THE RELIGIOSITY OF YOUTH IN AUSTRALIA AND THAILAND*

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Introduction

This chapter explores the nature of religiosity among young people in Australia and Thailand. In so doing, it reflects on how the nature of religiosity relates to the broader cultural landscape. It will argue that the forms that religion takes reflects not only that broader cultural framework, but the ways that specific religions interact with the social and cultural framework.

Australia and Thailand provide interesting case-studies outside the dominant matrix of the United States and Europe where much of the discussion on the nature of religion in modern and post-modern societies has taken place. Both have a dominant religious tradition: Christianity in Australia and Buddhism in Thailand. However, both have significant communities of other religious groups. In Australia, the Buddhist and Muslim communities have been growing rapidly and, in recent years, the Hindu community even more rapidly (Hughes 2007). Most of those who are not Christian are first or second generation immigrants to Australia. There are also large numbers of young Australians who are described in the Census as not religious or who choose not to answer the question (which is specified as optional in the Australia Census).

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Thailand has a Muslim community predominantly in the southern part of the country. The Islamic community has been in the south of Thailand for three or four hundred years. Thailand also has a small Christian community, predominantly in the north of the country. The Christian community is constituted mostly of families who converted to Christianity, many of whom did so in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Hence, many Christians come from a heritage of three or four generations of Christian faith. There are, however, also many Karen, other Sino-Tibetan and various tribal groups living in Thailand who are Christian. Some of these people have assimilated into Thai society, although others remain distinct in the locations of the villages; their dress, language and religious beliefs.

Between 2005 and 2008, large parallel surveys of young people were conducted in both Australia and Thailand. In Australia, the first survey of young people aged between 13 and 24 was conducted by telephone interviews of a randomly selected group. Other similar web surveys have since been conducted among 5500 young people in 28 schools around Australia in a project known as the Schools Spirituality Project.

The Australian survey was used as the basis for the survey of young people in Thailand. Because of the different proportions of major religions and the very different religious practices and beliefs, the Thai version was built on the model of the Australian survey rather than simply attempting a word-for-word translation. This survey was distributed in a paper form and was completed by 3000 young people aged between 13 and 24. To ensure broad coverage of young people, stratified distribution methods were used. The survey was distributed to groups of young people in schools, tertiary institutions and places of work in the urban and rural sectors of the north, north-east, central and southern parts of Thailand. This method ensured that the sample included over-representation of the Muslim and Christian communities, enabling analysis of these groups of young people, as well as the Buddhists. For a more accurate national picture of Thai young people, the data were weighted for age, gender, region, and religious identification using the 2000 national Thai Census as the benchmark.

Both surveys were supplemented by face-to-face interviews. In Thailand, 80 face-to-face interviews were undertaken with a variety of Buddhist, Islamic and Christian young people. In Australia, approximately