

# The Role of Religion in Promoting Morality and Ethics among Thai Youth in the Education System<sup>\*</sup>

Pravej Maharutsakul

Pathumthani University, Thailand

E-mail: pravej@ptu.ac.th

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## Abstract

This article explores the role of religion in promoting morality and ethics among Thai youth within the education system. It examines how Buddhist, Islamic, and Christian teachings are integrated into curricula, school rituals, and national policy to shape character and civic values. The discussion highlights both the strengths of religious moral education and the challenges of ensuring inclusivity in a pluralistic society. The article concludes with recommendations for balanced, values-driven educational policies that respect cultural and religious diversity.

**Keywords:** Religion, Morality, Ethics, Thai Youth, Education

## Introduction

In contemporary Thai society, morality and ethics are considered essential foundations for both personal conduct and national development. The cultivation of these values is particularly emphasized in the upbringing and education of children and youth, as they are regarded as future citizens responsible for maintaining cultural continuity and social harmony. Within the Thai education system, moral and ethical instruction is not only a pedagogical goal but a policy priority, embedded through civic education, religious studies, and national mandates such as the “Twelve Core Values” initiative introduced by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) in 2014. These values, including loyalty, gratitude, self-discipline, and respect for elders, draw heavily from religious and cultural norms rooted in Thai traditions (Office of the Basic Education Commission [OBEC], 2014).

Religion plays a central role in shaping these moral ideals, particularly through the long-standing influence of Theravāda Buddhism, which permeates nearly every aspect of Thai cultural and educational life. As approximately 93% of Thais identify as Buddhist, the teachings of the Buddha—especially the Five Precepts (*pañca-sīla*), the Noble Eightfold Path, and the principles of *mettā* (loving-kindness) and *karuṇā* (compassion)—form a moral compass widely accepted by both families and schools (Keyes, 1983; Swearer, 2010). Buddhist monks often participate in school activities, and many educational institutions begin each day with prayer or chanting sessions.

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Additionally, Islam and Christianity, although minority religions in Thailand, play important roles in the moral and spiritual development of youth in their respective communities. In the southern provinces of Thailand, Islamic schools (*pondok* and *tadika*) combine general education with Qur'anic teachings, emphasizing discipline, modesty, and social responsibility (Liow, 2009). Christian institutions, particularly those run by Catholic missions, similarly promote ethical values such as humility, service, and integrity through religious instruction and community outreach (Sirikanchana, 2003).

Given this rich religious and cultural landscape, it is important to examine how religion contributes to the development of morality and ethics among Thai youth, particularly within formal educational settings. This article explores the integration of religious principles into the Thai education system and analyzes their role in shaping the moral character of students. It seeks to identify how Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity offer frameworks for ethical conduct and how these are reflected in school curricula, extracurricular activities, and broader socialization processes. The objective is to critically assess the role of religion as a moral agent in education, while also addressing contemporary challenges related to religious pluralism, secularism, and educational policy in Thailand.

## Religion and Thai Moral Culture

Thailand is a multi-religious society with a dominant Buddhist majority and notable Muslim and Christian minorities. Each of these religious traditions offers a distinct yet overlapping moral framework that influences individual behavior, social expectations, and institutional practices, particularly in education. These frameworks are not confined to theological doctrines but are embedded in everyday cultural life, shaping notions of right and wrong, duty, and interpersonal responsibility among Thai youth.

### 1. Thailand's Major Religions and Moral Frameworks

Theravāda Buddhism is practiced by approximately 93% of the Thai population and has played a formative role in the country's moral landscape. Buddhist ethics emphasize personal responsibility, non-violence, mindfulness, compassion, and adherence to social harmony. The Five Precepts (*pañca-sīla*)—refraining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxication—serve as the baseline for lay morality and are frequently taught to children both at home and in schools (Swearer, 2010). The Noble Eightfold Path, especially components such as right speech, right action, and right livelihood, offers a comprehensive guide for ethical living and is often integrated into character education curricula (Harvey, 2000).

Islam, practiced by approximately 5–6% of the population, is especially prominent in the southern provinces such as Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. Islamic moral instruction derives from the Qur'an and Hadith, emphasizing virtues such as honesty (*ṣidq*), modesty (*ḥayā'*), filial piety, justice (*'adl*), and submission to God's will. Islamic schools (*pondok* and *tadika*) operate parallel to the national curriculum but incorporate Islamic studies, Arabic language, and religious rituals, thereby nurturing a

sense of moral identity grounded in Islamic ethics (Liow, 2009). Teachers and religious leaders often function as moral exemplars and guide students through daily routines that reinforce religious discipline and ethical reflection.

Christianity, though practiced by a smaller segment of the population (roughly 1.2%), has made a significant impact through its missionary-led educational institutions. Catholic and Protestant schools have long emphasized values such as humility, service to others, honesty, and compassion through both formal instruction and community involvement. Biblical teachings, prayer, and the figure of Jesus as a moral role model are used to cultivate a strong sense of ethical responsibility among students (Sirikanchana, 2003). Christian schools are also known for high academic standards and a holistic approach to education that includes moral, spiritual, and emotional development.

## **2. Moral Education through Religious Instruction**

In Thai public and private schools, moral education is often synonymous with religious education. Buddhist principles are formally taught during religion classes and are reinforced through daily rituals such as chanting, paying respect to the Buddha image, and participation in merit-making ceremonies. Schools often invite monks to deliver sermons on moral topics during special occasions like *Makha Bucha* or *Visakha Bucha* days (Mulder, 1996). Students are encouraged to internalize these teachings not just as doctrine but as practical guidelines for ethical living.

In Islamic and Christian schools, religious teachings are similarly positioned as core sources of ethical instruction. Islamic institutions integrate prayer, fasting during Ramadan, and lessons on the Prophet Muhammad's life into their moral education frameworks. Christian schools incorporate chapel services, Bible studies, and social service projects to instill values aligned with Christian ethics. In all cases, religion functions not merely as a subject of knowledge but as a formative influence on students' character and worldview.

The coexistence of these religious traditions within the Thai education system reflects a broader cultural consensus that moral development is both a personal and collective endeavor. While the content of religious ethics may vary, the shared emphasis on discipline, compassion, and social responsibility contributes to a moral culture that is pluralistic yet cohesive.

## **Religious Education in the Thai School System**

Religious education in Thailand is a state-sanctioned and culturally embedded aspect of the national curriculum. It operates as a key vehicle for instilling moral and civic values among youth and reflects the country's deep-rooted relationship between religion, education, and national identity. While Thailand is officially secular in its constitutional framework, its educational philosophy heavily incorporates religious and moral instruction—most notably from Theravāda Buddhism, the majority religion.

### **1. Religious and Moral Content in the National Curriculum**

The formal Thai school curriculum, overseen by the Ministry of Education, includes religion, morality, and ethics as a core learning area from primary through secondary education. Students are required to study religious principles, moral reasoning, ethical behavior, and civic responsibilities, with content adapted to suit diverse regional and religious demographics. Although Buddhist teachings dominate the textbooks and class discussions, provisions exist to accommodate students of Islamic and Christian backgrounds, especially in the southern provinces and in mission-run schools (Office of the Basic Education Commission [OBEC], 2008).

Curriculum materials typically focus on the Five Precepts, the Noble Eightfold Path, the virtues of the Buddha's teachings, and moral parables drawn from the *Jātaka* tales. Instruction emphasizes qualities such as self-discipline, gratitude, honesty, and compassion. In Islamic schools (*rong rian islam*), additional instruction in Qur'anic teachings, Shariah principles, and Arabic language is integrated into the standard curriculum. Similarly, Christian schools, particularly those managed by Catholic or Protestant institutions, blend biblical ethics and Christian worldview into moral education (Sirikanchana, 2003; Liow, 2009).

### **2. Integration of Religious Activities in Schools**

Beyond classroom instruction, Thai schools often incorporate religious practices into daily routines and special ceremonies. A typical school day may begin with a morning assembly that includes chanting Buddhist prayers, listening to moral sermons, or participating in guided meditation. On Buddhist holy days—such as *Makha Bucha*, *Visakha Bucha*, and *Asalha Bucha*—schools organize temple visits, merit-making activities, and almsgiving ceremonies where students offer food to monks (Mulder, 1996). These practices are designed not only to reinforce religious instruction but to cultivate experiential morality and emotional connection with spiritual values.

In predominantly Muslim provinces, school routines include the daily recitation of Qur'anic verses, Friday prayers, and observance of Ramadan. In Christian schools, prayer sessions, chapel services, and religious festivals like Christmas or Easter are integrated into the academic calendar, serving as opportunities for ethical reflection and community bonding.

Monks, imams, priests, and religious teachers often serve as moral exemplars and provide spiritual guidance within the school setting. In some institutions, monks are formally invited to teach classes or offer weekly sermons. This collaboration between religious figures and educational institutions reflects a communal approach to ethical development, where the cultivation of virtue is seen as a shared societal responsibility (Swearer, 2010).

### **3. The “Twelve Core Values” Policy and Religious Ideals**

In 2014, the Thai government—under the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO)—introduced the “Twelve Core Values of Thai People” policy as part of a national agenda to foster patriotism, discipline, and moral integrity in Thai youth.

These values, such as love for the nation, respect for parents and teachers, self-discipline, moderation, and upholding the monarchy, were officially mandated across all schools (OBEC, 2014). While the policy is framed in secular language, many of its values draw directly from Buddhist teachings and traditional Thai customs influenced by religion.

For instance, the promotion of gratitude (*katanyu*), self-control (*santosa*), and respect for elders are congruent with core Buddhist moral principles. The values also reflect the Confucian and Buddhist influence on Thai educational philosophy, where ethical conduct and social harmony are paramount (Keyes, 1983). Teachers are instructed to integrate these values into classroom lessons, school events, and extracurricular activities through storytelling, group discussions, moral games, and community service.

Critics, however, have pointed out that the policy emphasizes conformity and top-down moral instruction, potentially marginalizing diverse ethical perspectives and non-Buddhist worldviews (Vichit-Vadakan, 2016). Nonetheless, the initiative remains influential in shaping how morality and religion are intertwined in Thai education, especially in the formation of youth identity and civic consciousness.

## **Religion as a Vehicle for Ethical Development**

Religious traditions have long served as potent sources of moral and ethical guidance. In the context of education, religion functions not only as a body of doctrine but also as a mechanism for moral formation, shaping youth behavior through teachings, rituals, and community norms. This role is reinforced through various theoretical models of moral education, including virtue ethics, character education, and religious socialization—each offering a framework for understanding how religion fosters ethical development in young learners.

### **1. Moral Education Theories and Religious Influence**

The foundation of virtue ethics, rooted in Aristotelian philosophy and widely aligned with Buddhist and other religious traditions, centers on the cultivation of moral character through the habitual practice of virtues such as honesty, generosity, patience, and self-control. In Thai Buddhist education, this manifests through the encouragement of *sīla* (moral discipline) and *bhāvanā* (mental cultivation), both of which foster ethical mindfulness and personal integrity (Harvey, 2000). In Islamic education, similar emphasis is placed on the development of *akhlaq* (moral character), reinforced by prophetic traditions and legal obligations (Liow, 2009).

Character education builds on this by institutionalizing moral values into curricula and school culture. In religious schools—whether Buddhist, Muslim, or Christian—values such as compassion, justice, respect, and gratitude are explicitly taught and modeled. Educators serve as moral role models, and moral lessons are conveyed through religious texts, stories, and daily practices. As Lickona (1991) argues, character education is most effective when it involves cognitive understanding,

emotional engagement, and behavioral reinforcement—all of which are inherent in religious pedagogy.

Religious socialization, meanwhile, views moral development as a product of social learning within religious contexts—family, community, and school. Through repeated exposure to moral teachings, religious ceremonies, and intergenerational transmission, children internalize ethical norms. In Thailand, for example, youth participating in temple activities or *dhamma* camps report higher levels of empathy, altruism, and self-regulation compared to those without such exposure (Swearer, 2010; Siriphadung, 2022).

## **2. Reinforcement of Ethical Behaviors through Religious Teachings**

Religious teachings across traditions promote ethical behaviors that contribute to individual character and social cohesion. In Buddhism, the Five Precepts and the Brahmavihāra (four divine abodes)—*mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (sympathetic joy), and *upekkhā* (equanimity)—are used to cultivate pro-social behavior and reduce aggression (Mulder, 1996). Students learn not only to avoid wrongdoing but to actively cultivate virtue, especially through merit-making and mindfulness practices.

In Islamic education, children are taught the importance of accountability to God and society, instilling values like honesty, humility, and respect for others. Moral obligations are derived from Qur’anic injunctions and the Sunnah (Prophetic traditions), and students often participate in community service, daily prayers, and lessons in ethical jurisprudence (*fiqh al-akhlāq*) (Liow, 2009).

Christian ethics, commonly taught in mission schools in Thailand, emphasize virtues such as charity, forgiveness, and moral courage. Stories of Jesus and the parables of the New Testament are used to encourage youth to act with compassion and integrity. Religious events and outreach programs further reinforce the values of service, social justice, and care for the marginalized (Sirikanchana, 2003).

These teachings go beyond abstract principles; they are embedded in routines, rituals, and community practices, making moral behavior tangible and repeatable for students.

## **3. Comparison with Secular Moral Education**

While secular moral education also seeks to instill values such as respect, responsibility, and empathy, it often does so through rationalist or humanist frameworks, emphasizing moral reasoning, civic duties, and universal human rights. Thai public schools use civic education and the “Twelve Core Values” to promote morality independently of any one religion, although these values often reflect Buddhist and traditional cultural influences (OBEC, 2014; Vichit-Vadakan, 2016).

What distinguishes religious moral education is its ability to invoke transcendental authority, integrate ritual and emotional experience, and promote moral identity through belonging to a faith community. Religious narratives offer existential meaning, and rituals provide embodied experiences of virtue—factors that deepen

internalization of moral values (Lickona, 1991; Swearer, 2010). Furthermore, religious education often emphasizes self-regulation, spiritual discipline, and moral exemplars, offering holistic development that encompasses mind, body, and spirit.

Nonetheless, both religious and secular moral education face the challenge of pluralism in modern societies. While religious frameworks offer depth and tradition, they must be applied inclusively in diverse educational settings to respect multiple worldviews. Conversely, secular moral education must grapple with the risk of abstraction and lack of emotional engagement when disconnected from cultural and religious contexts.

### **Challenges and Considerations**

Despite the moral and ethical benefits often associated with religious education, its implementation within state education systems—especially in pluralistic societies like Thailand—presents several complex challenges. These include tensions between secular governance and religious influence, the risk of indoctrination or exclusion of minority faiths, and the struggle to balance national unity with respect for religious diversity. Addressing these challenges is essential for ensuring that religious education contributes to ethical development while respecting the rights and identities of all students.

#### **1. Secularism and Religious Pluralism in State Education**

Thailand's constitutional framework identifies the country as a secular state that guarantees religious freedom to its citizens. However, in practice, the educational system reflects a predominantly Buddhist ethos, especially in public schools, where Buddhist rituals, imagery, and teachings are widely present (Keyes, 1989; Swearer, 2010). While this reflects the demographic majority and cultural tradition, it creates an inherent tension between state neutrality and cultural-religious preference.

Religious pluralism is acknowledged in policy—Muslim and Christian students are permitted to receive religious instruction aligned with their beliefs—but implementation remains uneven. In predominantly Buddhist regions, students of minority faiths may experience limited access to tailored moral instruction, or be indirectly pressured to participate in Buddhist ceremonies. This raises concerns about the role of the state as a neutral guarantor of diverse religious and moral worldviews in public education (Vichit-Vadakan, 2016).

#### **2. Risks of Indoctrination and Religious Bias**

A second concern relates to the risk of indoctrination—the use of religious education not as a tool for critical moral reflection, but as an authoritative imposition of belief systems. In some cases, the lack of critical pedagogy or pluralistic engagement may lead to a dogmatic moral framework, where ethical reasoning is replaced by uncritical obedience to religious authority (Lickona, 1991). This may hinder students' capacity for autonomous moral judgment—a key goal of education in democratic societies.

Moreover, religious education, if uncritically designed, may reinforce majority bias, leading to the marginalization of religious minorities. For example, the overrepresentation of Buddhist symbolism and values in public schools may unintentionally exclude Muslim, Christian, Hindu, or secular students from full participation in school life (Liow, 2009). Such exclusion can perpetuate feelings of alienation and weaken social cohesion, particularly in multi-ethnic and multi-religious areas like Thailand's Deep South.

Efforts to make moral education "universal" by abstracting religious content into generalized values—such as the "Twelve Core Values" policy—while attempting to avoid favoritism, have also been critiqued. These values, though framed in secular terms, still reflect predominantly Buddhist and monarchist ideals, raising concerns about cultural hegemony under the guise of neutrality (Mulder, 1996; OBEC, 2014).

### **3. Balancing National Unity and Religious Diversity**

Finally, Thailand faces the broader challenge of how to foster national unity through shared moral values without undermining religious diversity. Religious education, if inclusively designed, can serve as a platform for promoting mutual understanding and ethical solidarity across faiths. However, this requires a pedagogical shift—from promoting one dominant religious worldview to encouraging interfaith dialogue, comparative ethics, and civic pluralism (Chaiwat, 2015).

Promoting shared moral values—such as compassion, honesty, and respect—across religious lines may offer a way forward. But this approach must be grounded in inclusive curriculum design, teacher training in intercultural competence, and policy safeguards that protect freedom of belief. A pluralistic moral education should not dilute religious identity but should instead promote ethical dialogue and cultural empathy, reinforcing democratic citizenship in a diverse society.

## **Policy and Pedagogical Implications**

In light of the challenges posed by religious diversity, secularism, and national unity in Thai education, it is essential to reimagine religious and moral education as a platform for inclusive ethical development rather than doctrinal instruction. This requires educational policies and pedagogical strategies that are sensitive to religious pluralism, culturally grounded yet interfaith-aware, and oriented toward civic and moral development for all youth, regardless of religious background.

### **1. Inclusive Moral Education for All Youth**

To ensure that moral education serves all students equitably, Thai policymakers must adopt a framework of inclusive religious and ethical education. This involves shifting from a mono-religious model—often implicitly Buddhist in public schools—to a pluralistic approach that respects and reflects the religious diversity of Thai society. In practice, this means that the curriculum should integrate ethical teachings from major world religions represented in the student body, including Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and others, while also allowing room for secular moral reasoning.

Such an inclusive approach does not require religious relativism, but rather the recognition of shared moral principles—such as honesty, compassion, and justice—that can be expressed through diverse traditions. This fosters ethical literacy, allowing students to appreciate both the distinctiveness and the commonality of different moral frameworks (Jackson, 2004). Countries like the UK and Indonesia offer useful models, where religious education is taught comparatively and analytically, aiming to develop moral reasoning and intercultural understanding, rather than personal belief systems (Gearon, 2013; Zuhdi, 2005).

In the Thai context, this means revising textbooks, lesson plans, and school rituals to ensure they reflect multifaith perspectives, particularly in regions with high concentrations of Muslims or Christians. State-mandated programs such as the “Twelve Core Values” should be revisited to ensure that they are inclusive not only in language but also in philosophical origin and pedagogical implementation (OBEC, 2014; Vichit-Vadakan, 2016).

## **2. Teacher Training for Values-Based and Multifaith Education**

Teachers play a critical role in the success of inclusive moral education. However, many educators in Thailand are trained primarily within Buddhist ethical frameworks, with limited exposure to the teachings or practices of other religions. This can lead to unintentional religious bias or pedagogical rigidity when dealing with diverse classrooms. To address this, teacher training programs must be reformed to include courses on comparative religion, intercultural education, and inclusive pedagogy.

Such training should emphasize not only content knowledge but also pedagogical skills in values-based education: facilitating ethical discussions, managing interfaith dialogue, and teaching moral dilemmas in a way that encourages critical thinking rather than rote acceptance. Teachers must learn to create safe, respectful, and reflective learning environments that allow students from all backgrounds to express and explore their values (UNESCO, 2014). Furthermore, collaboration with religious leaders from various communities can help educators better understand the cultural-religious contexts of their students and integrate relevant perspectives into classroom instruction.

## **3. Promoting Interfaith Understanding through Ethics Education**

An inclusive moral education model must go beyond religious tolerance toward interfaith engagement. This means encouraging students not only to learn about other religions but to engage in ethical discussions across religious boundaries, fostering empathy and respect. Schools can incorporate interfaith projects, dialogue circles, and community service initiatives that bring students of different faiths together around shared values and social concerns.

In multicultural regions of Thailand—such as the southern provinces where Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian youth often study in separate institutions—this approach has the potential to build social cohesion and reduce intergroup mistrust. Pilot

programs promoting peace education and interfaith dialogue, such as those supported by civil society organizations and faith-based NGOs, have demonstrated that youth can serve as ambassadors of coexistence when given the right educational tools (Chaiwat, 2015; Yousuf, 2018).

In policy terms, the Ministry of Education should develop a national framework for ethics education that explicitly supports interfaith understanding, integrates moral reasoning with religious diversity, and aligns with Thailand's commitments to inclusive and quality education under the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2014).

## Conclusion

Religion plays a central role in shaping the moral and ethical development of Thai youth within the national education system. Through the teachings of Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity, young learners are introduced to values such as compassion, honesty, self-discipline, and respect for others, which contribute to their personal growth and social responsibility. In Thailand, religious education is embedded in both curriculum and daily school life, with activities like prayer, merit-making, and religious observances reinforcing ethical behavior through practice. The government's Twelve Core Values policy further institutionalizes these moral principles, although it reflects predominantly Buddhist ideals. While religious education offers deep cultural and spiritual benefits, it also presents challenges, particularly in a diverse society. Tensions arise between secular educational goals and the religious character of moral instruction, as well as concerns about the exclusion of minority faiths and the risk of indoctrination. To address these issues, educational policies must be inclusive and balanced, promoting interfaith understanding and ensuring that all students feel respected and represented. Teacher training should focus on comparative ethics and inclusive pedagogy, equipping educators to foster moral reasoning and cultural empathy. Ultimately, religion remains a vital source of moral education in Thailand, and with thoughtful integration, it can continue to guide youth toward becoming ethical and responsible citizens in a pluralistic society.

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