

## **If Jesus is in Disneyland, Where is the Buddha?** **Philip Hughes <sup>(1)</sup>**

*As I begin this lecture, I wish to pay my respects to Charles Strong. Strong was an independent thinker, someone who did not like to be constrained by the traditions of his time. That is something I admire in him. He would agree with the many young people with whom I have talked that it is right to ask questions, even of the deepest aspects of faith.*

*I sometimes hear people speak about the fact that some aspects of faith must always remain mysterious. That is often short-hand for 'Don't ask any more questions, because I can't answer them'. Young people rightly want to keep asking questions. And I am sure that they would have the approval of Charles Strong in so doing. In that way, they are keeping something of the Charles Strong tradition alive in their own way. I believe also that young people today put action before dogma. Again, they would have the support of Charles Strong who was tireless in his social action, for peace, for justice for Aboriginal people, for prisoners, the care of mentally disabled children. Strong cared for the weakest and most vulnerable in society. And he believed that how you lived was of greater importance than whether you adhered to the dogmatic assertions of a particular church. I strongly agree.*

Disneyland sounds a long way from Nazareth, or even from Jerusalem. Disneyland is centred on play and pleasure. It does not take the real world seriously. The commercialism, the hedonism, the superficiality of its exciting rides and its presentation of flashy images is a very long way from the cross. How could Jesus be found in Disneyland? Does not Disneyland stand for all the values that Jesus rejected?

In 2000, David Lyon released a book entitled *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*. His starting point was a great Spring Harvest Day Crusade held right in Disneyland, Anaheim, California. In some sense, Jesus was, in fact, proclaimed within the actual context of Disneyland. The whole amusement park was taken over by evangelical Christians as a context in which to proclaim their faith.

For Lyon, this is a springboard to demonstrate how the Christian faith is being re-expressed within contemporary post-modern culture. Lyon argues that there are two primary drivers of cultural change. The first is the change in forms of communication and information technologies. Electronic communications have dissolved the boundaries of space. The huge amount of information available has led to a challenging of traditional authorities. The 'cyberspace' that has been created is anarchic and fragmented. It is a domain in which there are many voices and no clear authorities (2000, pp.67-8).

The second driver is consumerism. Consumerism is no longer about fixed needs, says Lyon, but about constructive a lifestyle. Individuals in Western society are encouraged to choose, arrange, adapt and display goods in order to make a unique personal statement. Consumerism is the process through which the contemporary identity of the self (or multiple identities) are constructed (2000, p.82).

For Lyon, 'Jesus in Disneyland' is a metaphor of the contemporary morphing of the Christian faith. In an era of relativity, secularisation means little, although he says that some conventional religious organisations are past their peak. Rather than drying up, faith has emerged in new forms: primarily as a consumer-shaped resource. There are world-wide signs of the resurgence of religion, he argues. In a time in which religion has become deregulated and deinstitutionalised, there is new 're-enchantment' (Lyon, p.34).

Among the post-modern expressions of the Christian faith, Lyons points to some new organisations and activities. The 'Promise Keeper' movement in the USA is Lyon's prime example (Lyon, p.36). This is a movement among men in which commitments are made to Jesus Christ, to sexual purity and to building family life. It has all the trappings of religious revivalism, he says, as it is expressed in mass rallies. Yet it does not include any reference to local church, or any denominational religious organisation.

The movement has grown through the use of the 'new media', through telephone and internet, television and email. It has been dependent on people networking with each other. There is no long-term memory in the movement, Lyon says. References to canonical texts are sparse. It is a movement in which the expression of feelings are central; a movement expressed through holding hands, singing, and praying. Lyon feels that the sense of identity that is being constructed through this movement is still in flux. There are many issues on which there is no specific policy. For example, there remains a lot of debate about how it relates to the feminist movement.

Another example that Lyon uses is that of the Toronto Blessing. He notes the significance of the fact that the phenomenon first emerged at a church near the airport in Toronto. Uncontrollable laughter within the context of worship was seen as a sign of the Holy Spirit. Thousands of people visited the church from all over the world and took the expression of worship back to their own locations. Within a short period of time, the Toronto Blessing was part of worship in churches all around the globe.

Again, the major denominations were not involved. There was an emphasis on a special spiritual experience. Through global media and global travel, the phenomenon spread rapidly. At the same time, it soon came to have local expressions in many parts of the world. Its success, Lyon says, depended on contemporary forms of communication and on a consumer orientation. It was supra-denominational as churches of many denominations became involved. The leaders expressed the hope that through it denominational differences would be submerged. At the same time, there was a focus on the spectacle which involved a lack of bodily inhibition (Lyon, pp.97-99).

There have been numerous other recent religious movements, large and small, which have transcended the boundaries of denomination and have made extensive use of new communication technology. Some of them have had a fundamentalist orientation, while others have revolved around humanistic ecumenism. Some are apocalyptic in their view of history while others are utopian.

In many of these movements, there has been a bricolage with other aspects of life, such as combining religion with sport, with ethnicity, or with contemporary music. Lyon suggests that the term 'religious flows' best characterises the fluidity of some of these movements. Many of them involve elements of syncretism and experimentation (Lyon, p.118). These movements are mostly unconstrained by the traditional religious organisations.

While Lyon focuses on new movements within Christianity, it is also possible to see similar characteristics in the ways that young people approach religiosity in contemporary Australia. Our focus will not be on so much on new movements, but on attitudes to and patterns of participation in religion among Australian young people. In these attitudes, we will see some of the characteristics that Lyon argues characterise post-modernity: the anarchic and fragmented nature of belief and the consumeristic use of religion as a lifestyle and a resource. This essay will then ask whether these attitudes are present among Thai young people, primarily in relation to their involvement in Buddhism.

The research on which this paper is based was conducted between 2002 and 2006. In Australia, part of

the research project was known as 'The Spirit of Generation Y' involving approximately 140 in-depth face-to-face interviews with young people plus a national telephone survey of 1200 randomly chosen young people between the ages of 13 and 24 and a control group of 400 older people <sup>(2)</sup>. In addition, the Christian Research Association conducted an additional 210 face-to-face interviews and web-based surveys of 3500 young people mostly in Catholic, Lutheran and government schools.

The Thai research involved the development of parallel interview schedules and questionnaires to those used in Australia. The research was conducted by the Church of Christ in Thailand and Mahidol University, with the assistance of myself. Eighty interviews were conducted in various parts of country to obtain a diverse sample. Stratified sampling from different parts of the country and from rural and urban environments was used to gather questionnaires from a sample of 2996 young people between the ages of 15 and 24.

### **Australian Young People**

It will be argued that the ways that most Australians of Anglo origin approach religion can be described as individualistic, consumeristic and experiential. I do not wish to assume that these characteristics are definitive of post-modernity, (if anything is definitive of post-modernity). Nor do I wish to enter into the debate between the use of the terms 'high modernity' and 'post-modernity'. The following characteristics both identify some of the characteristics of contemporary religiosity and distinguish it from previous forms.

#### *Individualistic rather than Communal*

Most young Australians approach religious belief as something personal. It is not just owned but constructed by the individual, rather than something that belongs to a community in which the individual participates. In the interviews conducted as part of the research project, many young people spoke about deciding what they would believe, trying to work things out for themselves.

Indeed, some young people assumed that if people did not own their spirituality, then it was not really theirs. There were hints, from time to time, that the person who simply went along with what the religious community said, or with a religious tradition, was not being true to themselves. The protest of a 15 year old girl at a Protestant school being told to believe in God and the Church typifies such a feeling:

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.

Indeed, many students were putting together their own views of the world and approaches to life in their own way. Loosed from the ties of tradition or a community, they were quite happy to affirm a variety of things which arose from different religions and traditions. For example, around half of all young people affirmed definitely or possibly the idea of reincarnation although only 2 per cent of them identified themselves as Buddhists or Hindus. In fact, around 25 per cent of all young people who identified themselves as Christians said they believed in reincarnation (Hughes 2007, p.141).

Others were quite explicit about the ways in which they drew on a variety of traditions in putting together their own set of beliefs.

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

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).

A fifteen year old girl said that what was important to her, in terms of religion, was 'school prayers and the sayings of Buddha'.

Attitudes to religious organisations also showed clear signs of independence. They were not simply going to accept what religious organisations taught, for example, with many saying 'maybe' they believed, and 'maybe' they did not. For example,

- 20% said 'maybe' they believed life after death ;
- 32% 'maybe' they believed in God.

While this, in itself, does not prove individualistic construction of faith, it is evidence of individual distancing from the organisations that propound such beliefs. At the same time, they were happy to entertain some options quite different from those that would have been taught by religious organisations. For example, 25 per cent said that they believed in astrology and an additional 18 per cent thought that maybe astrology was true. The anarchic and fragmentary nature of belief that Lyon considers characteristic of post-modernity is evident in the beliefs of young Australians.

Attitudes to practices were similar. They would go to a church service if they, personally, found it helpful as indicated by the following comments from three different young people when asked if they would go to church in the future:

[I am ] not sure [if I will go to church in the future]. I don't see the church as necessary. God is everywhere. It depends on what I do in life at the time.

Probably I will go to church if I have children for the sacraments, but it will be their choice. Probably I will go occasionally.

I will go at Christmas and Easter or if something bad happens.

Another young person said If I have problems, I will go (17 year old Catholic male). He went on to explain that his mother went when she had a problem and had found it helpful. He would go, then, if he felt it might help. There was no suggestion that one would go because one was part of the community and the community that gathered regularly. There was no suggestion that attendance at church was a duty for those who were Christians.

Associated with these attitudes to both beliefs and practices is the fact that the authority for religion is seen to reside in the individual rather than the community of faith. The individual decides what to believe or not to believe. The individual decides what to practise.

Religious individualism has had a long history. There have always been prophetic figures, such as Charles Strong, who have been willing to take an individual stand. This has often meant conflict with the religious institutions of the time.

At the time of the Reformation, Thomas Helwys, one of the founders of the Baptist denomination, wrote the first treatise to be published in England appealing for universal religious liberty and the freedom of conscience for all in 1612. A copy of this book exists personally addressed to James I. Helwys was thrown in prison and by 1616 he had died there.

Yet, among the Baptists, as amongst other groups, it was expected that the individual would test his or her ideas in the context of the community. The community would evaluate the ideas of the individual in the light of their combined understanding of the Bible. Even today, most denominations expect that, at least in terms of the essence of faith, individual members are subject to the discipline of their churches, under the leadership of the minister or priest, and the minister or priest is subject to the discipline of the organised denomination. While religious authority does not reside in the State in Australia, each community of faith has had its own means of exercising discipline.

The radically individualistic attitudes of contemporary young people are a recent phenomena. Indeed, one might argue that young people are growing up without the sense of being part of communities. They make connections with others through school and other activities, but see these in terms of networks rather than connections with pre-existing communities. Community, as it exists for them, is something they create, often in a fragmentary way. It is something that is maintained, to a large extent, through electronic forms of communication, and, to that extent, is independent of location.

Their individualism is not a specific choice. It is not a rejection of a communal way of seeing the world. Rather, it is the world in which they have grown up. For many, it is perhaps the only way they see of interacting with the world around them.

Individualism must be distinguished from selfishness, and even from self-centredness. Because many contemporary young Australians think from an individualistic perspective and see authority as residing in themselves as individuals does not mean that they have no care for others. They do think about others. They care a great deal about their families and their friends. They value greatly the time they spend with family and friends and they care about the needs and the wellbeing of others. But they do so as caring individuals rather than because they have particular roles or positions in communities. It is noteworthy that many of the young people, when asked whether they would attend church in the future, referred to what might be the needs of own children in the future. In fact, they would decide on their attendance not only in reference to their own needs but those of others for whom they were responsible (Bond, pp.1-6).

#### *Consumeristically rather than educationally*

Contemporary Australian young people approach faith as a range of options from which they can pick and choose. They see it as resources which they can evaluate and from which they can draw if found helpful.

So pervasive is this approach to faith that it has been enshrined in one form or another in some of the major theories of contemporary religion. The American sociologists, Stark and Finke, for example, argue that the first proposition for understanding religion is:

Within the limits of their information and understanding, restricted by available options, guided by their preferences and tastes, humans attempt to make rational choices. (p.85)

They go on to say:

In pursuit of rewards, humans will seek to utilize and manipulate the supernatural. ...Religion consists of very general explanations of existence, including the terms of exchange with a god or gods.

Furthermore,

In pursuit of otherworldly rewards, humans will accept an extended exchange relationship. An extended exchange relationship is one in which the human makes periodic payments over a substantial length of time, often until death (p.99).

Religion, according to Stark and Finke, is primarily about the consumption of rewards and benefits through exchanges with God. Religious people make rational choices about these rewards and benefits, among which are some which they cannot see or experience in this lifetime. They pay for these rewards and benefits through the religious actions.

However, this understanding of religion is at odds with the ways that many religious people see their faith. For many religious people, one no more chooses one's gods than one's parents. And one no more decide whether to worship God on the basis of what rewards one might garner than to show one's respect for one's parents.

It is true that many prayers have been offered with the hope that there might be a response. Many people have worshipped with the quiet hope that God would bless them. But just as family is not just about manipulating each other for the sake of individual rewards and benefits, so religious life cannot be reduced to that. Worship and festival is much richer than simply a periodic payment for possible rewards.

For many, worship has been about the recognition of what is seen to be the case rather than attempting to manipulate the gods for future rewards. It is the acknowledgement, or celebration, of the divine order of the world and of individual life. As people engage in worship, so they find the experience of the reassurance that the divine order remains. But worship is not carried out in order to obtain reassurance.

For many people, the reassertion of their beliefs and their participation in worship was associated with their basic sense of identity. It was about the nature of the world and their place within the world. Out of that came their values, not as means of negotiating with God, but in order to maintain the order of life. Often that sense of order was associated with an ethnic heritage, with a language and culture. Their identity was found through their participation in a religious community and acceptance of its teachings.

This way of seeing the world and participating in its acknowledgement is not experienced as something 'chosen', but as the nature of the world into which young people are introduced as children. It is learnt through educational processes, just as education introduces them to other aspects of the universe. Many have learnt about God in a similar way as they have learnt about gravitation.

Herein lies the difference with contemporary Australian young people. For most of them, the links with ethnic heritages have weakened, often to the extent that they are non-existent. Their identity is not rooted so much in a community or an ethnicity, or a language. It is rooted in their individualism, in their own biographies, or their life-style choices. It is expressed through their fields of study, their

occupations, their work history, their interests and their choice of music. It is expressed even in the television programs that they watch (Hughes, et al., 2004, pp.53-68).

Hence, few young people see religious faith as an issue of identity. While recent migrants may attend a church because they are part of a distinctive ethnic community within Australian society, the idea means little to most Anglo-Celtic Australians. The fastest growing group of religious organisations among young people in Australia is the Pentecostal, which do not have an explicit ethnic identity with few exceptions such as the Thai 'Hope of God'.

Religion is not simply a matter of consuming resources that they consider might be helpful. Many continue to grow up in an environment in which the creativity, the activity, even the intervention of 'God' is assumed. It is not questioned. Many continue to believe because they feel it makes best sense of their experience of the world in which they live.

On the other hand, there is a strong tendency to 'consume' religious practices in as far as they are seen to be helpful to the individual or to those close to the individual - not primarily for obtaining life in heaven, but because they may enhance life in this world one way or another. There is a strong sense that God does not need worship. God does not need people to go to church. God is above that. But worship may be a good thing for us. As one fourteen year old Catholic girl said: "Everybody has beliefs and everybody needs that for hope".

To that extent, there is a tendency for young Australians to consume religious resources as they are seen to contribute to their basic narrative of life. There may be no meta-narrative, as is often said of the post-modern world, but there is a midi-narrative, to use the word that Savage et al. (2006) have coined. There is a narrative that underlies most young people's ambitions and sense of what life is about. That narrative has to do with enjoyment. Life is about enjoyment. Enjoyment is found primarily in one's friends, family and fun. Having good friends who stick up for you, with whom you can 'hang out', not for any particular purpose but because it is good to enjoy their company, is a major part of what makes life enjoyable. Fun is also important, experienced, for example, in the excitement of life, in the sporting event, the music event, in performance, in travel, or whatever may turn one on.

Those young people who believed in God usually described God in a way that related to that midi-narrative. God was one who would help you to enjoy life. God was one you could turn to for help, just as one turns to a parent for some extra money for a little more excitement. God was often described as someone nice, loving, friendly, caring. 'Someone who is always there to listen to you and help you' said one student. 'God is like a second Dad, He loves us so much' said another. God was watching, 'a big man who looks over the world' one student put it. God could be depended on. God was always there to help.

Within this view of religious faith as resources to which one could turn for personal help, identity with particular denominations has little importance. Just as Lyon's religious movements are cross-denominational or non-denominational, so are the attitudes of young people to religious faith. Young people simply connect with the church or Christian activities which provides the appropriate resources they wish to use at a particular time.

In the national telephone survey, those who rejected the idea of God were asked whether they believed in a higher being or life-force. Quite a few indicated that they did. A little more than half of all those

who said they believed in a higher being or life-force believed that it cared about us. Less than half of them thought that such a higher being or life-force would be indifferent to us (Hughes, 2007, p.137).

Within this context, then, of the midi-narrative of the enjoyment of life, religion plays a part for some. It offers another resource through which help or other benefits may be obtained. Religious faith is not about giving up the self. Rather, it is about drawing on resources that are seen as having the capacity to enhance one's life and the life of those around you.

#### *Experientially rather than cognitively*

Gary Bouma (2006, pp.86-95) has noted that at different times in history, the will, the mind and the heart have each been at the centre of religious faith. In Medieval times, he says, it was the will, as was seen, for example, in the emphasis on ritual. Religious faith was not about what one thought or felt, it was about what one did.

The great change came at the time of the Reformation when the emphasis moved to the mind. For the new Protestant groups, religious faith was primarily about what one believed. Going through rituals was seen to be meaningless unless it was accompanied by the right beliefs. These beliefs had to be rooted in the Scriptures.

John Wesley built the Methodist tradition around the experience of God in the heart. Faith was primarily contained in the experience of feeling close to God, the experience of God 'warming the heart'. This experiential dimension of faith has come to fore again in Pentecostalism. Services of worship revolve around building that experience rather than being expositions of beliefs as so many Protestant services have been. Neither are they about ritual, about 'doing the right thing'.

The Pentecostal emphasis is consonant with the contemporary psyche. The consumerism of post-modernity emphasises how one feels. Indeed, to a large extent, consumerism drives the sense of feeling good about one's self and about life. Young people are not concerned to have a systematic and comprehensive account of belief. Indeed, evangelical Protestants, such as Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, have become quite concerned about the lack of coherent beliefs at all. They complain that the knowledge of young people about the faith is poor and they are almost inarticulate about what they believe (Smith and Denton, 2005, p.137). But, to most young people, this matters little. Experience is far more important than comprehensive knowledge or a coherent system of thought.

One of the expressions of this was found when we asked young people what influenced them in the ways that they thought about life. Overall, retreats and camps were seen as far more important than religious education. Retreats and camps were experiential. They gave young people a chance to reflect experientially, to work over what life was about in a less cognitive and systematic way than religious education, and they were seen as having a more profound influence (Hughes, 2007, p.188).

#### *In Summary*

Many young Australian young people ignore Jesus altogether. They can live life quite well without the resources of any religion. For some, religion is important, and, for most of these, is expressed through the Christian faith. Australian young people approach Jesus in similar ways to their approach to Disneyland. Jesus is found in the experiences of life, even in its excitement. Jesus is found consumeristically, as young people use the religious resources that are on offer. Jesus is found individualistically, as the individual tries to construct their lives in a way that feels right.



Overall, the numbers in Australian churches are continuing to decline. There has actually been an increase in the proportion of people over the age of 60 attending, but a decline in the people under 60. Most churches are not connecting with young people. They are a long way from the post-modern expressions of faith that make sense to most young people. The exceptions to this are the Pentecostal and charismatic churches, the 'Disneyland churches'. These are not growing rapidly, but they are continuing to grow faster than the population.

Young people are attracted to these churches because they enjoy the experience of their worship. They also see them as offering them a better way of achieving their goals or living life, or offering helpful resources that they cannot find elsewhere. For example, one young person I interviewed who had recently started going to a Pentecostal church told how she had learnt to accept herself. No longer did she feel that she had to compare herself to others. She said that every week, the positive atmosphere and approach to life in the church gave her spirits a lift that lasted her well into the week.

Some Pentecostal and charismatic churches have elements that discourage young people in attending them, such as high levels of authoritarianism. Most young people do not like being told what to do. However, others have attracted young people by their emphasis on experience, the sense of excitement in the services, and the promotion of the idea that God will personally help us, even to the extent of increasing our bank balances.

### **What about Thailand?**

Thailand is basically Buddhist. Ninety-five per cent of all young people in Thailand identify themselves as Buddhist according to the official 2000 Census. Another 4 per cent are Islamic and 1 per cent are Christian. We may well ask, then, where is the Buddha? Can he also be found in Disneyland or its Asian equivalents? Is religion taking on post-modern approaches there? In looking at the major expression of religion among Thai young people, we will use the concepts that have been used to analyse the nature of faith among Australian young people.

### ***Individualistic versus communal faith***

There are certainly signs of individualism in that Thai young people are not simply accepting the teaching of their religion on many things. Indeed, much more than the Australian young people, a high proportion of them are dubious about beliefs.

- 59% said 'maybe' they believed in life after death (compared with 20% of Australians);
- 47% said 'maybe' they believed in reincarnation (compared with 22% of Australians);
- 51% said 'maybe' they believed in God (compared with 32% of Australians);
- 58% said 'maybe' they believed in astrology (compared with 18% of Australians); and
- 57% said 'maybe' they believed in fortune-tellers (compared with 21% of Australians).

Indeed, even in relation to fundamental beliefs about Buddhism, the Thai Buddhist young people are not at all certain what they believe, although few reject the ideas entirely. Similarly, many of the popular beliefs, such as in the power of amulets and in the 'house spirits', are held, but also with little certainty.

**Table 1. Affirmation of Belief among Thai Buddhist Young People (15 to 25 years of age)**

<i>Belief</i>	<i>Certain (%)</i>	<i>Believe but not certain (%)</i>	<i>Do not believe (%)</i>
Nirvana	30	58	12
Heaven	28	63	9
'Old' karma – which influences the present life	42	48	10
Amulets	26	61	13
House spirits	33	55	12

Part of the issue is that many young people are not very confident of the sources of religious authority. When Buddhists were asked whether they believed sermons that they heard, 48 per cent were unsure and another 16 per cent said they did not generally believe them. When asked whether they believed that the things written in the Buddhist Scriptures actually happened, 48 per cent were unsure and 10 per cent said they generally did not believe them.

Another question asked whether the behaviour of religious leaders had led them to lose confidence in religion. Fifty-one per cent of Buddhist young people agreed that it had. Another 34 per cent were not sure. Only 15 per cent rejected the idea. In interviews, many young people spoke of the bad behaviour of religious leaders, such as monks who were not good role models and some who had even been accused of raping children. There were references to religious leaders who had contributed to the violence in the south of the country. On the other hand, others felt that religion was declining because alcohol was more commonly used in festivals and that young people had been seduced by hedonism and materialism.

The lack of confidence in their beliefs was not so evident among Thai Christians or Thai Islamic young people. Among the Christians, for example, 84 per cent said they definitely believed in God, 73 per cent definitely believed in heaven, and 72 per cent believed that the miracles described in the religious writings actually happened. Sixty-six per cent of Christian young people said that they believed the sermons they heard their religious leaders preach. Nevertheless, 55 per cent of Christians agreed also that the behaviour of religious leaders had led them to lose confidence in religion.

Among Islamic young people, 82 per cent said they believed in God, and 78 per cent believed in heaven. Eighty-one per cent said they believed that the miracles described in their religious writings were true and 70 per cent were believed the sermons they heard their religious leaders preach. Again, a significant proportion, 53 per cent, agreed that the behaviour of religious leaders had led them to lose confidence in religion.

There is an awareness among many Thai young people that religion and science are not always compatible.

- 48% of Buddhists
- 60% of Christians, and
- 58% of Islamic people

agreed that religion and science see the world in different ways. Those who agreed that religion and science were not always compatible were less likely to believe with certainty in God, heaven, life after

death, or astrology.

This high level of doubt and the lack of confidence in the sources of religious authority, however, does not mean that Thai young people approach belief with the same individualism as Australian young people do. In the interviews, there were many instances of young people expressing doubt about religious beliefs, but no one suggested that they were constructing their own beliefs or were putting together their own version of what they believed.

Quite a few Thai young people described certain beliefs as 'far from them'. As one young person said:

I believe in reincarnation. It makes me fearful to doing evil. As for heaven and nirvana, I believe, but I feel that it is far from me.

Others spoke of believing, but that their beliefs had little impact on how they lived. For example, one young person said in regard to religious beliefs:

[I am] not sure, but I believe to some extent. But it doesn't have any influence on me.

In the interviews, we asked Buddhists what they thought of Jesus and asked Christians what they thought of Buddha. In both cases, many said something like: I have no opinion; they do not belong to my religion.

In that regard, then, there was an ownership of a particular religion and a rejection of ideas that were associated with a religion different from their own. Nevertheless, in practice, the distinctiveness of religions is sometimes blurred. Eight per cent of Thai Christians (compared with 25 per cent of Australian Christians) and 13 per cent of Thai Islamic young people said, for example, that they believed in nirvana and another 37 per cent of Christians and 38 per cent of Islamic young people said they were not sure about nirvana. Among the Thai Buddhists, 27 per cent said they believed in God and 57 per cent said they believed but were not sure.

While many seemed happy to affirm beliefs of other religions, it is not clear that they are actually incorporating them into their own lives. There was no evidence that the Buddhists were praying to God or that the Christians or Islamic young people were seeking nirvana. It is likely that the cross-religious affirmation of beliefs was a reflection of their belief that all religions have the truth in their own frameworks, rather than that they were personally incorporating the beliefs of other religions into their own lives.

- 63% of Buddhists
- 65% of Christians, and
- 65% of Islamic young people affirmed that there is truth in all religions.

In summary, for most Thai young people, belief remains something belonging to the religious communities rather than becoming something personal. Nevertheless, many are distancing themselves from the religious organisations and from their teachings. Indeed, many Thai young people, especially the Buddhists, have become quite remote from their religious organisations. This distancing from religious organisations may reflect the beginning of a process of post-modernity driven by modern forms of communication. However, Thai young people are not open to the variety of possibilities that Australian young people contemplate, nor the personal and individualistic construction of belief. Few were willing to actually reject the beliefs of their religion, although many indicated their hesitancy in

affirming them and in incorporating the beliefs into their daily lives.

***Consumeristically rather than educationally***

The consumeristic approach to religion among Australian young people was seen in the fact that their involvements in religion were often occasional and were motivated by the value the practice had for the individual, rather than an expression of identity with a religious (or ethnic) community.

The expectations of participation in public religious services among Thai Buddhists have always been rather different from the expectations of Christians. Thai Buddhists have participated in services and ceremonies from time to time, rather than on a weekly basis. While Buddhists hold services in their temples four times a month, there has never been a tradition of taking time off from work for such occasions. Usually, the elderly go, along with the monks. However, there are daily rituals such as giving food the monks.

Analysis of their responses to the questions on practice indicated that there were three groups of Buddhist practices which reflected three ways of practising Buddhism.

1. Communal rituals which are organised by the religious institution and in which Buddhists participate. Among these are the practices of giving monks rice as they walk around the neighbourhood to collect their food of a morning and various forms of merit-making and making offerings of money or other goods to the temple, particularly at times of festivals.
2. Personal rituals which individuals undertake at a time appropriate to themselves. They may be done individually or with a group of friends or family members. Among them are going to a temple and walking around the central holy chedi (wien tien) and taking the eight precepts.
3. Personal ways of wisdom which individuals undertake, but which do not necessarily occur at a temple or involve religious institutions. These include meditation and the study of Buddhist teaching.

There are a range of resources for Buddhists that are available for the individual, often on payment of a fee. For example, most temples sell amulets which have been blessed by monks. A group of monks will come and give a blessing to a new business upon request and payment.

We found that few Thai Buddhist young people were engaged in regular practices. Many said that they were engaged in the various practices occasionally as shown in the following table.

**Table 2. Frequency of Performance of Buddhist Practices by Young Buddhists in Thailand.**

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Never do it (%)</i>	<i>Occasionally (%)</i>	<i>Monthly or More (%)</i>
Been to a religious service and listen to a sermon	27	64	9
Circulated the temple (wien tien)	22	66	11
Freed animals	24	64	12
Given money to religious groups	7	78	15
Given rice to the monks	11	71	18

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Never do it (%)</i>	<i>Occasionally (%)</i>	<i>Monthly or More (%)</i>
Make merit	5	76	19
Meditated by oneself	21	63	15
Meditated or prayed in a temple	38	55	7
Participated in khwan ceremony	57	38	6
Read the Buddhist Scriptures	61	33	5
Taken the 8 Precepts	57	37	6

The interviews indicated that many people chose to do some special Buddhist activity on their birthdays or on a special family celebration. Sometimes they would make merit or have a khwan ceremony, which involves tying the wrists to prevent the 'khwan' or human spirit or spirits from escaping) when anxious about a future event, such as travel overseas or in times of sickness. To that extent, Buddhism in Thailand provides a wide range of resources that are used by Thai young people according to personal need.

However, that does not mean that religion is seen purely in terms of those resources. Religious identity is not an optional extra for Thai young people as it is for Australians. This was evident, for example, when people were asked what is their religion. All Thai young people responding to our survey gave a religion, while many young Australians indicated that they had no religion. In the Thai Census in 2000, only 0.3 per cent of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 said they had no religion compared with 22.9 per cent of young people in the same age group in Australia.

Furthermore, religion remains associated with ethnicity among Thai young people. Sixty-nine per cent of Thai young people affirmed that 'to be a Thai person one must have a religion'. Another 21 per cent of Thai young people did not know whether that was true or not.

Yet, religion is certainly seen as a resource for the individual. When asked why religion was important to them, the most common reasons cited by Thai young people were:

- 24% it gives us happiness
- 15% it teaches us to be self-reliant
- 13% it gives teaching about living life
- 10% it shows the meaning of life, and
- 10% it helps us to have a cool heart.

What the affirmation of values among Thai young people shows is the deep desire for peaceful and harmonious relationships at every level of existence. Religion is seen as contributing to those peaceful and harmonious relationships. Buddhism was seen as providing explicit ways which contribute to peace, harmony and happiness such as by making merit and by describing the ways of meditation. It also provides rules for social interactions and shows how they can occur in a peaceful and harmonious way. It also teaches people to live in harmony with nature.

At the same time, for many Buddhists, there are spiritual powers inherent in the Buddha images on

which people can draw in order to be successful in life. Such powers can be transferred from the spiritual power in Buddha images and in very pious monks to amulets, to make that power available in daily life.

There have long been these two sources of 'power' in Thai religion. On the one hand, there is the 'moral' power that arises out of the teaching of Buddhism. On the other, there is the 'a-moral' power that is often associated with the spirits, but is also connected in various to Buddhism through the power that is believed to be in the Buddha images and amulets (Mulder, 2000, chapter 2).

In Christianity and Islam, these two sources of power are combined. These faiths are seen as promoting peace and happiness in similar ways to Buddhism. They do it through their teaching about the way of life and how to interact with family and society. They also do it through providing access to God. Particularly for Thai Christians, even more than for young Australian Christians, God is there to help when needed.

While religion is used then, by the individual, it continues to provide a framework, particularly for the moral area of life. It remains the basis of moral rules and principles. It sets out a basic set of instructions so that people can live well and find peace and happiness, both at personal and social levels. Furthermore, many Buddhists believe that by accumulating merit, not only will this life be better, so will be one's birth in the next life.

Religious practices in Thailand may be drawn on consumeristically. Indeed, this is happening more with new sects emerging. However, most of these new sects are not exclusive new religious movements. Rather, they consist in the identification of particular spirits or gods as having particular power, such as King Rama V and the Goddess Kuan Yin (Ekachai, 2001, p.237).

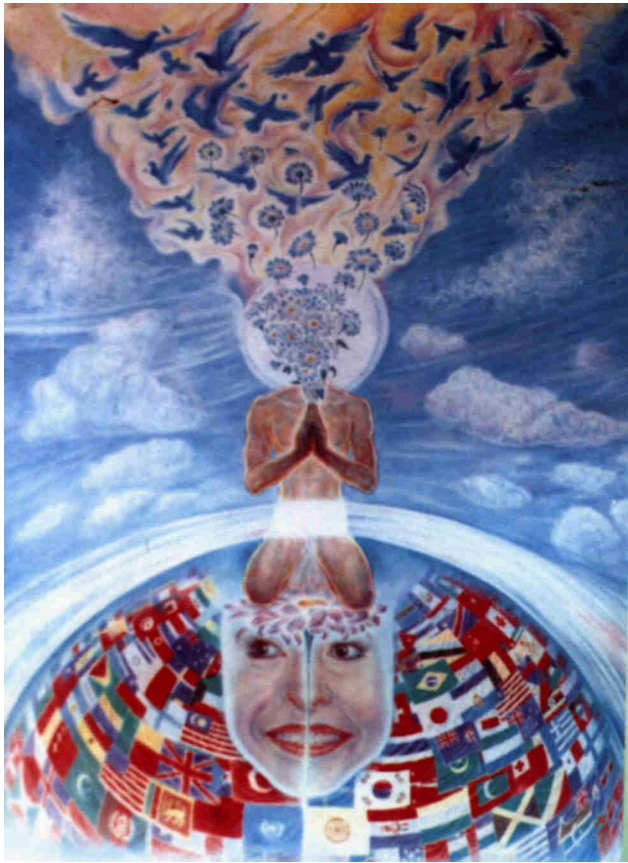
Nevertheless, religion remains part of the basic framework through which most Thai young people view the world. All see themselves as belonging to a religion, and religion provides for most of them some instructions as to how they should live.

### ***Experientially rather than cognitively***

In many ways, Thai religion is a matter of the will and ritual rather than experience or understanding and cognition. Thai religion is focussed on the actions such as giving rice to the monks, attending services, merit-making ceremonies, and pilgrimages to special religious sites. What matters is that one has done the right thing. How one feels about it is generally not considered important. While there are a some Buddhist young people interested in meditational experiences or in the philosophy of Buddhism, most express their Buddhism through communal or personal rituals. However, there are some signs this is changing. Meditation classes are increasingly popular. The survey found that the frequency of communal and personal rituals was less among older young people who were no longer attending school. Nevertheless, the frequency of meditation was maintained by older younger people suggesting that, for some, this was an on-going, personal way of practising religion.

There is an experiential element in the practice of religion. Many young people when describing their involvement in personal rituals said that they felt good inside when they had done them. Perhaps for some it is a matter of conscience. They have done something good and worthwhile. They also believe that such good actions will have good results. They feel good about increasing their stores of merit, just as young Western people might feel good about putting some money into a bank. As noted above, the

most frequent reason given for the importance of religion was that it made one happy.



*Fig. 1: A contemporary painting in the Buddhist temple at Doi Saket, northern Thailand*

Young people are increasingly attracted to what Buddhism can offer in terms of personal happiness and inner peace. One evidence for a change in direction has been the paintings in some of the newer temples. The paintings on the walls of the Doi Saket Temple, for example, all have to do with one's inner life, with one's experiences of peace and wellbeing. Most Temples, traditionally, have been painted with scenes from the tradition, the stories from the life of the Buddha or from his previous lives.

### **Implications of These Studies for the Study of Religion**

If Jesus is to be found in Disneyland, for some young Western Christians, where, then, is the Buddha for young Thai Buddhists? Thai Buddhism is to be found partly in the government offices of the department which administers the Buddhist institutions of Thailand as Buddhism remains a dominant part of the 'official' Thai cultural landscape. On the other hand, the data shows that many Thai young people are distancing themselves from this 'official Buddhism', in terms of their beliefs and their scepticism about Buddhist leaders. When they do practise, it is often in a personal rather than communal way.

The Western world has moved into 'post-modern' ways of thinking in which 'truth' has become that which the individual constructs on the basis of 'what works' for that individual. In Australia, this way of thinking has developed in an environment that recognises there is a great plurality in ways of thinking about life and the world, that encourages critical thinking and the formation of individual opinions. In this context, religion has become a set of resources which some young people find helpful and others ignore.

In Thailand, there is also a pragmatism in relation to 'truth'. People believe in whatever they find 'works' for them. On this basis, Thai young people turn to astrology, amulets, Rama V and many other sources of assistance.

However, Buddhism continues to provide a basic framework of teaching. Young people are not so convinced about Nirvana or about the impact of the karma of past lives, or even reincarnation. Nevertheless, the idea that there are moral consequences of one's actions is very basic in their way of thinking. The Buddha continues to teach the way of happiness, but he is also seen as ensuring the functioning of the Buddhist Sangha. He offers rituals which help people to feel good about their lives, to assist in the search for peace and happiness. To that extent, at least, Buddhism underpins a common understanding of how the world works for Thai young people. Beyond that, it also provides some

resources that people can use if they choose, whether they be ritual or meditative.

The extent to which Buddhism provides a full framework for thinking has diminished as has Christianity in the Western world. The ideas about Mt Meru as the centre of the universe, about the layers of the heavens, is quite remote for many young Thai Buddhists. Indeed, the ideas about reincarnation and nirvana have become somewhat remote to many.

But other elements of Buddhism remain as a part of publicly agreed truth, more strongly than Christianity does in the West. Religion remains well respected in Thailand, and almost all young people identify with a religion and believe that religion is a good thing, even if they are not regularly engaged in its practices.

There are some interesting comparisons and differences between religion in Australia and Thailand. In both places, the forms of religion are interacting with the changing culture and historical circumstances. In Australia, the individualistic and consumeristic approach to religion is evident, most poignantly in the way that young people see themselves as able to construct their own beliefs. In Thailand, there is a dimension of individualism in the ways religion is practised, but religion remains something that belongs to a community. There is scepticism about many beliefs and certainly a high degree of scepticism about the authority of the community. Yet, the scepticism is not seen as giving them the right to develop personal alternatives.

In both Australia and Thailand, religion is experienced as meaningful as it relates to people's functioning in life and in society, as it helps people achieve their aims in life. This is illustrated as we see how religion relates to the mid-narrative of personal life. In Australia, if religious faith is important, it is often because it is seen as able to provide resources to better ensure the achievement of an enjoyable life. Religion is approached as are other consumeristic lifestyle choices of contemporary life. In Thailand, religious faith is seen as important in as far as it provides teaching and rituals which help young people to achieve a life of peace, harmony and happiness. It provides resources for enhancing life, but also contributes to the framework for thought.

Yet, religion is never reducible to particular expressions. As traditions, religions are always able to provide the basis for critiquing the culture and for critiquing any particular expression of the religion itself. Religions are expressed within these cultures, but also stands over against them.

As young people become conscious of the wide range of religious options, of the possibility of choice, whether that be in relation to religious identification or in relation to practices, even of the possibility of putting their own beliefs together, so religious education must adapt. Religious education must become a means of helping young people make those decisions, rather than the passing of a tradition.

Further the study of religion must change. I see many studies in religion as ostensibly exploring particular traditions and their forms of expression. But religious expressions are becoming increasingly diverse in a world where individuals are constructing their own syntheses. Indeed, the study of particular traditions is becoming increasingly irrelevant to the post-traditional realities - even in Buddhist Thailand. The study of religious traditions must be combined with the study of the psychology and sociology of religion in which individual and social expressions are explored.

In reality, for some people the study of religion is not just of describing but of actively constructing a



faith that is personally meaningful. To that extent, the study of religion and the creation of tradition merge. That reality and the complexity of contemporary religion needs to be more openly acknowledged.

While religion among young people in Australia is, to a significant extent, a personal construct, and while in Thailand, it is something that is adopted by each individual in their own way, I do not see the future for religion in what has been described as 'New Religious Movements'. New Religious Movements hardly appeared in our research.

I suspect that such movements had their hey-day in the 1970s and 1980s in the West, primarily as part of the revolution in religion that took place as 'tradition for tradition's sake' was rejected, as people searched for new expressions of spirituality that would give them freedom, that would affirm their new-found sexual freedom, the equality of gender, and, indeed, the equality of human beings. They were protests which had a place in the religious revolution that occurred, primarily, thirty to forty years ago. There are remnants of those new movements, mostly among middle-aged people. Some of their terms and their concepts have dissipated into society. But most young Australians who see themselves as spiritual actually see the expression of that largely in through their personal versions of the major religious traditions.

In Thailand, attention has been drawn to the rise of 'New Age' type movements. Yet, again, these are largely peripheral to the mainstream, and frequently 'add-ons'. They consist of respect for certain gods, or spirits; the acknowledgement of certain sources of spiritual power.

What I do believe is critical for the study of religion today is how the various forms of adoption of particular beliefs and practices has consequences for the individual and society. The content of one's view of the world and approach to life may have profound personal and social consequences. One person's view of the world and approach to life may contribute to and provide a basis for the hatred of the social world, and lead even to terrorism. Another person's view of the world and approach to life, even drawing on similar traditions, may contribute to great personal happiness and fulfilment and to commitment to the common good. How can traditions be used in such different ways and contribute to such diverse consequences? I believe that the forms that these different views of the world and approaches to life take in terms of the extent of eclecticism, the clarity of faith, the level of commitment in faith, irrespective of their content, can also have profound personal and social consequences.

As Charles Strong critiqued the religious culture and its expressions in his time, so, in a world in which an individualistic construction of belief is readily accepted, it is just as necessary to actively critique the variety of expressions of religious culture. How people are constructing their lives and how they are drawing on religious resources in contemporary Disneyland, Melbourne and Bangkok, must be explored. This exploration will help in critiquing the various expressions of religion and spirituality, and indeed, in critiquing the various forms and expressions of contemporary life and its generalisations in culture.

Such a focus for the study of religion today can make a major contribution to the religion of young people in the future. Young Australians, and, in a different way, young Thais, will make their own decisions about faith. The study of religion and its consequences can make an important contribution to helping them to make such decisions wisely.

## Notes:

1. Philip Hughes is the senior research officer of the Christian Research Association and a research fellow in the Centre for Social Research, Edith Cowan University.

Some of the material on Australian young people presented in this paper comes from the book *Putting Life Together: Findings from Australian Youth Spirituality Research* written by Philip Hughes and published by the Christian Research Association in conjunction with Fairfield Press in March 2007. The book is available from the Christian Research Association, PO Box 206, Nunawading LPO, Victoria, 3131, Australia. This book is a comprehensive account of youth spirituality as seen in the domains of the relationship with the self, friends and family, the wider society, nature, God and other philosophies of life as explored in the 'Spirit of Generation Y' research project and the Schools Spirituality Project.

2. The 'Spirit of Generation Y' was funded by 17 organisations. The research team that designed the national telephone survey included Assoc. Prof. Ruth Webber (ACU), Dr Michael Mason (ACU), Dr Andrew Singleton (Monash University) and Dr Philip Hughes (Christian Research Association). The Social Research Centre, Melbourne, was contracted to conduct the national telephone survey. For an account of the project's methodology, see Philip Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, pp.209-211.

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