

## Research Article

# AMBIVALENCE IN RECOGNIZING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY: ANALYSIS OF LAWS, POLICIES, AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THAILAND

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aimed to examine Thai religious education (RE) discourse by analyzing the constitution, policies, and national curriculum concerning recognizing religious diversity. It further investigated how public schools in the northern education service areas implemented RE. This qualitative study employed document analysis to answer the first part. Then it conducted empirical research at four religiously diverse schools chosen by purposive random sampling. The data was gathered via documents, observations, and semi-structured in-depth individual interviews with 4 school directors and 12 RE teachers. The study found a double standard in constitutions, policies, the national RE curriculum, and the implementation of RE in northern Thai public schools. While Thailand's laws and policies formally recognize religious diversity and equality, they also favor one particular religion over others. This ambivalence about guaranteeing religious equality is also found in the national RE curriculum, where it theoretically stands for every faith but practically not. The findings of empirical research revealed that schools, in fact, implement Buddhist-oriented RE for all faiths, regardless of the students' religious affiliations. There is a pressing need for the recognition and promotion of equitable RE for all faiths in Thailand.

**Keywords:** Religious Curriculum, Religious Education in Thailand, Religious Minority, Religious policy

## Introduction

Durkheim and Freud explained religion as a device for social cohesion and control (Pals, 2006; Jantawanit, 2014), while Karl Marx and Russel McCutcheon saw religion as a tool to sanction oppression (Segal, 2005; Pals, 2006). Whether scholars understand religion positively or negatively, religions have played a significant role in Thailand's history. Historically, states have used a particular religion to achieve social control or to justify their political practices. Today, however, such practices are problematic for pluralistic, modern nations such as Thailand, which is marked by different ethnicities, cultures, and religions. By definition, for the state to sanction one religion is to discriminate against religious minorities and violate the claim to equality before the law.

Western nations have historically recognized the separation of church and state. This separation has acted as a brake on religious enthusiasm, ultimately preventing (or at least moderating) government interference in matters of faith or the favoring of one religious faith. Many modern Asian countries such as South Korea, Japan,

Taiwan, separate religion from politics to ensure the state's neutrality, religious freedom, and equality. The current Thai government, however, holds religion in high regard. The national slogan is 'Love nation, religion, and king.' In Thailand, religion functions as more than just a pathway to personal enlightenment. As Turner (2013) notes, Thailand was influenced by the Ashokan model of kingship, which provided a normative framework for the intersection of religion and politics. The Thai government is manifestly in confederation with Buddhism in almost every social, political, and cultural sphere.

This naturalized 'religio-national identity' (Winichakul, 2015) helps explain many of Thailand's social and behavioral patterns. However, it leads one to doubt the officially sanctioned idea of religious plurality. Studies show that Thailand has always been an ethnically diverse nation (Jory, 2002). The Nation's Encyclopedia claims that Thailand contains more than 30 ethnic groups, while an Overseas Missionary Fellowship found more than 50. Ethnic diversity implies religious diversity, but there

are only five religions approved by the Thai government; Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism. Thai historian, Wongthet (2016) argued, however, that the original Thai religion is ghost worship, which later combined with Brahmin Buddhism to form the uniquely Thai version of Buddhism, known as Theravada. Nevertheless, Thais believe that they are true Buddhists, even though every house and temple accommodates a ghost shrine at the corner.

Consistent with the Thai government stresses on the importance of religion, the Basic Core Curriculum of the Ministry of Education of Thailand requires the study of Buddhism from grades 1 to 12 and encourages students to become good followers of their religion. The curriculum also pursues peaceful coexistence among different faiths. The phrase iterated in the official curriculum documents is 'Buddhism or those of learners' religion,' indicating that Thailand's educational policy acknowledges religious pluralism and the equal rights of learners. Theoretically, Thailand's RE curriculum aims to develop in the learner a strong allegiance to one's religion, tolerance of different faiths, and harmonious coexistence among all faith communities.

The acceptance of other religions is a noble curricular goal that necessitates fair and equal treatment for students from all faiths. Nonetheless, the finely built Buddha pavilion near the gates of all public schools - the only officially sanctioned symbol of religion - begs questions about the equitable treatment of all faiths in the RE curriculum. Moreover, there is a prevailing ambivalence between recognizing religious plurality in laws, policies, national curriculum, and visualized religious presentation. At the least, it suggests that Buddhism might be favored in public schools. However, researches on public schools RE in consideration of religious pluralism is rare in Thailand. Most of the studies are for the development and improvement of Buddhist education in public schools (Phutinan, et al., 2017; Ongprakit, et al., 2018). Numbers of studies have been conducted for Islamic public schools (Boongatayong & Narongraksakhet, 2009; Mama & Yisunsong, 2015). On the contrary, however, the comparative studies on multi-religious education in public schools are limited to the southern border provinces (Aphathananon, 2015; Weawanjit, 2017). Therefore, this research aimed to contribute to building an understanding of how Thailand discourses RE for public

education by analyzing the constitutions, policies, and national curriculum concerning religion. Further, it investigated how these policies are reflected and implemented in Northern Thai public schools and explored teacher's views on the present RE curriculum and practices. This study is premised on a belief in religious pluralism.

### Research Objectives

1. Examine Thai religious education discourse by analyzing the constitution, policies, and national curriculum in relation to recognizing religious diversity.

2. Investigate how these policies are implemented in Northern Thai public schools and explore teacher's views on the current school RE.

### Expected Benefits

It builds the body of knowledge that should be preceded for academic research on multi-religious education in Thailand, and also provides necessary academic inquiry to develop religious education in accordance with the global multicultural era. Moreover, it is among the few studies to address the problem of RE for religious minority students in a state-supported Buddhist country, as opposed to similar

lines of research in traditionally Christian countries.

### Research Scope

The author reviewed Thai laws and policies concerning religious rights and religious education including the national RE curriculum. The author then narrowed the scope into the northern educational region to conduct a qualitative study of how public schools in the educational service areas from number 34 to 37 implement RE.

### Literature Review

Modern democratic countries, such as South Korea, Taiwan, or Singapore, separate religion from the state and public education due to inequality or marginalization issues, however, numbers of modern countries, such as the United States of America, U.K., and Germany, still include a study of religion in school curricula. The importance of teaching about religions is shared by Charles C. Haynes (Lester, E., Roberts, P.S. 2006): "Knowledge of the world's religions is essential for comprehending much of history, literature, art and contemporary events. Moreover, learning about religions promotes religious freedom and creates understanding across

religious differences.” Other educators also view that the study of world religion is essential for understanding life’s questions, enhancing faith, and also academically beneficial for inter-disciplinary study (Graham, 2012).

Teaching religion or religious education in public schools has two major different approaches. One is for “teaching about religion,” and the other is “teaching of religion.” Teaching about religion is an academic, non-confessional approach to various faiths. The curriculum is neutral to every religion and seeks an objective way of providing knowledge and understandings. In this regard, Thailand requires confessional faith education in public schools, which aims to cultivate firm believers and good citizens (Ministry of Education Thailand).

While most of the studies on RE in other democratic countries have been reporting religious conflicts, inappropriate approaches, and marginalization of minorities (Baker, D. 2011; Douglass, 2000; Schachter, K., 2006; Lynne, Hartwick, M.M., Hawkins, J.M., Schroeder, M.P., 2015; Moulin, D., 2011), however, major studies in Thailand are to improve Buddhist -Oriented RE. For example, studies to develop instructional packages on Buddhist moral topics (Thongdee, Ngamnin, 2015), Buddhist

teaching set to enhance life skills (Phutinan, 2017), or developing learning methods to increase learning achievement based on Buddhist doctrine (Ongprakit, Panyapruk, and Jaisanit (2018).

Alongside the study of Buddhist-Oriented RE in public schools, several studies have been conducted related to the Islamic RE in private Islamic schools: research on the history of Islam education in private schools (Arlee, C., Baka, D., 2012), status and problems in teaching Arab language (Mahama, A., Narongraksakhet, I., 2009; Darachai, C., 2014), educational supervision (Mama, H., Yisunsong, A., 2015), learning activities to cultivate Islamic ethical values (Boongatayong, M., Narongraksakhet, I., 2009), and much more on the similar topics.

Nevertheless, studies based on religious pluralism in public schools still lack. Among the small number of studies, Aphathananon (2015) found that 90 % of 271 public schools provide RE for both Buddhist and Muslim students, and the most important variable to this change was the portions of each group of students. Weawanjit (2017) noted in her study that public schools in Pattani province integrated multicultural education in recognition of Muslim communities. Preechapermpasit

(2006) pointed out that the Thai government has been using Buddhist studies to implant a sense of loyalty towards the Buddhism and monarch. He argued that the teaching of Buddhism, however, has been changing in accordance with the ever-changing national policies until it destroyed the essence of Buddhism and defeat the aim of Buddhism study in a pathway to freedom.

### Conceptual Framework

This research was conducted through the following concepts.

### Methodology

This qualitative study includes document and empirical research. It began by analyzing government documents pertaining to the religious rights in the Thai constitution, policies, and national curriculum related to religious education. After that, empirical research was conducted to study how these policies are reflected in RE implementation in northern Thai public schools.

Among 192 secondary public schools in northern educational service

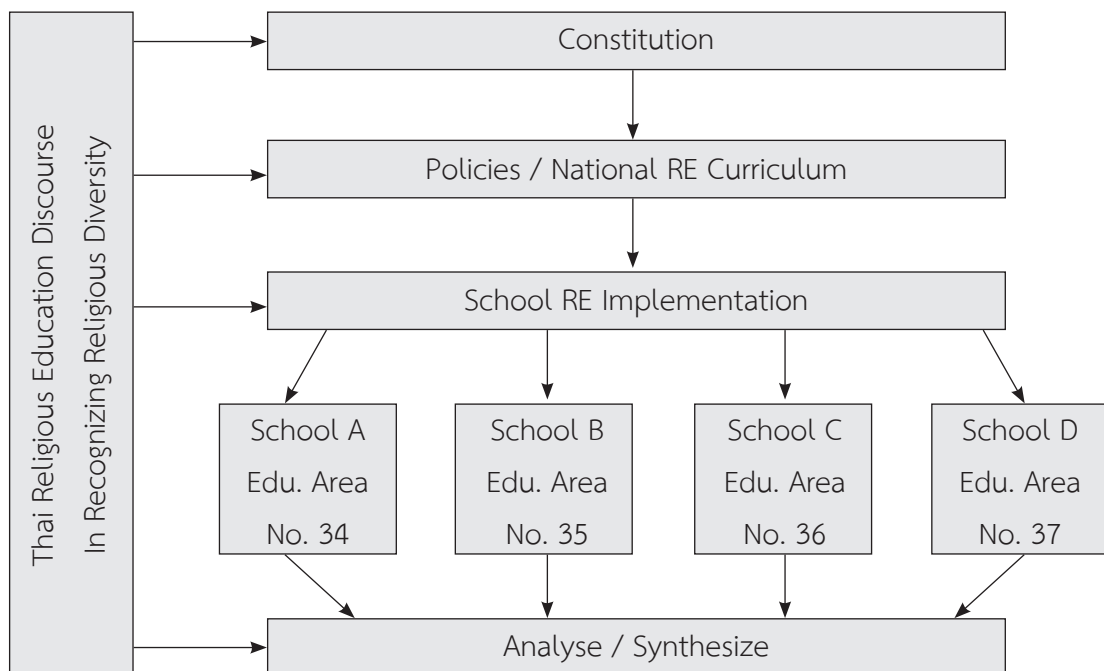


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

areas from number 34 to 37, 12 (3 schools each) middle and large size district schools were randomly selected first. Then the phone calls were made to select one school from each area that is religiously diverse and also accepted participation in this research.

All schools were having Buddhists as the majority. For Buddhist students, school A has 1,005 (86.64%); school B has 3,134 (99.27%); school C has 3,044 (95.27%), and school D has 876 (99.10%). Christians were the next most populous: School A has 88 (7.59%) students, B has 14 (0.48%), C has 122 (3.82%), and D has 8 (0.90%). Muslim students comprised the smallest population: school A has 23 (1.98%), B has 8 (0.25%), C has 29 (0.91%), and school D has no Muslim students. There were no Hindu or Sikh students. Data on the School's RE curriculum and implementation were collected by applying the data recording form, and daily RE practices and religious environment were collected by applying observation form. School directors' and teachers' opinions on the present RE were studied by conducting semi-structured in-depth one-on-one interviews with 4 school directors, one Christian three Buddhists, and 12 RE teachers, all Buddhists, who volunteered. The results of the legal and political examination were analyzed along

with the results of the empirical research by content analysis.

## Results

### 1. Analysis of Thai Constitutions and policies concerning religion and religious education

#### 1) The right to religion, and the constitution of Thailand

Thailand has a long history of officially supporting human rights, beginning with its vote for The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Constitutions guarantee the religious right and freedom of the Thai people. Between the coup of 1932 and 2019, Thailand has had 20 Constitutions. Still, the author confined this study to the three latest constitutions: the Constitution Acts of 1997 and 2007, and 2017, the Constitution of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO). All affirm a person's right to religious freedom.

Nonetheless, there were significant changes in the direct Principles of Fundamental State Policies: the religious freedoms of the Constitution 1997 were regulated, limited, and the state eroded equity through the Constitution 2007 and 2017. Section 79 of the 2007 Act includes the phrase 'Buddhism, which the majority of Thais have followed for a long

time...’ Buddhism is assigned supremacy and used to determine the majority and the minorities, the superiority, and the inferiorities, and the privileged and non-privileged. This specification even goes further. Section 67 of the 2017 Act specifies the implementation of Theravada Buddhism over others, upholding it as an untouchable political tool. The State’s responsibility (Section 73 of the Act 1997, Section 79 of the Act 2007) in promoting understanding and harmony among followers of all religions which states, ‘The state shall patronize and protect Buddhism and other religions, promote good understanding and harmony among followers of all religions as well as encourage the application of religious principles to create virtue and develop the quality of life has virtually vanished from the 2017 Constitution.

By definition, religious pluralism allows the free exercise of different faiths free from political interference. However, the political marginalization of any religion, and the dominance of one religion in Thailand’s latest constitution, point to contradictions. The fundamental religious rights and equality of Thai people are both guaranteed and violated within the same constitution. Section 4 of the Act 2017 states, ‘Human dignity, rights,

liberty and equality of the people shall be protected. The Thai people shall enjoy equal protection under the Constitution.’ Section 27 of the same act explicitly states: ‘Unjust discrimination against a person on the grounds of the difference in origin, race, language, sex, age, physical or health condition, personal status, economic or social standing, religious belief, education or Constitutionally political view, shall not be permitted.’

Nevertheless, as we have just seen, section 67 of the same constitution favors the dominance of Theravada Buddhism over other religions and demonstrates the state’s excessive legal protection.

## **2) National curriculum for religious education and policies**

In 1981, the Ministry of Education in Thailand proposed a revised school curriculum. The revisions placed the learning of Buddhism as an elective subject within social studies for secondary school students but made it a compulsory subject for students who are Buddhist (Janutso, 2016). Currently, the Basic Education Core Curriculum (2008 and revised in 2017) provides the framework and direction for the provision of education of all types (formal, non-formal, and informal), covering



all target groups of learners from grades 1 to 12. The curriculum focuses on developing learners' characters, and among the eight desired characteristics, the first is 'Love of nation, religion and the monarchy.'

Moreover, religion is the first compulsory subject among five sub-subjects of Social Studies. Every student must be taught the following:

The fundamental concepts about religion, morality, ethics and the principles of Buddhism or those of learners' religion; the application of religions, the principles and teachings for self-development and peaceful and harmonious coexistence; the ability to do good deeds; acquisition of desired values; continuous self-development as well as the provision of services for the community.

These curricular aims have two learning standards:

Knowledge and understanding of the history, the importance, the masters and the moral principles of Buddhism or those of one's faith and other religions; having the right faith; adherence to and observance of the moral principles for peaceful coexistence

Understanding, awareness, and personal conduct of devout believers; and furtherance of Buddhism or one's faith

Learning areas require not only knowledge about religion but also of religion, the confessional practice, and the application of one's religion in schools. Learning standards indicate that the knowledge and understanding of one's religion frequently led to the manifestation of one's faith. Students often become devout believers who advance in their religious faith. The learning indicators for lower grades include facts, faith, and application. In contrast, the upper levels require a deeper understanding of the Buddhist Canon or Scriptures, an analytic understanding of intensive religious knowledge of one's religion, and personal conduct following their faith. Moreover, the standards and indicators require that students 'appreciate,' 'pay respect,' 'firmly believe,' 'pray,' 'profess,' and 'conduct themselves' according to their religion. The curriculum requires students to demonstrate growing piety, which indicates that religious faith is not a choice.

Thailand's RE is both devotional and indoctrinatory. It explicitly states' faith in religious teaching as a learning area, meaning that all government schools are de facto faith schools. The curriculum emphasizes Buddhism throughout, but does not dismiss other religions by mentioning

‘Buddhism or those of learners’ religion.’ Indicators for learning standards include analyses of the differences, acceptance of other faiths, and appropriate treatment of people from different faiths according to the principles of their religions.

Nevertheless, the phrases ‘Buddhism or those of learners’ religion’ or ‘Buddhism or other religions,’ are repeated continuously in the curriculum. To name a specific religion, Buddhism, without explicitly naming other religions, connotes an ‘otherness’ or ‘foreignness’ to all other religions. Acknowledging Buddhism as the national religion is included in grade 6 level indicators, which state, ‘Analyze the importance of Buddhism as the national religion...’. Interestingly, none of the Thai Constitutions have ever formally approved Buddhism as the ‘national religion.’ The curriculum indicates the provision of balanced and non-discriminatory faith-based RE according to one’s religion, of at least five approved religions. Yet the Basic Core Curriculum details only the contents of Buddhism while omitting the contents of other faiths.

In 2002, the Basic Education Commission introduced a new school administration system as an option, The Buddhist-Oriented School. Among 32,225

public schools in Thailand (School Index), around 70% of public schools have registered as Buddhist-Oriented Schools by the end of the year 2020 (Buddhist-Oriented School). Public schools without a Buddha statue in front of the schoolyard are virtually non-existent in the northern region. The 29 guidelines of the Buddhist-Oriented School include; Buddhistic school environment settings with symbols, statues, and arranging of religion room (Buddhism room); daily meditations, holistic approach of Buddhistic teaching into all subjects, weekly and monthly applications and participating Buddhistic holidays; behavioral guidelines for teachers, school directors, and students; application tips for daily practices.

The curriculum requires that Buddhism principles and practices be merged with school administration, school practices, and Buddhistic celebrations and rituals. The Basic Core Curriculum binds all students to be taught and assessed via Buddhism. Such one-sided practices might develop religious piety for Buddhist students, but they can be deeply problematic for students from other faiths, especially monotheists like Christians and Muslims. It also imputes religious superiority, creating unintended discrimination and tension.

### 3) Textbook publication

The Ministry of Education (MOE) and officially approved private companies publish textbooks for teaching religions under the Basic Education Core Curriculum. Contents about religion form the first part of social studies for grades 1 to 6. The contents are mostly about Buddhism and deal with the Lord Buddha, his teachings, and the monks. Contents about Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism, are confined to a few pages. Some levels have less than a page for each religion, outlining only basic information. For grades 7 to 12, different textbooks provide more in-depth knowledge of Buddhism, including religious practices and applications.

In general, textbooks contain meager and simplified summaries of 'other religions,' except for Islam. The MOE and private publishers publish a series of different texts for teaching eight subjects on Islamic study. However, no single, officially published reader provides comparatively balanced teaching about religions other than Buddhism and Islam.

### 4) National assessment

A person's religiosity or piety is unlikely to be measured empirically by scales and points. Nevertheless, schools assess students' religious knowledge based

on the learning standards prescribed in the Basic Education Core Curriculum. In addition to the schools' assessment, all grade 12 students must take the national test – the Ordinary National Education Test (ONET). In the ONET section on religion, 70 to 80 percent of the test questions are about Buddhism, while 20 to 30 percent of the items are for all the other religions, including general knowledge (NIET, 2019). The ONET score is crucial for university entrance, counting for about 30 percent of the overall admission score. For students to excel on the ONET test, schools naturally have to focus on teaching Buddhism. This standard national test is applied to all public-school students regardless of religious differences.

## 2. Empirical findings on the implementation of religious education in northern Thai public schools

As previously mentioned, this study looked at four different schools. School A's director was the only Christian teacher, and all other directors and RE teachers were Buddhist. Ten RE teachers majored in Social Studies, but two RE teachers did not - one teacher majored in Handicrafts, and the other majored in Primary Education -, and none of the teachers had taken RE teachers' training courses. The research found that RE

implementation and teaching and learning management of all selected schools were similar in practice.

### 1) Curriculum management

Every school was implementing a Buddhist-Oriented school administration system. Contents, learning areas, learning standards all corresponded with the Basic Core Curriculum mainly directed at Buddhist students. Schools focused on teaching only Buddhism for lower secondary levels 1 to 3. World religions are taught only to prepare students for the ONET. Since religion is only one study area among five social studies learning areas, teaching hours were limited to 15 or 20 or 30 sessions (one session is 50 minutes) per semester for the lower secondary level. School D teaches 60 sessions of Buddhism for upper secondary level 1, and other schools allocate 40 sessions for studying about world religion, including Buddhism either in upper secondary level 1 or 3. Every student, of whatever religious background, was being educated and evaluated with the same Buddhist-oriented school curriculum.

There were two types of textbooks used, one about Buddhism, while the other encompassed world religion. Private publishers printed both books. There were no books for teaching Christianity or

other minority religions. Teachers prepared additional notes or sheets for studying other religions because both the National Curriculum and printed textbooks do not provide enough knowledge. Every school library contained copies of Buddhist cannons and a series of Buddhist literature. There were no Bibles or Qurans, and supplementary reading resources regarding other religions were minimal in schools A, B, and C. School D contained no literature about other faiths.

### 2) Religious environment setting

Every public school has a well-built place for a Buddha pavilion near the entrance. There was also a ghost shrine at each school. Also, every school contained a separate room for learning about Buddhist practices. This room was designated as an 'Ethic Room,' 'Religion Room,' or 'Dharma Room.' Every classroom has a Buddha photo hanging above the whiteboard. No other religious symbols were displayed.

### 3) Learning activities

Learning activities were related to Buddhism with daily practices and annual Buddhist events and festivals, which were the same in every school (except for a Christmas party). Schools follow the same routine, having students pay respect

to the Buddha statue near the school gate in the morning as they enter. During the morning assembly in front of the national flag, students memorize Phemetta (แผ่เมตตา the Buddhist prayer) and meditate, while students of different faiths standstill in a row at the back. There was no space or time provided for other religious practices.

Each year, every school holds an ethics camp in the Buddhist way. Monks are invited to teach, either in school or in the temple. Some RE teachers allow students of other faiths to be exempted but assigned a report of what he/she practice in their religion. Some RE teachers responded differently, “All students have to participate because it is a school activity. Although they (students) are from a different faith, they can learn from Buddhism.”

Additionally, major Buddhist events or festivals, which are official public holidays in Thailand, such as Makhabucha, Wisakhabucha, Asanhabucha, are celebrated in schools. Schools allow Christian or Muslim students not to participate, staying separately behind the row or waiting in the classroom. But in many cases, RE teachers have all students participate, except when there is a special request for exemption. School D sometimes arranged for Christian students to gather with adult

Christians from outside when the school brings Buddhist students to the temple. Merit-making ceremonies -- offering food or goods to monks -- were often arranged either in schools or in temples. Students are encouraged to participate in various Buddhist competitions held regionally.

Learning activities related to learning about other religions are limited. None of the schools bring students to visit different religious places, nor do they invite religious personal to participate in teaching, as they often do with temples and monks. The Christmas party prepared by foreign teachers in the English department is the only school activity related to other religions. Many teachers said that they asked Christian or Muslim students to share their religion and traditions in the classroom. Because all RE teachers are Buddhist, they do not know the details and practices of other faiths.

#### **4) Collaboration with religious organizations and inter-religious participation**

Schools are closely related to several temples in the area. They cooperate with the temple in teaching and participating in Buddhist events. Monks are often invited to the school to teach, conduct religious ceremonies, and participate in religious

events. Schools also bring students to the temple to participate in religious events. None of the schools have invited people from other religions to teach or participate in RE in school, nor were students brought to visit churches or mosques. Inter-religious or multi-religious activities were unknown to RE teachers.

### 5) Assessment

Written tests evaluate knowledge about religions based on the learning areas of the Basic Core Curriculum. For the lower secondary levels, almost 100 percent of the evaluation is about Buddhism, with a few questions about other religions. For the upper secondary level, the portion of questions about Buddhism to other religions is 60 percent: 40 percent, or 80 percent: 20 percent of which is similar to those of ONET questions. Contents of world religion include knowledge about Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Other assessment methods include worksheets, participation in learning activities, memorizing Buddhist prayer and scriptures, group works, and projects. Students are also trained to pay appropriate respect to the Buddha statue and adopt the Buddhist way of greeting or paying respect to people according to their age and social status with proper attitude and

posture. Students from other faiths learn the same contents but are exempt from grading on some religious practices, such as bowing down to the Buddha statue. All religious practices in school are related to Buddhism, so most RE teachers ask students, for example, Christians, to report on how they participate in Christian activities at their churches or ask them to memorize/ read the Bible verses. Yet RE teachers lack knowledge of other religions, so they have no idea if their students' understandings are correct. Classroom discussions on religious diversity and critical questions to build understandings among different faiths (Allgood, 2016; Rogers, 2011) are yet unknown in Thai classrooms

### 6) School directors' and RE teachers' views on the present RE curriculum

The school directors admitted that their schools' administration of the RE curriculum follows the National Curriculum in every aspect. All directors and teachers agreed that a Buddhist-oriented education is designed to serve the majority of Buddhist students. Moreover, they admitted that Christian or Muslim students are not receiving RE according to their faith, as written in the National Curriculum. When asked whether the current religious

education applies equally to all students, most respondents answered, “Before you ask this question, I had yet to think that the current Buddhist-Oriented religious education would be a fair or a problem for students who believe in other religions.” Teachers pointed to reasons why the school does not provide multi-religious or pluralistic religious education, consistent with the provisions of the National Curriculum:

- The Basic Core Curriculum upon which schools are evaluated and supervised is mainly about Buddhism.

- The national test ONET questions emphasize Buddhist teaching; it is a large determinant of what schools teach.

- The textbooks and resources for teaching about other religions are limited.

- Teachers are Buddhist and are not confident to teach about other religions because they had never experienced or learned about other faiths in-depth, nor had they received RE teachers’ training.

- Teaching time is limited, but the contents and the depth of knowledge required about Buddhism by the National Curriculum is already too much for regular students, and even for the RE teachers.

- There are a limited number of students from other religions, and the

school does not have a budget to hire teachers with the same faith from outside.

Nevertheless, many teachers were confident that there is no religious conflict among students with a different faith. They said they heard no complaints from Christian or Muslim students. Many added, “Every student, no matter what religion they are from, should learn about Buddhism because Thailand is a Buddhist country.” Yet students from other religions are rarely asked about their views, or how they feel when they are obliged to be educated in a faith other than their own.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrated that there are ambivalences in recognizing religious diversity in the Thai constitutions, religious policies, and national RE curriculum. All literally acknowledge the equal religious rights of the religious minorities; however, it practically bares discrepancies in favoring a particular religion over others which results in marginalization. These fundamental contradictions are reflected in the Northern Thai public schools’ RE implementation that every school practices the Buddhist confessional RE for all regardless of students’ affiliation to their faith.

Thailand's Constitution has 'devolved' in terms of religious freedom, equality, and the state's religious neutrality. The Constitution Act 2007 impairs religious equality by favoring Buddhism in Section 79. The Constitution Act of 2017 contains contradictions. Sections 4 and 27 recognize religious diversity and equality, while section 67 recognizes the supremacy of Buddhism. In brief, Thailand's political monotheism is against the equal religious rights of people from different faiths.

Similarly, the national RE curriculum demonstrates the same contradictions. Since learning about religion in public school was introduced in 1981 and became compulsory for every grade, the Buddhist-Oriented Curriculum has necessitated that public schools conform with Buddhist-oriented administration. The national religious curriculum requires equal RE, but the curriculum has no details of other religions equivalent to Buddhism. The school directors and RE teachers in the schools studied said that there are insufficient contents of minor religions available in the curriculum so that they have no choice but to offer Buddhist-Oriented RE. Although the national RE Curriculum states teaching 'about' religions, the word 'about' here is used differently from what

Haynes (Lester and Roberts, 2006) and Anderson (2011) described. Both scholars described that education 'about' religion seeks to include a diverse range of religious and non-religious views and belief systems. On the other hand, Thailand's RE requires knowledge about Buddhism or (not and) those of learner's religion which does not include others at the same rate.

Additionally, the empirical findings suggest the absence of RE suited to one's religion as guaranteed in the national curriculum. Buddhist-centric education is practiced as a natural discourse for all in Northern Thai public schools. Teachers cite the national curriculum and the national exams, which stress Buddhism as the reason for this exclusivity. This mainstream RE simply ignores the Christian and Muslim students the schools accommodate. As Turner (2013, p. 24) points out, 'ongoing civilizational tensions caused by political engagement with religious diversity have been ignored especially in Buddhism-oriented religious school education. Doubtless, Turner's observation would hold if Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or any other religion politically dominated others.

It is noteworthy that the teacher is a critical factor in students' RE experience (Moulin, 2011; Robinson, 2013), however,



there is no RE teacher training even though practical, faith-based education is a compulsory subject. The school directors and RE teachers gave an offhand response, “the majority of students are Buddhist, the Curriculum is Buddhist-Oriented, and all teachers are also Buddhists.” Some of them added, “All religions teach good, so students from other faiths also can learn from Buddhism.” Religious pluralism is simply not a consideration.

The natural acceptance of Buddhism for all is hegemonic that school directors and RE teachers perceive the present RE as just normal, peaceful, and suitable for all. In fact, apart from Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, there are significant numbers of highlanders who worship ghosts and are not officially counted. Nevertheless, the majority Buddhist population monopolizes the legal, political, and educational space. As Bianco and Slaughter (2016) observe, “Thailand has a long and consistent policy of denying concessions to a pluralist vision of its identity which would arise from formal recognition of differences, and has never embraced, at the official level, any discourse approximating multiculturalism.”

Decades of studies and RE reformations in other countries have incorporated RE in contexts of religious

diversity (Jackson, 2004, 2013; Julia Martinez-Ariño and Sara Teinturier, 2019; International Association for Religious Freedom, 2002). Studies suggest that academically and balanced classes about various religions promote civic-mindedness, friendship, and belongingness (Anderson, 2011; Robinson, 2013; Floresta, 2019). On the other hand, neither secularization nor monolithic RE has been found useful; many researchers argue that the need for a balanced and appropriate RE is at a critical stage of development (MacMullen, 2004; Schachter, 2006; Hartwick et al., 2015).

Unlike other democratic countries that accommodate religious diversity, in Thailand, studies and debates about multi-religious education are still rare. Christian and Muslim students, who are exposed daily to Buddhist symbols and rituals, might dispute the teachers’ confident assertion that their schools contain no religious conflicts or problems. The findings of this study suggest that nowhere is there a greater need for a balanced approach to RE than in Thailand. As a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country, Thailand should ensure that its citizens are imbued with respect for individual religious freedom and equal human rights. Yet as long as the Thai constitution asserts a double standard and the RE curriculum

marginalizes religious minorities, religious discrimination may prevail.

state's policies affect RE perceptions and attitudes of different stakeholders.

### Suggestions and Recommendations

1) There should be more qualitative researches on RE implementations at both micro and macro level to explore how the

2) Comparative studies on equal, inclusive religious education with neighboring countries will help develop religious education in Thailand.

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