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Religious Ideology Trends in the Eyes of the New Generation: Conflict, Reinterpretation, and Faith-Based Discrimination

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Abstract

Aim/Purpose: This study aimed to explore how younger generations interpret, negotiate, and critique religious ideologies in contemporary society. It focused on three core dimensions: (1) ideological conflict between traditional religious teachings and modern values, (2) reinterpretation of religious beliefs within the context of digital culture and individual autonomy, and (3) experiences of faith-based discrimination, particularly as they relate to gender, sexuality, and non-religious identities. The research responds to a global phenomenon in which religious affiliation is declining, yet moral and spiritual inquiries persist in new and complex forms.

Introduction/Background: Religious ideology has long provided frameworks for explaining life's existential questions, shaping moral behavior, and structuring social order. However, in an era marked by globalization, secularization, digital communication, and identity pluralism, the authority of traditional religious institutions has been increasingly challenged. Younger generations—particularly Gen Z and Millennials—are no longer passive recipients of inherited religious beliefs. Rather, they critically assess and selectively engage with religious teachings. This study, situated in the culturally diverse Nakhon Sri Burin region of Thailand (comprising Nakhon Ratchasima, Buriram, Surin, and Sisaket Provinces), investigated this paradigm shift through the lens of sociology of religion, drawing on theories by Berger, Althusser, and Foucault. Religion is framed as both a system of meaning-making and a power-laden ideological apparatus whose role in modern life is undergoing reconfiguration.

Methodology: The research employed a qualitative, phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences of younger individuals across diverse religious and non-religious backgrounds. Purposive sampling was used to select 100 participants, classified into four groups: religious leaders (20), young religious adherents (40), non-religious youth (30), and scholars of religion (10). Data collection methods included in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and non-participant observation of religious practices across Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic communities. Thematic content analysis and pattern analysis were employed to identify recurring interpretations, critiques, and reconfigurations of religious ideology. Documentary research and secondary data supported the empirical findings by offering a broader theoretical and sociocultural context.

Findings: Three major findings emerged. ***Ideological Conflict and Selective Belief:*** Many young people perceive traditional religious ideologies as incompatible with contemporary ideals of equality, individual rights, and scientific reasoning. This has resulted in the rejection of certain doctrinal elements (e.g., gender hierarchy, moral absolutism) while retaining or reinterpreting others (e.g., compassion, forgiveness, mindfulness). This phenomenon aligns with the concept of "believing without belonging," where individuals maintain spiritual values outside institutional frameworks. ***Reinterpretation of Religion through Digital Culture****:* The digital era has facilitated new forms of religious engagement. Participants reported accessing religious content through platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and podcasts, often bypassing traditional religious authorities. This has fostered the rise of personalized religiosity, syncretism, and hybrid spiritual practices. Religious meaning is now negotiated interactively, informally, and with critical distance from clerical control. ***Faith-Based Discrimination and Calls for Reform****:* Discriminatory experiences—particularly among LGBTQ+ youth,

women, and non-religious individuals—highlight the exclusionary tendencies of some religious institutions. Many participants voiced a desire for religious reform that prioritizes inclusivity, compassion, and ethical integrity over rigid adherence to outdated dogmas. These critiques do not signal rejection of religion per se but demand a morally relevant and socially just reinterpretation.

Contribution/Impact on Society: This research contributes to the understanding of how young people actively transform religious ideology in ways that affirm human dignity, pluralism, and autonomy. It underscores the erosion of institutional monopoly over spiritual meaning and highlights the creative capacity of youth to construct alternative ethical frameworks. By revealing how religion functions as both a site of oppression and liberation, the study enriches sociological debates on religion, identity, and generational change. Practically, the findings can inform religious institutions, educators, and policymakers seeking to engage youth in inclusive and constructive ways. It also offers pathways to address intergenerational tensions, religious intolerance, and ideological polarization.

Recommendations: ***For Religious Institutions****:* Create inclusive spaces that welcome critical dialogue, affirm diverse identities, and decenter hierarchical authority. Religious leaders should receive training in interfaith sensitivity, gender inclusion, and youth engagement. ***For Educators:*** Incorporate religious literacy into educational curricula with an emphasis on critical thinking, pluralism, and comparative belief systems to equip students for life in a multi-faith, secular world. ***For Policymakers:*** Enact laws that protect freedom of religion and belief, especially for minority faith groups and non-religious individuals. Public institutions should ensure that no citizen is disadvantaged due to their religious identity or lack thereof.

Research Limitation: The study is geographically limited to the Nakhon Sri Burin region in Thailand and thus may not fully capture the diversity of religious experience in other parts of the country or in different cultural contexts. The qualitative nature of the research, while rich in depth, does not allow for generalizability to larger populations. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce potential biases linked to social desirability or selective memory.

Future Research: Further studies could expand the geographic scope or employ mixed methods approaches to compare generational religious perspectives across regions and belief systems. Future research should explore long-term implications of religious deinstitutionalization on civic engagement, moral development, and social cohesion. Investigating how digital religion influences political behavior, social activism, and community formation among youth may also yield valuable insights.

Keywords: *Religious ideology, youth, secularism, reinterpretation, faith-based discrimination*

Introduction

Religious ideology is a structured system of belief that provides explanatory frameworks for fundamental aspects of human existence, including the meaning of life, suffering, death, morality, and natural phenomena such as birth, aging, illness, and disasters. Many religious traditions interpret these events as consequences of karmic forces or the intentions of divine or sacred entities—such as God, Dharma, or universal laws. Religion functions as a mechanism for establishing social values and regulating individual and collective behavior. This is typically mediated through institutional structures and forms of authority, including doctrinal teachings, moral prescriptions, sacred rituals, and the formal roles of clergy (Alagha, 2006). However, in rapidly evolving social contexts—especially among younger generations such as Generation Z and Generation Y—religious ideology has increasingly come under scrutiny. In the age of globalization, digital media, and heightened individualism, traditional religious frameworks are being reinterpreted or questioned, reflecting a shift in how sacred meaning and moral order are constructed and negotiated.

According to global statistics, the number of people identifying as non-religious increased dramatically from 35 million in 2008 to approximately 1.1 billion in 2019, with projections indicating continued growth. This shift is particularly pronounced among individuals under the age of 40, who constitute most of the non-religious demographic across all global regions. Notably, five of the top ten

countries with the highest proportions of non-religious populations are in Asia: China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, and Vietnam.

In Thailand—traditionally regarded as a strongly Buddhist nation—recent statistics show that 20% of the population now identifies as non-religious (Kamnoetsiri, 2022). This is a remarkable shift in a society where religion has long been intertwined with national identity, monarchy, and community life. There is disillusionment with religious institutions, revealed in reports of misconduct, corruption, or perceived hypocrisy among religious leaders, which weakens public trust. Digital media influence through online platforms amplifies criticism and highlights scandals more widely than traditional media ever could. Young people consume digital content that often questions or satirizes religious authority. Changing lifestyles and values, urbanization, higher education, and exposure to global culture foster more individualistic orientations, causing spirituality to be pursued outside of traditional temples and monasteries. A contributing factor appears to be growing disillusionment with religious figures and institutions—particularly as negative perceptions are amplified in online and digital media—which, in turn, undermines reverence toward faith-based traditions (Kamnoetsiri, 2022).

Simultaneously, the phenomenon of religious disaffiliation is increasingly understood as a complex interplay of emotions, beliefs, cognition, and the assertion of individual liberty. The choice to forgo religion is, in this sense, an expression of personal rights and freedoms, rooted in the principle that religious belief must remain a matter of individual autonomy. As such, the rising tide of non-religiosity presents a significant challenge to religious institutions, particularly in their ability to articulate and embody genuine moral values. As Venerable Naphit Yanaviro (Lap Imthong) argues, the legitimacy of religion can no longer rest solely on doctrinal preaching; rather, it must be substantiated through demonstrable ethical integrity and lived moral experience. The expression of religious affiliation should not be confined to bureaucratic documents or official records but must instead be reflected in personal virtue and social relevance (Yanaviro, 2021).

Consequently, a growing number of younger individuals are opting to disengage from formal religious institutions—a phenomenon often described as the deinstitutionalization of religion. Instead of participating in traditional religious practices, many engage with religion through self-directed learning and private spiritual practice. Examples include meditating or observing Buddhist precepts at home rather than attending temple services, as well as embracing practices such as yoga, mindfulness, or secular forms of contemplative discipline (Kaeuper, 2012). This shift reflects a move away from ritualized, institutionalized expressions of faith toward more personalized, eclectic spiritualities.

Concurrently, there has been a noticeable trend toward syncretism, in which elements of Buddhist belief are combined with alternative spiritual systems such as belief in cosmic energy, astrology, or Tarot. This pattern highlights a generational divergence in religious orientation: while older generations often rely on religion as the primary framework for determining moral judgments—such as what is considered "right" or "wrong"—younger individuals tend to adopt a more selective approach to belief. Rather than adhering wholesale to religious orthodoxy, they often engage in partial belief, embracing certain teachings while disregarding others (Possamai, 2016). This can manifest in practices such as forgoing temple attendance, declining monastic ordination, or critically questioning the authority and social role of the clergy.

The reinterpretation of religion among younger generations does not signify an abandonment of religion, but rather the creation of personalized forms of religiosity. Examples include meditation without the presence of monks, prayer through digital applications, or reverence for nature without reference to a deity. Others choose to retain religion primarily as a cultural practice—for instance, participating in merit-making festivals—while distancing themselves from theological doctrines. Peter Berger, the Austrian American sociologist, has argued that in the postmodern era, religion has increasingly become a “commodity in the marketplace of belief.” No longer regarded as the absolute truth or the sole path to transcendence, religion now constitutes just one among many options available for individual “consumption” within a free marketplace. Unlike in the past, religion no longer monopolizes social life; instead, it must compete with other religions, secular ideologies, scientific explanations, and cultural trends. In this context, individuals choose whether to affiliate with a

religion, not because they are predetermined by family or state, but based on pragmatic considerations, personal sentiments, or identity alignment. Belief, therefore, becomes "optional," and individuals emerge as "faith consumers" (Martin, 2013).

Given the preceding analysis, it is evident that in a rapidly transforming postmodern world—marked by accelerated changes in technology, values, and social structures—religious ideology, once central to regulating human behavior, is facing profound challenges. The decline in religious authority among younger generations is not solely attributable to the process of secularization. It also stems from ideological tensions and growing critiques of the structural power exercised by religion, particularly in its exclusionary practices toward marginalized groups such as women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those with non-conforming beliefs (Jolliffe & Foster, 2022).

Based on the foregoing considerations, the researchers observed that in today's rapidly changing postmodern world—shaped by transformations in technology, social structures, and values—religious ideology, once central to regulating human behavior, is increasingly confronted with resistance from younger generations. The decline in religious adherence cannot be attributed solely to this secularization process; it also emerges from ideological conflicts and critical questions regarding the structural power that religion wields over marginalized groups, including women, LGBTQ+ communities, and those of differing faiths. In this sense, religious ideology, as viewed by younger generations, exists in a state of critique and negotiation rather than unquestioned belief. Young people do not reject religion because of a lack of faith, but because they refuse to accept religion as an instrument of suppression, exclusion, or inequality. Instead, they seek new interpretations that render religion contemporarily meaningful—anchored in compassion and openness—transforming it into a space of freedom and inclusion for all, irrespective of identity or belief.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, focusing on an in-depth analysis of religious ideology from the perspective of younger generations, with particular attention to conflict, reinterpretation, and faith-based discrimination. A phenomenological approach was adopted to capture and interpret the lived experiences of individuals directly engaged in these phenomena. To analyze the data, content analysis and pattern analysis were applied as methodological tools to uncover underlying themes and structures in the ways younger generations understand religious ideology. The field site encompassed the Nakhon Sri Burin sub-region, specifically the provinces of Nakhon Ratchasima, Buriram, Surin, and Sisaket. Data were collected through multiple methods, including in-depth individual interviews, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. The details of these methods are as follows.

1. Secondary Sources: The collection of secondary data was conducted through documentary research, focusing on texts and studies relevant to religious ideology from the perspectives of younger generations. The analysis covered issues such as conflict, reinterpretation, and faith-based discrimination across Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Specific areas of investigation included: Young people's views on religious doctrines, the Perceived significance of religion, Patterns of belief and faith, Adaptations of rituals and religious practices, the Relationship between religion and conflict in modern society, Perspectives on teachings concerning gender, sexuality, and gender roles, and the Study of religion through modern technologies and relevant scholarly research.

2. Primary Sources: The primary data consisted of information concerning religious ideology from the perspectives of younger generations, with a focus on conflict, reinterpretation, and faith-based discrimination. Data collection was carried out through the following methods:

a. In-Depth Interviews: The in-depth interview method was employed using a semi-structured interview guide to elicit detailed insights into young people's perspectives on Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. The interviews addressed multiple thematic areas, including religious belief and personal experiences, ideological reinterpretations and individual meaning-making, modes of communication and the use of digital or traditional platforms, public expressions of faith and visibility of religious

identity, and critical questioning of religious norms and authority. Particular emphasis was placed on understanding how young individuals engage with religion in public spaces and how they negotiate religious values within the context of contemporary social life. The interviews also investigated participants' perceptions of the relevance of religion, varying degrees of belief and faith commitment, as well as changes in ritual practices and methods of observance.

b. Focus Group Discussions: Focus group discussions were conducted to explore collective perspectives and stimulate interactive dialogue among participants regarding Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. The discussions centered on how young people understand and engage with religious beliefs, communicate their views, and express religious or critical sentiments in public spaces. Key areas of inquiry included emerging reinterpretations of religious doctrine, contestations of traditional teachings, the use of humor or satire as a form of religious critique, and activism related to freedom and rights that may conflict with established religious norms. Each focus group consisted of 6 to 8 participants, selected to represent diverse experiences and viewpoints. These sessions allowed for the observation of group dynamics, the negotiation of meaning, and generational differences in religious interpretation and expression.

c. Non-participant Observation was employed to examine young people's engagement with a variety of religious rituals and practices across Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. The observations included participation in and observation of events such as Buddhist merit-making ceremonies, prayer gatherings, and ordination rituals; Christian Mass, sacraments, prayer, and scripture reading; as well as Islamic practices of Salat (daily prayers), Sawm (fasting), and Zakat (almsgiving). This method allowed the researchers to document how religious practices were performed, how participants interacted within these contexts, and how ritual activities were reinterpreted or adapted in contemporary social settings.

Research Target Group

For the selection of participants, the study employed purposive sampling, focusing on individuals directly involved as key informants who could provide substantive insights into religious ideology from the perspective of younger generations—particularly regarding conflict, reinterpretation, and faith-based discrimination. A total of approximately 100 participants were engaged in the study, categorized into four distinct groups as follows.

1. Religious Leaders (20 participants): Including Buddhist monks, Christian clergy, and Islamic imams, this group offers institutional perspectives on doctrinal teachings, religious authority, and the organization of faith-based activities both offline and online. They served as key informants due to their doctrinal knowledge and leadership roles.

2. Young Religious Adherents (40 participants): Comprising youth who identify with Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam, this group helps reveal tensions between traditional religious values and contemporary societal norms. Focus areas included reinterpretation of doctrine, resistance to clerical authority, and experiences of belief-based discrimination.

3. Non-religious Youth (30 participants): These participants did not affiliate with any formal religion. The study explored how they construct moral frameworks, personal meaning, and identity in secular contexts where rationality and autonomy are prioritized over traditional religiosity.

4. Scholars of Religion (10 participants): Academic experts in religious studies contributed interpretive analyses on the broader ideological shifts, such as the decline of institutional authority, redefinition of belief, and the evolving cultural role of religion in modern society.

Results and Discussion

In the past, the northeastern region of Thailand was predominantly an agricultural society, where communities maintained close ties with temples and monks. Merit-making, traditional festivals, and

religious rituals were regarded as the central elements of daily life. However, with the onset of economic development, urban expansion, labor migration, and increasing access to education and modern media, the communal relationship with temples has gradually weakened. Many young people have moved to Bangkok or other major cities for work and study, resulting in a diminished role for religion in everyday life. However, this does not necessarily signify a complete rejection of religion. Instead, many young people choose to maintain a certain distance from it. For example, they may not visit temples regularly but still participate in merit-making festivals as community events. Others turn to new forms of spiritual practice, such as meditation, prayer applications, or psychological interpretations of Buddhist teachings. For some, religion serves primarily as a cultural marker rather than a theological commitment—manifested in participation in ordination ceremonies, funerals, or traditional festivals such as the Bun Bang Fai (Rocket Festival)—while detaching themselves from doctrinal or theological content.

This study investigated how younger generations reinterpret and transform religious ideology in the context of globalization, digitalization, and liberal thought. Key points include:

*Religion as Ideology: Ra*ther than a fixed moral system, religion is examined as a cultural ideology embedded in institutions, norms, and power structures, drawing on Althusser's theory that ideology conditions individuals to reproduce dominant social orders.

Youth as Active Agents: Young people are not passive recipients of inherited religious systems (Ferretter, 2006). They critically challenge religious authority, reject rigid rituals, and create alternative belief structures—often expressed as being "spiritual but not religious," engaging with online religious discourse, or forming hybrid, inclusive worldviews.

Dual Nature of Religion: Religion is seen both as a mechanism for meaning making and a tool of social control, implicated in sustaining hierarchy and exclusion, especially regarding normative values.

Analytical Focus: This study provides a critical framework to analyze how youth negotiate, subvert, and reimagine religious ideology, prioritizing autonomy, diversity, and subjective meaning over institutional conformity.

However, younger generations are not simply passive recipients of religious ideology. Rather, they are active agents who critically interrogate, resist, and reconfigure the structures of religious authority. Many reject traditional rituals and institutional affiliations, instead cultivating new spaces of belief that align with their personal identities and values. This includes identifying as spiritual but not religious, engaging with religious ideas through online communities, or developing hybrid forms of belief that are inclusive and liberatory in nature. This research, therefore, goes beyond merely documenting generational shifts in religious adherence. It offers a critical framework for analyzing religious ideology as a tool of power, and explores how younger individuals negotiate, subvert, and reimagine belief systems in ways that affirm autonomy, plurality, and meaning on their own terms.

The Transformation of Religious Thought Among Younger Generations

In an era of rapid technological advancement and globalization, significant changes have emerged in how younger generations relate to religion. Increasingly, they show less interest in adhering strictly to religious doctrines or rituals but instead exhibit a growing tendency toward individualized religiosity. In this context, religion is no longer perceived as a rigid system of belief imposed through ceremonial and institutional authority. Rather, it becomes a spiritual space—flexible, optional, and subject to personal interpretation and meaning-making. This transformation can be understood through the theoretical lens of sociologists Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck. Giddens (2013) conceptualizes the modern era as one marked by detraditionalization—the erosion of traditional religious practices and structures, including increased secularism, atheism, and religious disaffiliation. Beck (2001) extends this analysis by describing contemporary society as a phase of reflexive modernization, wherein individuals actively evaluate, select, or reject belief systems according to their own reasoning, experiences, and identities. In this framework, young people are no longer passive

inheritors of religious tradition, but are reflexive agents who negotiate religious meaning within pluralistic, digital, and globalized contexts. Thus, religion is increasingly untethered from institutional authority and redefined through personal autonomy, fluid spirituality, and selective engagement.

Many members of the younger generation do not reject religion outright. Instead, they tend to diminish its institutional authority, while elevating its role as a source of emotional and psychological healing. This shift is evident in the selective adoption of religious practices—such as meditation detached from monastic authority, or the integration of certain moral teachings into daily life without the need for formal rituals like ordination, chanting, or temple attendance. This phenomenon aligns with what sociologists term "believing without belonging"—a condition in which individuals retain spiritual beliefs without affiliating with formal religious institutions. Religious identity, in this context, becomes increasingly fluid, marked by religious syncretism and shaped by access to digital platforms that enable autonomous exploration and reinterpretation (Smith & Adamczyk, 2020).

Trends among younger cohorts further suggest that religion is no longer understood as a closed doctrinal system, but rather as an open system that allows for integration and hybridity. For instance, an individual may live by Buddhist principles of mindfulness, while drawing on Christian ideas of forgiveness or incorporating teachings from positive psychology (Klangrit et al., 2024). This trans-religious search for meaning reflects an eclectic approach that is largely self-directed and digitally mediated (Keshavan et al., 2013). Foucault (2019) emphasized that religion is not a neutral entity, but rather a form of discourse, produced and regulated through systems of power. Accordingly, Islam cannot be reduced to a single, unified meaning. When younger Muslim generations advocate for interpretations such as "liberal Islam" or "Islamic feminism," this does not represent a destruction of religion, but instead the creation of a new discursive arena—one that challenges both ecclesiastical authority and authoritarian state power. From this perspective, the reinterpretation of religion is deeply intertwined with questions of knowledge, power, and freedom (Macey, 2019).

Shifting Perspectives on Buddhism among Younger Generations

In the current era of societal transformation, Buddhism—once the foundational structure of moral and ethical values in Thai society—is undergoing a process of reinterpretation, particularly by younger generations. These individuals increasingly question their religion's role, legitimacy, and practices. This shift is not a matter of declining faith or religious disengagement; rather, it reflects an ideological and practical reconfiguration of Buddhist observance to align with modern contexts (Wuthnow, 2007). Economic development, expanded access to education, and advances in technology have all added to a broader transformation in value systems and belief structures. Younger individuals, raised in a globalized world that emphasizes freedom, individualism, and critical inquiry, are more inclined to question the authority of religion as a foundational pillar of social order (Bengtson et al., 2013).

In this regard, religion is no longer accepted as a neutral force for moral guidance, but rather as a discourse that constructs and regulates power. As Foucault (2019) has noted, religion is not merely a belief system, but a discourse of power—one that governs bodies, thoughts, and behaviors (Cataldi, 2004). Many young people perceive religion, particularly institutionalized Buddhism, as a tool of the state used to impose ethical norms and reinforce political control. In this framework, religion functions as an Ideological State Apparatus—a concept introduced by Althusser—legitimizing systems of authority, such as obedience to elders, patriarchal norms, and the subordination of women. As a result, younger individuals, particularly those influenced by liberal and feminist ideologies, tend to resist or critically engage with the institutional and ideological functions of religion. They are not simply disengaging from Buddhism but actively participating in its critique and reconstruction in ways that reflect their values, aspirations, and demands for equality and autonomy.

Interview Excerpt: Buddhist Youth, Age 21

> *To be honest, I feel that religion is becoming increasingly distant from our everyday lives. Unlike our parents' generation, we didn't grow up listening to sermons from monks. Instead, we learn through platforms like TikTok and YouTube. The Dhamma we consume is short, concise, and meaningful in ways that relate to our own lived experiences. Young people today tend to believe based on reason rather*

than blind faith. Our grandparents used to tell us to go to the temple and listen to sermons, but it just doesn't resonate anymore. The temple has become a place of rituals rather than a space for open dialogue or critical discussion about the Dhamma—like it was during the Buddha's time. It feels like people just listen and believe without reflection, and sometimes what is said isn't even grounded in the core teachings of Buddhism. I think monks need to create more space for young people to speak, to listen to criticism, and to allow religion to evolve with society. We don't need strict religiosity; we need a safe space to understand ourselves—through religion, but in our own way.

Shifting Perspectives on Christianity Among Younger Generations

The rise of scientific knowledge, the global human rights movement, and the evolving behaviors and values of younger generations have significantly impacted traditional Christian belief systems. Today's youth are not merely "distancing themselves from religion," but actively reinterpreting Christianity to align with their lived experiences, liberal values, and resistance to long-standing conservative power structures. This transformation is better captured by the concept of New Secularism, which differs from classical notions of secularization. Rather than rejecting religion outright, younger individuals selectively engage with aspects of Christianity—such as love, hope, and forgiveness—while discarding institutional rituals, religious authorities, or doctrines that no longer resonate in a contemporary context (McKenzie et al., 2019).

Interview Excerpt: Christian Youth, Age 18

I love God and grew up in the church, but ever since I realized I'm gay, I've started to feel unwelcome. When news spread in the congregation, some people stopped talking to me—even though I'm still the same person, just more honest with myself. That experience led me to search for answers directly from the Bible, and I found that Jesus never taught us to hate anyone. So, I've chosen to be a Christian in my own way. Even if the church doesn't accept me, I believe that God does.

Shifting Perspectives on Islam Among Younger Generations

Islam holds a deeply embedded position in both the personal and collective lives of Muslims, particularly in societies where it is the dominant religion. However, in the context of contemporary Northeastern Thai societies—shaped by globalization, digital transformation, and the growing influence of human rights discourse—Muslim youth are increasingly redefining what it means to be Muslim on their own terms. This redefinition is evident in the emergence of new identity frameworks such as Muslim feminists, queer Muslims, and proponents of eco-Islam, all of whom seek to integrate Islamic principles with broader issues like gender justice and environmental ethics. These perspectives reflect a deliberate effort to align faith with contemporary social concerns.

For example, some Muslim women adopt fashionable interpretations of hijab, while others make the personal ethical decision to forgo the hijab entirely—yet continue to affirm their devotion to Allah (Smith & Woodward, 2013). Such developments mark a significant departure from rigid, literalist interpretations of Islam, such as Salafism, which many young people now view as outdated and incompatible with the cultural pluralism and moral complexity of the modern world. In this view, Islam is not abandoned but reimagined—that is, reframed as a flexible, living tradition capable of responding to the diverse and evolving realities of Muslim lives in the 21st century.

Interview Excerpt: Adam (Pseudonym), Age 23

I grew up in a Muslim family in a small community where Buddhists and Christians also lived. We were raised to respect one another and coexist peacefully. As I got older, I began to question certain religious practices—such as the roles assigned to women and specific interpretations that seemed outdated. It's not that I lost faith in Islam, but I chose to embrace a more compassionate and reasoned perspective, one that aligns with the diverse society I live in. I still perform salat (prayer), but I don't judge others who don't. I believe religion isn't meant to control people, but to foster understanding and humanity.

New Interpretations of Religion and Shifting Meanings

In contemporary society, and particularly among younger generations, this reconfiguration of religion transforms it from an unquestionable authority into a dialogical space where moral reasoning

and lived experience take precedence over rigid dogma. For many young people, faith is no longer inherited passively; it is co-created, grounded in empathy, and shaped through critical engagement with both tradition and modernity. In the Nakhon Sri Burin region of Thailand—which includes the provinces of Nakhon Ratchasima, Buriram, Surin, and Sisaket—religious and ethnic diversity is deeply woven into the social fabric. Among the younger Muslim population in this area, there is a growing tendency to reject the use of religious doctrine as a tool to regulate gender diversity or to restrict women's freedoms. This rejection does not imply a loss of faith, but rather a reimagining of religion—one that aligns with principles of compassion, human dignity, and coexistence within a pluralistic society. The research team proposes the following classification of new interpretations of religion and shifting meanings across three major religious traditions—Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam—based on field data collected in the region:

New Interpretations of Buddhism and Shifting Meanings

Historically, Buddhism in Thailand has been closely associated with ritualistic practices and orthodox beliefs (orthodoxy)—such as merit-making for the next life, ritual purification, or the veneration of sacred objects. However, younger generations have increasingly begun to question whether religion should focus more on addressing the challenges of this life, rather than being preoccupied with the afterlife or karma from the past. This has led to a reorientation of Buddhism as a form of practical psychology or "Dhamma for life"—centered on mindfulness, emotional regulation, and achieving balance amidst capitalist pressures. This shift aligns with Max Weber's theory of rationalization, which posits that in modern societies, religion moves from a domain of the sacred toward one governed by reason and pragmatism (Kalberg, 2021). For many young Buddhists, learning the Dhamma no longer depends solely on temple sermons or formal participation in rituals. Instead, they engage with Buddhist teachings through platforms like TikTok, YouTube, podcasts, or livestreams of meditation monks who translate traditional teachings into accessible language that resonates with contemporary life.

Expert Commentary: Scholar of Religion

> *In my view, Buddhism is being reinterpreted to align with the lifestyle and values of contemporary society—especially among younger generations. We are witnessing a shift in which Buddhism is no longer centered on rituals or rigid formalities, but rather serves as a tool for self-understanding, emotional healing, and improving one's quality of life. For today's youth, the meaning of religion is not about sacredness or external authority, but about internal experience and reason. They don't believe simply because a teacher or monk says something—they want to know whether a teaching actually reduces suffering. This represents a movement away from authority-based faith toward a more reflective, reasoned form of belief.*

New Interpretations of Christianity and Shifting Meanings

In the 21st century, Christianity in many countries—particularly within multicultural and globalized societies such as Thailand, the United States, and South Korea—has been significantly affected by both internal and external pressures. The institutional Church, which once held a position of privilege and moral authority, is increasingly subject to critique by younger generations. This is especially evident in debates surrounding civil rights, gender diversity, women's roles, and interfaith coexistence. As a result, Christianity is no longer understood solely as "faith in God" but has become a "contested arena of meaning"—one negotiated across generations, ideological frameworks, and moral hierarchies (Tehranian & Lum, 2006). Many young Christians reject moral absolutism in favor of a more inclusive and relational theology—interpreting Christianity as a pathway grounded in love, empathy, and non-judgmental coexistence with others. This rethinking aligns closely with Liberation Theology and Progressive Christianity, both of which position religion as a social force for justice. Unlike traditional models that emphasize Biblical literalism and obedience to divine commands, these new interpretations engage directly with contemporary ethical concerns. These include affirming LGBTQ+ identities, dismantling patriarchal structures within the Church, and rejecting the stigmatization of women regarding issues such as sexuality and reproductive rights (Petrella, 2017).

Clerical Commentary: Christian Priest

Contemporary Christianity is being reinterpreted in response to changes in society, globalization, and modern lifestyles. Younger generations tend to prioritize spirituality over ritual. They understand God's teachings more through the lens of ethics, love, justice, and human rights rather than strict adherence to rigid doctrines or rules.

In Northeastern Thailand, although Christians constitute a religious minority, there is a clear trend toward the formation of new expressions of faith communities, particularly among younger Christians. These individuals increasingly utilize digital platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and podcasts to disseminate the teachings of Jesus through a lens that emphasizes non-judgment and non-dogmatic engagement. This includes the rise of inclusive churches and LGBTQ+ Christian groups that are developing new theological interpretations, often framed through the lens of Queer Theology.

New Interpretations of Islam and Shifting Meanings

As a dynamic belief system, Islam is increasingly subject to both external pressures and internal critique—more so than at any point in recent history. These changes are not limited to ritual practice or Islamic law (Shari'a) but extend deeply into the evolving meanings of what it means to be Muslim in a globalized society. In the face of contemporary realities—such as women's rights, human rights, democratic governance, religious pluralism, and technological modernity—Islam is being reinterpreted in ways that allow it to remain spiritually relevant, while also responsive to the demands of the modern world. This shift reflects the effort of Muslim communities to recontextualize Islamic principles in alignment with present-day values.

For example, contemporary re-readings of Shari'a often emphasize compatibility with human rights, and there is increasing acceptance of women's roles in public life (Gibb, 2022). What was once seen as a symbol of female subjugation—such as the wearing of the hijab—is now being reframed by younger generations as a declaration of identity and an act of autonomous choice. Within the framework of neoliberal modernity, previously stigmatized religious practices have become tools of resistance and negotiation vis-à-vis religious authority.

Clerical Commentary: Imam

New interpretations of Islam do not signify a departure from faith, but rather a return to the original spirit of the Qur'an—one rooted in mercy, justice, and peace. These reinterpretations are about applying those core principles to the realities of the modern world. We must acknowledge that society has changed, and certain practices from the past may no longer align with contemporary conditions. Therefore, interpretation today must prioritize foundational values over rigid forms. We are witnessing a greater emphasis on women's rights, increased participation of women in mosque life, respect for diverse beliefs, and peaceful coexistence with non-Muslims. These are, in fact, central to Islam, but in the past, they were often overshadowed by more rigid readings that neglected the true intent of the faith.

Belief-Based Discrimination in Contemporary Society

A growing number of younger individuals today self-identify as agnostic: that is, choosing not to commit to any single religious faith. This is not merely a personal preference, but a broader sociocultural phenomenon reflecting what may be called a "transitional state of faith identity" in an era increasingly defined by pluralistic worldviews, cultural complexity, and unbounded access to information. Historically, religion served as the primary tool for constructing a "meaning-making order"—offering normative guidance on how life should be lived, what constituted good or evil, and the ultimate purpose of human existence. However, in the contemporary context—especially under the influence of globalization, digital technologies, and modern scientific reasoning—religion is no longer perceived as "the singular truth" (Keshavan et al., 2013).

Agnosticism, in this regard, should not be conflated with atheism. It does not constitute a wholesale rejection of religion or the denial of God. Rather, it involves suspending judgment about the existence of a divine being or supernatural force, embracing uncertainty and philosophical openness. Agnostics often prioritize reason, empirical inquiry, and personal experience over dogmatic belief. Their moral frameworks are not abandoned, but constructed independently of institutionalized

religion, prompting the fundamental question: Does moral goodness require religious affiliation? (Lightman, 2019). The increasing prevalence of agnosticism among younger generations can be traced to three principal factors:

Education and Access to Information

In the modern world, driven by data, knowledge, and critical paradigms, education is no longer merely a vehicle for the transmission of academic content. Rather, it serves as a crucial arena for shaping human consciousness, particularly in cultivating attitudes that question traditional power structures, including those of politics, economics, and religion. Modern education moves beyond the simple act of knowing and toward the encouragement of thinking: thinking freely, critically, and courageously in relation to inherited norms and practices. This intellectual shift can be understood through the work of key scholars such as Peter L. Berger and Bryan Wilson, who argue that secularization does not signify the disappearance of religion, but rather its gradual retreat from public life and its decreasing influence on the private consciousness of individuals. As scientific knowledge (Kasselstrand et al., 2023), free-market mechanisms, and modern state institutions become the structural pillars of society, religion is increasingly redefined as a personal option rather than a social imperative.

Digital Technology and Social Media

The digital age has not only transformed how humans communicate, but has also fundamentally reshaped how individuals encounter, engage with, and negotiate religious belief and spiritual identity. In particular, social media platforms have emerged as expansive public arenas where users can access a vast array of beliefs, faith traditions, and spiritual worldviews from across the globe, instantly and without restriction. This unprecedented accessibility has effectively dismantled the previously dominant "single-faith structure" that once formed the backbone of religious socialization in pre-digital societies (Rissanen, 2014). In contrast to previous generations—whose exposure to religion was often limited to what was transmitted through families, schools, or local temples—today's youth grow up in a "religious marketplace", surrounded by limitless alternatives. Faith is no longer something that is passively inherited; it is something that can be chosen, customized, and even revised. Religious identity in the digital era is marked by fluidity, experimentation, and personalization. Individuals now engage with religious content through YouTube sermons, TikTok reflections, interfaith podcasts, virtual meditation apps, and online communities that transcend national and denominational boundaries. This digital plurality empowers younger generations to explore faith on their own terms, but it also challenges traditional institutions, which often struggle to maintain authority and relevance in a decentralized environment. Consequently, religious belief has become not only more diverse, but also more subject to critical reflection and ideological negotiation, fueled by digital technologies that democratize access to sacred knowledge and pluralize the modes of spiritual engagement.

Focus Group Excerpt: Young Participants (*n* = 5)

> *Younger generations are not growing up within a single belief system. Instead, they access a wide range of religious teachings—Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, and even alternative spiritualities—through platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and podcasts. All of this is available at their fingertips through a mobile phone. For us, religion is no longer merely a set of beliefs passed down by family or community. It has become something we choose for ourselves. Religious teachings don't have to come from a temple or a church; they can be consumed through short video clips or meditation apps. Digital technology doesn't destroy religion—it transforms it. It shifts faith from institutional adherence to a personal quest for inner peace. Many young people today would say they have faith, but not necessarily in any one religion.*

Doctrinal Conflicts with Modern Society

In today's world shaped by ideals of freedom, equality, and pluralistic identity, many doctrines once considered sacred are increasingly subject to critique. This shift does not stem from a generational abandonment of religion, but rather from the inability of certain religious frameworks to fully respond to the realities of the contemporary world. The rise of secular ethics, especially among

younger generations, reflects a transformation from a society grounded in inherited belief to one rooted in individual reason, autonomy, and human rights.

Particularly contentious are religious positions on gender roles, sexual diversity, women's rights, and civil liberties. Many religious traditions remain deeply embedded in patriarchal structures, which privilege male leadership while limiting women's roles and denying full acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities. These perspectives, grounded in traditional value systems, often clash with modern democratic ideals that emphasize equality, inclusion, and social justice.

In this context, new generations are increasingly seeking ethical frameworks that are not bound by religious authority, but guided by human experience, critical reasoning, and shared values. This is what Gill (2006) identifies as the emergence of secular faith: a moral orientation that does not reject spirituality but repositions it outside institutionalized religion. For many, this is not a loss of faith, but a shift in where and how faith is lived and articulated.

Focus Group Commentary: Religious Leader

> *Religion itself is not outdated, but sometimes interpretations remain confined within rigid traditional frameworks. This restricts the space for real inclusion. We need the courage to re-evaluate how religious teachings are communicated so they resonate with the consciousness of people today—without abandoning the core values of the faith.*

Focus Group Commentary: Religious Studies Scholar

> *Religion is deeply rooted in society and culture. But as society evolves, so too do moral questions. If religion cannot respond to these new ethical challenges, it risks becoming irrelevant in daily life. Research across various countries shows that faith persists, but it no longer needs to be tied to traditional institutions.*

This tension between institutional doctrine and contemporary values has led many young people to construct alternative moral paths. These paths often draw from secular humanism, feminist ethics, queer theology, or global justice movements—revealing a desire for liberation from dogma rather than a rejection of meaning. The search is not for less morality, but for morality that reflects lived experience, dignity, and pluralism in an interconnected world.

Discussion

This discussion aims to analyze the ideological transition of religion among younger generations through the lens of the sociology of religion. The analysis focuses on three key dynamics: resistance, synthesis, and the construction of new spaces of belief. These processes reveal not only shifting religious expressions, but also the deeper interplay between faith, identity, and power in modern society—relationships that continue to demand critical and nuanced understanding. Drawing upon empirical findings, the research team identified four central themes that characterize how younger generations engage with religion today. Each of these dimensions is examined in greater detail below.

1. Attitudes toward the Role of Religion in Everyday Life
2. Questioning the Authority of Traditional Religious Institutions
3. Personalized and Selective Religious Interpretation
4. The Emergence of Secular Morality.

1. The attitudes of younger generations toward religion reveal a clear shift in both cultural structures and social consciousness. Religion is no longer regarded as the "center of life," as it once was in traditional societies. Instead, it has become merely one among many "options" through which individuals seek values, meaning, and ethical orientation. This transformation cannot be explained solely by the forces of globalization or the influence of information technology. It is also closely linked to a cognitive shift and a reconfiguration of the systems of legitimation embedded within modern social structures. These findings resonate with the work of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, whose notion of cultural pluralism emphasizes that modernity has not led to the disappearance of religion. Rather, it has altered its status, turning religion into something that must be consciously chosen or justified to maintain its legitimacy within contemporary contexts (Shapira, 2025).

Within this paradigm, young people increasingly emphasize moral consciousness, goodness, and justice over ritual performance or institutional religious obligation. As such, the declining structural role of religion does not imply a loss of religious value. Instead, it reflects a recasting of religion as a form of cultural capital—a symbolic and emotional resource that individuals draw upon selectively, according to personal needs and social context. For example, religion may be invoked for emotional healing, participation in meaningful rituals on religious holidays, or as an occasional pathway to inner peace—without requiring full institutional affiliation or doctrinal commitment. The attitudinal shift observed among younger generations is not a rejection of religion as a source of sacred meaning, but rather a recalibration of the distance between religion and everyday life. This new orientation allows for the pursuit of a spiritual identity that is more fluid, personalized, and responsive to the demands of a diverse, decentered, and constantly evolving world.

2. The phenomenon of questioning the authority of traditional religion among younger generations has not emerged abruptly, but rather as the cumulative outcome of broader social, educational, and political transformations. Religion, once regarded as an unquestioned institution, is now increasingly subject to critique. It is reconsidered as a construct of power, deeply interwoven with the mechanisms of the state, elite interests, and social orders that prioritize control over emancipation. From Foucault's (2019) perspective, religion as an institution operates in tandem with state power through mechanisms of discursive power and pastoral power. These mechanisms shape people's modes of thinking by deploying discourses of sin, merit, sexuality, and morality. Particularly concerning gender diversity and women's rights, religious discourse often becomes a tool for regulating sexual behavior within the boundaries of legitimacy, grounded in patriarchal values and conservative power structures (Chomsky & Foucault, 2015). Émile Durkheim, by contrast, described religion as a system that generates social cohesion by producing and reinforcing distinctions between the sacred and the profane. Yet, as cultural and identity diversity expands, such cohesion can transform into a mechanism of exclusion. This is visible in practices that restrict women's participation in religious rituals, prohibit LGBTQ+ expressions, or narrowly define "morality" without allowing space for alternative interpretations (Jenson, 2010).

In response, many younger individuals engage in acts of symbolic resistance to religious authority. Examples include refusing to participate in religious ceremonies, rejecting hierarchical gestures such as bowing to religious figures, or campaigning via social media against teachings perceived as violating human rights. These symbolic refusals represent a deeper demand for ethical accountability and institutional transparency within religion. In today's pluralistic and democratic society, religion is thus under growing pressure to reform—to realign with the evolving values of human rights, equality, and cultural diversity. It would be inaccurate to conclude that young people are abandoning religion altogether. Rather, they are calling for religious reform—seeking to reclaim spiritual spaces that are just, inclusive, and reflective of their lived realities.

3. The tendency of younger generations to interpret religion on their own terms reflects a broader transition from religion as an institution to religion as a matter of personal judgment. This shift signifies the decentralization of religious authority and the opening of interpretive space for individual agency in shaping faith. Importantly, many young people are not rejecting religion altogether; rather, they are rejecting traditional interpretive frameworks—those historically controlled by clergy, the state, or ritual orthodoxy—in order to return to the ethical core of religious teachings: compassion, kindness, and justice. This reorientation is not centered on ritual forms—such as prescribed clothing, memorized chants, or hierarchical protocols—but on the ethical intentions behind those practices. It aligns with the theoretical framework of postmodern religion, which posits that in the postmodern era, individuals prioritize personal meaning over systemic form or grand narratives that dictate how a "true religion" must be strictly practiced (Gellner, 1992). Although religion continues to play a role in the lives of many young people, the forms it takes are no longer subject to the same degree of institutional control as in the past. Sacredness is no longer defined exclusively by monks or clerics. Instead, it emerges from the direct experiences of individuals: for example, through meditation, acts of forgiveness, or helping others without reliance on ritual. This phenomenon does not represent the

destruction of religion, but reflects efforts to reconstruct religion in ways that render it meaningful within a rapidly changing world characterized by increasing diversity of identities and ways of life.

4. The rise of secular morality among younger generations reflects a broader cultural and moral transition—from virtue grounded in religious teachings to ethics rooted in universal reason, human dignity, and human rights. This phenomenon is not simply a rejection of religion but signifies a reorientation of moral authority away from religious institutions and toward intellectual reasoning and individual social responsibility. This shift reflects the growing belief that goodness and justice do not require theological justification but can be derived from shared human values such as empathy, fairness, and mutual respect. Young people who turn toward secular ethical frameworks are not abandoning spirituality altogether, but are seeking ethical principles that are inclusive, reason-based, and grounded in the realities of an increasingly diverse and global society.

This trend aligns with the theory of Jürgen Habermas, who argues that in a post-secular society, the religious and the secular must coexist through rational dialogue, grounded in human rights and mutual recognition of diversity, rather than through moral domination by religious authority (Nynas et al., 2012). This phenomenon is reflected in the rise of various civil society movements—such as humanitarian volunteer groups, refugee assistance networks, women's rights organizations, and environmental advocacy groups—that ground their activities in principles of humanity and mutual support, without the need to reference any specific religion or accompany their actions with religious rituals. Ethical conduct in this context is not tied to a single religious framework, but is enacted based on human dignity, grounded in freedom, equality, respect for difference, and the rejection of identity-based exclusion. For younger generations, such forms of secular morality represent a reorientation of moral authority—from hierarchical structures of control to grassroots practices of care and solidarity. This shift demonstrates that goodness does not require validation through "sacred teachings," but can instead emerge from compassion, understanding, and reason applied equally to others.

Policy and Practical Recommendations

1. Establish "Provincial Youth Faith Dialogue Councils" in collaboration with temples, churches, mosques, schools, universities, and local administrative bodies. These councils should organize "Debias Dialogue" forums designed to dismantle prejudice, foster cross-generational understanding of religious principles, and provide culturally sensitive dialogue handbooks for youth engagement.

2. Develop curricula on "Interreligious Understanding" for schools, vocational institutions, and universities. In addition, create short modules (3–6 hours) focusing on constitutional rights to religious freedom, comparative faith traditions, and fact-checking tools to counter religious rumors and misinformation.

3. Launch a digital media campaign—"Different Beliefs, Shared Humanity"—in partnership with local influencers. This campaign should feature 60–90 second short-form content highlighting stories of interfaith solidarity within communities (e.g., volunteer work, flood relief, green markets).

4. Implement a "Religious Learning Pathways" program at the municipal or subdistrict level, incorporating study tours of temples, churches, mosques, and shrines. Activities should be documented through field notes and presented as small-scale exhibitions in libraries or community learning centers.

5. Create Legal and Religious Rights Clinics in collaboration with the faculties of law or local legal officers. These clinics would provide preliminary legal advice, training in negotiation, and mediation of minor disputes within schools, universities, and workplaces.

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