantee, moral cultivation is the internal core, and public-image construction is the outward expression of educational effectiveness.

For religious colleges, strict governance should not be understood as external pressure alone. It is a comprehensive educational process that helps students understand public norms, internalize religious discipline, cultivate moral character, and serve society responsibly. The pathway is therefore closely connected with the high-quality development of religious education, the cultivation of qualified religious personnel, and the constructive adaptation of religion to contemporary society. In future implementation, religious colleges should further integrate the fourfold pathway into curriculum design, teacher development, student management, campus culture, social service, and evaluation systems. They should also strengthen long-term tracking of educational effects and develop more refined assessment tools. In this way, strict school governance can move beyond formal activity and become a stable mechanism for cultivating religious personnel with correct faith, disciplined conduct, moral integrity, and a positive public image.

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