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*Social Compass* 2008 55: 359  
DOI: 10.1177/0037768608093697

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## The Nature of Spirituality among Young People in Australia and Thailand

*Eighty interviews with Thai young people and 283 interviews with Australian young people revealed that there were similarities and differences in the ways they related to religion. All Thai young people identified with a religion and considered religion important as a basis for morality. In contrast, many Australian young people neither identified with religion nor considered it important. In both contexts, many young people occasionally or never participated in public or personal religious practices. While many Thai young people were sceptical about some traditional religious beliefs, it was common among Australian young people to see beliefs as something they constructed personally using traditions as resources. In Thailand, religion remains a key part of the publicly accepted culture, while in Australia it has become a personal “lifestyle” option. The differences suggest that religion plays different social roles and takes different forms in different cultural contexts.*

**Key words:** Australia · privatization · religion · secularization · Thailand · youth

*Quatre-vingts interviews avec des jeunes Thaïlandais et 283 interviews avec des jeunes Australiens ont révélé qu’il existait des similitudes et des différences dans leur manière d’approcher la religion. Tous les jeunes Thaïlandais s’identifient à une religion; la religion est pour eux une importante base de moralité. Les jeunes Australiens, par contre, ne s’identifient à aucune religion et, par conséquent, la religion n’a pas d’importance pour eux. Dans les deux pays, beaucoup de ces jeunes se disent n’avoir que parfois, ou jamais, participé à des pratiques religieuses publiques ou personnelles. Alors que beaucoup de jeunes Thaïlandais sont sceptiques par rapport à certaines croyances religieuses traditionnelles, on trouve souvent parmi les jeunes Australiens l’idée que l’individu construit lui-même ses croyances, se servant des traditions comme ressources. En Thaïlande, la religion fait partie intégrante d’une culture publiquement acceptée, alors qu’en Australie, la religion est devenue un style de vie, une option personnelle. Ces différences montrent que la religion joue différents rôles sociaux et revêt différents aspects selon le contexte culturel.*

**Mots-clés:** Australie · jeunes · privatisation · religion · sécularisation · Thaïlande

## **Futures for Religion**

Debate about the future of religion continues to be vigorous. The classical sociologists, such as Weber and Durkheim, predicted there would be a decline in religion due to processes of rationalization and the development of mass society. In the 1960s and 1970s, it seemed that those predictions were being fulfilled. Yet since then, many have been rethinking religion's future.

The persistence of religion in the USA has been so strong that alternative theories based around religion thriving in a pluralistic competitive environment have gained a strong following. Such theories find support in the growth of Pentecostal forms of religion in South America and other parts of the world. Yet in other places, such as Eastern Europe, monopolistic forms of religion have strengthened as the grip of Communism has been released. In Croatia, for example, there has been a strengthening of Catholic belief and practice. The emergence of new forms of religion or spirituality has been noted, characterized by "journeying" (Wuthnow, 1998) or seeking (Roof, 1999). However, debate continues regarding the extent to which younger people are being attracted to them (Heelas and Seel, 2003; Smith, 2005).

Most of the work on general trends in the nature of religion has occurred in the United States and Europe where some quite different trends have been identified. As noted by Davie et al. (2003: 7), comparatively little study has been done in Asia. As has been argued by Casanova (2003), it is quite possible that neither European nor American patterns of religious change point the way to the future of religion in Asia or other parts of the world.

One way of examining possible future trends in religion and spirituality is to look at the patterns of belief and practice emerging among young people. In so doing, one must seek to distinguish life-stage and generation effects. Australia and Thailand provide interesting alternative locations for research on the global futures of religion. Australia is interesting because it stands midway between Europe and the United States. A large sector of its population and most of its religious traditions have come from Europe. Yet as in America, there has been a "free market" for religion with significant recent growth in the diversity of religious expression (Bouma, 2006).

Thailand, as an Asian country, has accepted many aspects of western education, science and technology and built its own western-style hospitals. On the other hand, it has strongly and openly maintained its Buddhist heritage as part of its independence from the western world. As westernization and urbanization have continued rapidly in recent decades, Buddhism has been retained as the national religion, seen as one of the three pillars of the Thai way of life, alongside the nation and the monarchy (Podhisita, 1998: 38). At the same time, Thai scholars have recognized that westernization is having an impact on some aspects of the Thai world view (Pongsapich, 1998: 10–11).

Thailand is also of interest because there are significant minority groups of Christians and Muslims. As early as the 16th century, Islamic traders settled in the area now known as Thailand (Gilquin, 2005: 14). Christians have also had a history spanning several generations in Thailand. Thus it is also possible to examine the beliefs and practices across several religious groups within the context of Thai culture and the processes of westernization and urbanization in Thailand.

## **Methodology**

Over the past three years, the Christian Research Association (Australia) has been undertaking a major study of youth spirituality in Australia in conjunction with researchers from Monash University and the Australian Catholic University, and with the support of 17 educational and youth organizations. Sub-projects of the original study have been conducted by the Christian Research Association for several clients. A parallel study has been conducted in Thailand by the Church of Christ in Thailand and Mahidol University. The Christian Research Association (Australia) has been an adviser in this study and has ensured that there are parallels between it and the Australian research.

Both studies involve qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys. This paper focuses on the qualitative parts of both studies. As the paper explores how young people speak about religion, it contributes some important insights to the debate on the global futures of religion.

An initial round of in-depth interviews was completed in both Thailand and Australia in 2005. These interviews were conducted among a wide variety of young people in order to understand something of the range of ways young people think about spirituality and religion. In Australia, approximately 283 in-depth interviews were conducted by the researchers of the Christian Research Association with young people between the ages of 13 and 18 years in the several sub-projects in different school systems. In Lutheran, Catholic and government schools, the research team deliberately sought to interview young people from a range of religious backgrounds.

In Thailand, 80 interviews were conducted among young people between the ages of 13 and 25 years. These were conducted by two Thai researchers. These interviews were carried out in different parts of the country among Buddhists, Muslims and both Catholic and Protestant Christians. Again, the aim in selecting interviewees was to talk to a wide range of young people and to obtain some idea of the variety of ways in which young people think about religious faith. The interviewers ensured that the interviews covered young people (both males and females) in both rural and city areas in various parts of the country.

An interview schedule was constructed firstly in Australia to probe young people's views about religion and spirituality in their various manifestations. In order not to prejudge responses, young people were first asked a range of questions about life: what they did in their spare time, what they thought was valuable in life, how they coped with "bad experiences", and their attitudes to and involvement in the wellbeing of the wider society. They were asked what they thought were the major influences on their lives. In the responses to these questions, the researchers were seeking to find out how young people saw themselves as "putting their lives together" and whether they saw religion or spirituality as having a role in those processes. In the second part of the interview, the researcher asked a number of specific questions about spirituality and religion. This was approached by asking respondents whether they thought there was a spiritual side of life and in what it might consist, before proceeding to explore a range of traditional and alternative religious and spiritual beliefs and practices.

It was not possible simply to translate that interview schedule into Thai, although the same basic framework was used. Young people were asked first

about their day-to-day activities, what was valuable in life and how they coped with bad experiences, before the questions moved on to religion. However, the ways people talk about religion and spirituality in Thailand and Australia are quite different. Many of the key words did not have parallels in each other's language and even where words could be translated, their scope did not always coincide. Because of the different world view and language, it was necessary to reconstruct the interview schedule in a parallel way for the Thai context rather than to make a direct translation of the one used in the Australian context.

## Some Comparisons

### *Religious identity*

Every Thai young person who was interviewed readily identified themselves with a particular religion. They saw themselves as Buddhist, Christian or Muslim; there was no one who saw themselves as having no religion. Religion is an essential part of a person's identity. According to the National Population and Housing Census 2000 (National Statistical Office of the Thai Government, 2000), young people aged between 10 and 19 years were identified as follows:

- 92.6% Buddhist
- 5.6% Islamic
- 0.9% Christian
- 0.2% other religions, and
- 0.7% had "no religion" or their religion was "unknown".

Almost all Thai young people identified with one religion or another, as reflected in the Census statistics quoted above. Most felt they had been born into a particular religious community and this remained "their" religion. This sense of identification was evident when Buddhists were asked what they thought about Jesus. He is not "of our religion", most of them replied, "I have no thoughts about him". Likewise, most Christian young people did not have much interest in Buddha. "I have never thought about Buddha", said several Thai Christian young people when asked in the interviews.

According to the 2001 Australia Census,

- 65.5% of young people aged between 10 and 19 years were identified with a Christian denomination,
- 6.6% identified with another religion,
- 17.2% indicated they had no religion, and
- 10.7% did not answer the question (ABS, 2001).

However, in many cases parents fill in the Census for their children. A recent national survey of young people found that only half of young people (aged 13 to 24 years) identified themselves with a particular Christian denomination, about 6% identified with another religion, and most others said they had no religion (Hughes, 2007: 153). In the interviews, identifications were often tentative. "I was raised a Christian, but I grew out of it," said a 16-year-old

girl (LD14). A 14-year-old girl said, "I'm not sure. I believe in God but not religion" (LD26).

Other Australian young people said that they, personally, were not religious or, more occasionally, that they were atheists. Some preferred not to answer the question. "I'm not religious or spiritual—life is what it is," said a 13-year-old male. Others indicated that they put together their own ways of thinking.

I have no definite philosophy. A whole range of things influence me depending on the situation. There is nothing constant. I live by different things at different times. (17-year-old male, GD15)

I have my own beliefs by which live. (17-year-old female, GD20)

While young people sometimes referred to the religious identity of the family, it was often evident that they saw themselves making up their own minds about it. Most approached it with the sense that they had a personal choice in the matter, as shown in the following quotations.

I'm Catholic, but I'm not weighed down by traditional beliefs. I just use it as a social justice stance. (16-year-old female, CD28)

The Lutheran church runs in our family. I'm not really sure about it but I have been confirmed. (14-year-old male, LD29)

The importance of personal choice in the matter is evident in the following outburst from a student at a Lutheran school:

[Religion at school] confuses me. We're told to believe in things sometimes. Like at our last assembly last year our principal pretty much told us we had to believe in God and the Church. Kind of annoying because we all feel that we want to believe in what we want to. I was kind of confused. I just kind of thought we don't have to do that because you tell us to. (15-year-old female, LD27)

It is also noteworthy that some Australian young people indicated they were exploring other options, mostly within the Christian denominations. "I'm Catholic but go to Lutheran church," said one 14-year-old girl (LD46). Some had mixed parentage spanning different denominations or religions. One boy, for example, had a Christian mother and a Hindu father (now separated from his mother). "I used to go to church. Mum is a born-again Christian. I like the Hindu ceremonies. They are beautiful but I don't understand them," he said (GD18). This boy described himself as agnostic.

### *The importance of religion*

All but three of the 80 young people interviewed in Thailand said that religion was important to them, at least to some extent. In 50 out of the 80 interviews, reference was made to the moral importance of religion by Buddhist, Christian and Islamic Thai young people: religion was important because it made people good.

It teaches people to be good, to be dependable. Religion is very important. (19-year-old Christian female, TD31)

Religion leads us in various ways. It helps us to have kindness and not to do violence against anyone who is weaker than ourselves. (16-year-old Buddhist male, TD65)

Religion is important because it teaches people to be good and how to lead lives that in every way have goodness and beauty. (22-year-old Islamic female, TD72)

A major difference between Australian and Thai young people was that many Australian young people said that religion had little if any importance to them.

Religion is not important. My friends aren't spiritual. It would never rule my life. (18-year-old female, CD79)

Others qualified their responses:

Yes, religion is important but only one aspect of my life, not my whole life. (17-year-old female, CD23)

On the other hand, there were some responses that were similar to those of the Thai young people as regards the importance of religion in the moral domain and in making them feel good about life and about themselves. However, even here, the way many young people spoke often suggested that they thought of religion as an optional extra: it could be helpful if one was interested.

Religion teaches people morals and gives a good outlook on life. It encourages people to donate to charity. (16-year-old male, LD10)

[Religion] makes me a better person—what you value and how you think. (15-year-old male, LD71)

On the other hand, many were wary of religion. "People abuse it [religion]. Some take it too seriously," said a 16-year-old female (LD59). Another male said:

[Religion] can be both [helpful and harmful]. Religion plays a big part in the sense of all the teachings it has—that's good. It spreads out to a wide community—do good, don't do these bad things ... It can be bad, for example, extremism, and then you have terrorists. (17-year-old male, GD15)

There was no suggestion of the possible harmfulness of religion in the interviews with Thai young people.

### *The nature of belief*

Discussion about belief with the Thai young people began by asking them about heaven. "Heaven" was chosen because it is a term common to all three major religions: Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. It was also chosen because it involved some reference to a world beyond this one and therefore might indicate whether the young people were open to beliefs about a supernatural realm. Interviews then moved to "rebirth". In traditional Buddhism, there are said to be many layers of heavens where the gods live. Rebirth in heaven is one of the possibilities if one's accumulation of good karma is great enough.

Most Thai young people accepted, largely, the basic beliefs of their respective religions. Most Christians and Muslims and many Buddhists said they believed in heaven. Almost all Buddhists said they believed in rebirth, while many Christians said they did not. On the other hand, while some Buddhists

said they accepted the idea of rebirth, several of them added that it did not have any significance for the way they lived.

I don't believe in rebirth. Belief in heaven does have an influence on me. When I die, I am afraid I will not go to heaven. (18-year-old Christian male, TD34)

I don't believe in heaven, but I do believe in rebirth. If a person does good, then he must receive good. But it doesn't have any influence on the way I live my life. (18-year-old Buddhist male, TD51)

Many Thai young people had reservations about aspects of religious belief. Some said they believed 50 per cent, or they were not sure. In particular, nirvana was often described as being "far off". This focus on rebirth within this world rather than seeking to attain nirvana has often been noted in writings about Buddhism in Thailand. One scholar writing about Thai beliefs says:

Most Buddhists, monks and laymen alike, prefer rebirths within the world (sphere) of sensual happiness to the complete salvation from suffering (nirvana) which is the most perfect in the Buddhist perspective. (Podhisita, 1998: 41)

Indeed, many Thai Buddhists think that it is only possible for the Buddha himself to attain nirvana. The following quotations from Buddhist young people are indicative of how many feel.

I believe in nirvana but I don't hope to go there. I believe in heaven and rebirth and the karma from my previous life. One will reap the consequences of karma from previous lives in this life. (17-year-old Buddhist male, TD68)

I don't believe in heaven, but I do believe in rebirth. I believe in my future life I will be reborn in some form or other. But it doesn't influence the way I live. (16-year-old Buddhist male, TD55)

While Christians and Buddhists see themselves as having quite distinct beliefs, it is interesting to note that there are similarities in the ways some ideas are interpreted. Both suggested, for example, that going to heaven would be a result of how one had lived one's life, the consequence, to use the Buddhist term, of karma.

I believe in heaven to some extent. Heaven is more comfortable than the earth. It has an influence on how I live. If I do good things, I will go to heaven. I believe in rebirth. I believe that if I die, I will go according to my karma. (14-year-old Christian female, TD53)

If you do good you will go to heaven, if not good, you will fall into hell. (18-year-old Christian male, TD47)

Thai young people were also asked about their belief in spiritual powers. There were various opinions, but such powers were not generally seen as part of religion. If young people believed in them, then they saw them as part of the environment they had to negotiate rather than as an alternative to religious faith.

I think there are spiritual powers. I do not like to believe in them. But it is forbidden to show disrespect. Looking out for the spirits is one aspect of living life. (20-year-old Buddhist female, TD46)

Not only was the content of belief different, but so were the ways that young Australians talked about belief. Many of them saw belief as something they

could construct for themselves. Rather than accept or reject the doctrines of their religious traditions, Australian young people often saw them as resources they could use as they put their own views together. Many felt that they could believe what they wanted to believe. Belief was an area in which one made personal and sometimes creative choices, as shown in the following quotations.

I have my own ideas that I have pieced together: rational thinking, Christianity, Catholicism. (17-year-old male, CD8)

I believe in God, but I don't practise much. It has shaped my morals. But I like the Buddhist attitude to free will. (15-year-old male, CD9)

A 15-year-old Australian girl said that what was important to her, in terms of religion, was "school prayers and the sayings of Buddha" (CD14).

When talking about their belief in God, many Australian young people gave a strong impression that they were working out their own ideas.

I am uncertain what God is, maybe a spirit, but I believe there is something. (17-year-old female, GD5)

I don't believe in God but I believe there is something bigger and better out there. They haven't covered a whole lot of things they should have in the Bible, but there is something bigger and better out there in the universe but we just haven't found what it is. (15-year-old male, GD23)

These beliefs that there is some sort of higher power were very common among Australian young people. They did not necessarily imply an involvement in a specific alternative spirituality. No young people interviewed engaged frequently in New Age practices such as those associated with crystals. While some of them indicated that they warmed to Buddhist beliefs, none were regularly engaged in Buddhist practices. If they embraced alternative spiritualities at all, they did so at the level of diffuse ideas, rather than as specific practices.

### *The nature of practice*

Religious practice has different patterns in Thailand among the different religions. Christians are expected to go to church frequently, preferably weekly. Muslims are expected to go to prayers each week at the mosque. However, there is little pressure on lay Buddhists to go to the weekly services at the temple. Mostly those who attend are monks and novices and elderly people who feel they will make extra merit for themselves by their attendance. However, many take part in festivals. All Thai Buddhist males are encouraged to spend time at some period as a monk, and it has been estimated that approximately 20 per cent of Thai males do, often during adolescence (Mulder, 2000: 93).

In interviews, many Thai Buddhist young people said they had not been to a ceremony for a long time. Other young people were involved in religious practices more regularly, particularly on their birthdays and on special religious days. A number of them referred to special events some years before when they had attended a ceremony:

I sometimes go to the temple. I often went when I was a child. Last time I went was to walk around the temple to worship the Triple Gems (*wien tien*) with a friend. When I have been

I feel good. [When younger] I didn't know what it was all about. Now I know the meaning. It helps to replenish and polish the heart. But it is not very important. (16-year-old Buddhist male, TD56)

Many Christian young people attended services on a weekly basis, but others attended rarely.

I go to church often with mother and younger brothers and sisters. When I go I feel good. I go to play music and teach the little ones. It is important because the ceremonies show us what our lives are like. (14-year-old Christian female, TD53)

I hardly go to church at all. It is not important to me because I don't hold to Christian thinking. I do enjoy reading about the consequences of karma. It makes me begin to call things to mind. (20-year-old Christian female, TD46)

The levels of involvement among Islamic young people in Thailand also varied.

I sometimes participate in religious ceremonies. When I was a child, I went on special religious days. The last time I went with my father and mother in January 2548. I felt good and my heart felt bright and happy. I used to go more often. It is important because it helps the heart to be transparent. (22-year-old Islamic female, TD72)

Similarly, the frequency of prayer and meditation varied. While some meditated or prayed daily, others could not remember the last time they had done so.

The patterns of religious practice in Australia were similar, often reflecting family practices and personal inclinations. They felt they could go if they wanted to and if they personally found it helpful.

Yes I would like to [go to church], but it depends on time and work. (13-year-old Catholic female, CD42)

I'm not sure about going to church. I don't see the church as necessary. God is everywhere. Whether I go in the future depends on what I am doing in life at the time. (16-year-old female, CD17)

## Discussion

For most Thai young people, religion is a given part of the world in which they live. The laws of the moral universe, of karma, are seen as being no different from the laws of the physical universe, described by science. Many Thai people see the moral universe as working in a comparable way to the physical universe.

The law of karma in Buddhist belief may be compared to the law of motion in western science. Karma gives order and regularity to the moral and social universe much as the Newtonian laws of western science give order and regularity to the physical universe. (Podhisita, 1998: 46)

In other words, one can take notice of the moral universe, or one can ignore it at one's peril. If one does not live a good life according to its precepts, one is likely to suffer the consequences, in the long run. Religion is seen as important partly as a guide to moral behaviour and partly as a way to feel good about life and about oneself.

In Thailand, religion is not seen as adding another dimension to reality. Rather, religion provides the foundations of moral behaviour and describes the moral universe dominated by the law of karma in which most young people see themselves living. This belief in moral causality finds expression among Thai Buddhist, Christian and Islamic young people in different terms. While Buddhists think of it as affecting rebirth, Christian and Islamic young people tend to see it as affecting whether they will go to heaven when they die. In other words, built into the foundations of religion in the context of Thai culture is belief in moral causality. Similarly, most Thai young people believe there are spiritual powers that can have an impact on life. Again, these are not part of a transcendent world but simply part of the reality in which they live.

On the other hand, as noted above, many Thai young people are sceptical about many of the details of traditional doctrines. For example, while most Buddhist young people accept the idea of rebirth, only some accept the idea of heaven, and nirvana seems a long way off to most of them. There is evidence in the way many speak about their religious beliefs and practices that their focus on this life has supplanted practices, and to some extent beliefs about other lives. For many the focus is on making a living now and coping with the daily contingencies of life. When talking about what is important in life, few talk about religion (Hughes and Chaisri, 2005). Most talk about their family and the debt of gratitude they owe to them and many talk about finishing study and getting a good job. In practical terms, a good education and a good job are seen as much more important in ensuring a comfortable future than is merit-making.

Religious practices, both private and public, are seen by many Thai young people as being a good thing, but an optional extra. One can engage in religious practices if one wants to and when one wants to, or if one has time. When they do participate, it is frequently with other family members or with friends on special occasions.

For most Australian young people, religion is an optional extra for those who want it, although some young people see religion as providing a basis for morals and social justice. Many young Australians who have been introduced to religious practices as children, either through school or church, feel that they have grown out of them. They participate in the practices in as far as they find them personally helpful.

Their beliefs reflect similar attitudes. They construct them in a way that makes sense to them personally, sometimes drawing consciously on a variety of belief systems. Others take what appeals to them from the Christian faith, perhaps not consciously “picking and choosing”, but certainly emphasizing what is significant to them as individuals.

In Australia, the sense that one can have “no religion” has a lot to do with the fact that religious identity has become an individual choice. Each person has the right to choose their own religion or choose not to identify with any religion at all.

The possibility of having “no religion” arises from the fact that one can make sense of life in Australia without reference to religion. Indeed, many people contend that religious belief is unnecessary. One can operate in business and in one’s family life, among friends and in the wider society, without any reference to religion. One can understand the nature of the world without any reference to

religion. Many young people also believe that moral values can stand on their own without reference to religion.

In other terms, in contrast to Thai young people, Australian young people who are religious believe that there is an additional dimension to reality than that acknowledged by most of those who do not believe. They believe that there is a non-material dimension, that there is a divine reality that cannot be contained or understood within the context of the material dimension that is explored by science. Most religious people in Australia accept most of what science says. They accept the world that it describes, but they say that there is an additional dimension beyond the realm where science operates.

## **Conclusions**

In Thailand, Buddhism has contributed substantially to the framework for seeing the world. However, since the introduction of western scientific ideas and views of the world in the 19th century, many aspects of that framework have been eroded. For example, the belief in Mt Meru as the centre of the universe commands little attention these days. Indeed, it has been shown in this study that some Buddhist young people are sceptical about the whole idea that there are any heavens at all, let alone the twenty planes of heavens in traditional Buddhist teaching. On the other hand, there is no evidence that Buddhism is about to disappear or be supplanted by “no religion”. Belief in the moral law of karma remains very strong.

The extent to which Thai Christian, Buddhist and Islamic young people engage in public and private religious practices varies considerably. Many young people go to a church, temple or mosque only occasionally, often on special occasions with their friends or their family. Religion continues to provide ways in which people can accumulate merit, whether for this life or for the next.

But Thai young people have not rejected religion. Almost all continue to identify with one religion or another and consider religion to be important. They see it largely as providing some basic moral principles and encouraging them to be “good people”. To that extent, religion continues to be part of the cultural framework in which they live.

For Australian young people, religion is approached very much from an individualistic and consumerist perspective, as Smith has suggested is the case in the USA (Smith, 2005: 262–3). Various forms of Christianity provide “resources” from which young people most commonly draw. Some Australian young people are aware of Buddhist and New Age ideas, but few actively practise them.

Some young people attend a church; many do not. Some young people believe in God and pray regularly, but many do not. All see it as something in which they have a choice and while the majority think there is something “out there”, they are often not sure what to believe.

In Australia, for most young people, religion is not part of a publicly agreed way of seeing the world. Rather, it is an optional additional dimension to life for those who find it appealing, a “lifestyle” option for those who want it. Beliefs are created by individuals drawing on the traditions in a way that makes sense

to the individual. Practices are engaged in where young people feel there are benefits. Many young people, at least at some point in their lives, find religion to be an appealing resource, offering direction, comfort and wellbeing, but it has no importance for many others.

There are several similarities in the ways Thai and Australian young people relate to religion. In both places, most young people focus on finding happiness in this world rather than on the traditional religious focus of life beyond death. In both places, science and technology, economics and politics play significant roles in the ways young people understand their world and look for ways to create a good life within it. In both countries, the level of involvement in religious practices is a personal matter, and seen, at least to some extent, as dependent on how the individual evaluates its benefits.

There are also some significant differences. While there is scepticism about some religious beliefs in Thailand, there is little of the creative formation of individual belief systems that is common in Australia. Authority in belief remains with the religious institutions in Thailand, while for many Australian young people it has been firmly located in the individual.

The greatest difference, however, is in how religion itself is regarded. Many Australian young people are comfortable saying that they have “no religion” and many consider religious beliefs or other forms of spirituality as unimportant. In contrast, almost all Thai young people identify with a religion and consider religion to be important, particularly in terms of underpinning moral behaviour.

These differences between young people in Australia and Thailand suggest that, in the foreseeable future, there will not be one global future for religion. Rather, religion will continue to take different forms and perform different social functions in different contexts. In these different countries, religion interacts with science and technology, with national identity and personal wellbeing, finding its particular form in each context.

## NOTES

TD – Thai database of interviews.

CD – Database of interviews conducted in Catholic schools in Australia.

GD – Database of interviews conducted in government schools in Australia.

LD – Database of interviews conducted in Lutheran schools in Australia.

(Note that Catholic, Lutheran and government schools in Australia all contain students from a variety of religious backgrounds.)

“The Spirit of Generation Y” study of youth spirituality in Australia was funded by 17 organizations and was undertaken by a research team consisting of Ruth Webber (Australian Catholic University), Michael Mason (Australian Catholic University), Andrew Singleton (Monash University) and Philip Hughes (Christian Research Association). Sub-projects were developed in Lutheran schools, Catholic schools and some government schools and were the sole responsibility of the Christian Research Association. This paper is based on the interviews undertaken in these sub-projects.

The study in Thailand was funded by the Department of History, the Church of Christ in Thailand and the Humanities Department, Mahidol University. The Thai research team includes the three authors of this article.

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