

# The Understanding of Non-Religiosity and Moral Principle of Thai Younger Millennials\*



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## Abstract

Misunderstanding of the meaning of immoral person and non-religious person, including reputation of religiosity of Thai younger millennials, leads to claim themselves as non-religious person. By such claim, the term 'non-religious person' falls to the criticism that it is immoral person by conservative believers. This paper is intended 1) to investigate what is the causes of argument against religiosity and moral principles of religion defined as immorality and 2) to propose the new tendency of valorization of moral principles in Thai younger millennials. To complete investigation and proposal, this paper uses the marks of moral condition in the book *Postmodern Ethics* written by Zygmunt Bauman as criticism for reputation of religiosity. Reputation of religiosity is not equivalent to being immoral. It found that using the marks of moral condition of Zygmunt Bauman in Postmodernist perspective is stronger argumentation of reputation of religiosity.

**Keywords:** Non-religious person; Immoral person; Moral principle

## Introduction

It is not surprising that new generation reputed religiosity, including religious morality. The younger teenagers around the world decline both religion and religious morality because both of them are ambiguous and obsolescent. Therefore, moral principles of religions are indispensable and useless. This assumption leads to reputation of religiosity around the world. Generally, in Thailand, the relation between religion and moral principle seems, at least in the understanding of Thai Buddhists, indispensable. For some people, Buddhism and morality are related in terms of moral justification that it can be used to be moral judgement. For example,

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Moral conduct. It meant that their ordination became moral justification. Ordination, for some people, is obviously a symbol of goodness and a symbol of good life. In many cases, it seems to be moral automatically. For example, when a murderer committed crime, if he was allowed to be ordained as Buddhist monk for a while, then he was probably considered as innocent guy. Someone might go to the final conclusion that an ex-monk is moral person. By contrast, in some cases, people expected that a man ordained as monk was moral person after living in monkhood for long time. His conduct and action in lay-society frequently after they became ex-monk were immoral as same as people expected. The conduct of an ex-monk falls to blaspheme. Furthermore, some Buddhist monks violated regulations during living in monastery. This action was argued how monks, as moral preceptor, committed immoral themselves. By these examples, it could be affirmed that moral justification of Thai people was equivalent to belief in Buddhism. But the reaction of Thai younger millennials is reputation both moral principle and religiosity. To be fair, Thai younger millennials resisted religiosity and its moral justification because it did not work for the modern lives. Then, some younger millennials became non-religious persons and criticized against the older moral justification. In the present situation, the ideology of global citizen became prevalent where human beings live in the universal value that we share the same standard value. Therefore, what we needed is the universal criteria which can be applied in the actual life.

The situation of religion resistance and affirmation of 'non-religious' agent of Thai younger millennials has widely been spreading. This phenomena would not be surprising in other countries where the state ideology stands for secular world. The social acceleration, for example politic liberalism, was partially noticed and accepted as the cause of religion reputation. Another can be seen in ethical solution. In the past, human beings faced and struggled moral problems in daily life. Many new problems are unknown or unnoticed to the past by old generations. Thai younger millennials seem to be upset to the old criteria of ethical judgement. In other words, the global context of contemporary life cannot be fathomed in advance because the old moral justification did not work. It seems, furthermore, obsolete function. It is by no means possible solution for contemporary problems. It could not function properly. The notion of the old approaches has come to be the demise of the ethics. Is there any ethical justification available? Therefore, the interpretation of possible ethics is contentious. Further, respect towards multi-culture and believes is necessarily recognition in society.

Another remark of misconception of religion in Thai society concerning moral principle and ethical justification is the assertion that religious belief is moral justification. It leads to resistance even reputation of religiosity, especially Buddhism because Buddhist is majority. However, the millennials might count other faiths in the controversy either. For example, the proposal of millennials to remove Buddhism subject, probably particular religion teaching, in ordinary study was widely consent. Another misconception in Thai society is assertion-that ‘non-religious’ agent is immoral self and-that ‘non-religious’ agent can blaspheme any believes in terms of obsolete function. To respond the issue is not to counter criticize, but to investigate and examine how this situation takes place in terms of distinguishing between moral principle and ethical justification. Furthermore, the understanding of distinguishing between moral principle and ethical justification is needed. If Thai younger millennials can classify and contrast diversity between moral principle and ethical justification properly, the religion resistance will go beyond blaspheme. This paper is intended to investigate the misunderstanding concept of non-religious person and immoral person in the context of Thai society. This paper takes the ethical framework to outlook the situation in Thai context in order to discuss the controversial issues of moral justification. It takes the postmodern critique of modern moral justification by following the marks of moral condition in the book *Postmodern Ethics* written by Bauman (1996). The notices of Bauman in *Postmodern Ethics* indicated the causes of moral resistance. To explore and investigate the criticism of the millennials, this paper uses Bauman’s postmodern perspective of moral condition as criticism against the old moral religiosity because their resistance shared many aspects of denials.

It is hopeful for new generation to have any moral justification in order to justify moral problems in contemporary disruption. In Thai society, Dogmatism became majority of belief and used as moral justification. The alternative moral justification is still needed. This paper was divided into five parts: 1) Introduction, 2) Reputation of Religiosity to Liberalism and Universal Values, 3) Postmodern Perspective of Moral Crisis, 4) Conclusion, and 5) Suggestion.

## Reputation of Religiosity to Liberalism and Universal Values

It was generally accepted that the majority of Thai people believe in Buddhism. Then, the way of life involved in Buddhist teaching, including moral justification. Thai used Buddhist moral principle as moral standard. This is ideology of Thai ancient state inherited since Sukhothai period. Somparn Promta stated that good state or society according to Buddhism must consist of morality... because the leader must rule the good life for citizen (Promta,

2008). The continuity of using Buddhist ideology for ruling in Thai history can be found the work of Phra Bhramagunabhorn (P. A. Prayutto, 2007). His work became the pillar of Thai Buddhist strongly. Another evidence of relation between Buddhism and Thai state in terms of national morality can be found in the time of centralization of King Rama 4-6 (Taveesak, 2021). The attempt to construct nation by establishing three pillars; Nation, Religion, and King indicated that Thai nation and religion, here is Buddhism is indispensable. Therefore, it is not surprising that Thai younger millennials assume Buddhism as a moral justification of society. Then, some of them acclaim to distinguish religion from state. The state should be secular state. Pipat Pasutharacharti critically proposed that the absolute monarchy is the key to study Thai history before revolution in 1930 which the three pillars were united accordingly. He concluded that belief in any religions is freedom of Thai people. (Pasutharacharti, 2010). This would be one reason why they reputed resligiosity. Thai younger millennials declared themselves as non-religious person.

The ambiguity among the terms among non-religiosity referring to those who have not believed in any particular religions might be enumerated as 1) atheism, 2) agnosticism, religious skepticism, and secular humanism. In the context of religious study, the term 'atheism' might be used to mean a kind of religion which did not believe in the existence of God. In other words, it means a group of religions that do not concern the religious morality. The criticism against this standpoint as atheism because God is moral justification. In Christian context, therefore, those who did not believe in God are atheists in terms of immoral person either. This assumption can be found in Christian context. The misunderstanding of atheism as immoral agents becomes controversial in Thai society. For example, the term 'atheism' was used to described Buddhism as atheism because its main standpoint is denial of the existence of God. It means the negation of theism. It further refers to non-religious agent. But Thai context, the term 'atheism' does not compatible with the term 'non-religious person'. Thai younger millennials reputed religiosity because they argued that any religious moral justification was imprecise. What their parents thought, for example morality, cannot provide universal values. The universal value, for the new generation, is liberal democracy which all human beings live equally while some religious teachings neglected this value. Since the world in the past is not the as same as the global society we have now, the universal value is needed.

The crash of religiosity occurred because Thai younger millennials yearn for the universal values and tendency of liberalism. Some exclusivist believes, for example Buddhist

moral justification, in any ideology are not the solutions in democratic society. What should be proposed to be acceptable for younger millennials in the democratic atmosphere is liberal democracy. Since secularism have grown up in the last 300 years, religions have increasingly lost their importance. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is it possible to find any new religion that valorizes a system of human laws founded on a belief in superhuman laws?

Yuval N. Harari, the author of *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, defines religion as a system of human laws that is founded on a belief in superhuman laws. He affirmed that religion must have two qualities. First, it must espouse a universal superhuman order that is true always and everywhere. Second, it must insist on spreading to everyone. In short, it must be universal and missionary (Harari, 2015). The most interesting proposed by Harari is affirming that some ideologies, such as liberalism, Communism, capitalism, nationalism and Nazism are new natural-law religions. It is undoubtedly strange and unfamiliar for conservative believers. He insisted that if a religion was defined as a system of human norms and values that is founded on belief in a superhuman order, then Soviet Communism was no less a religion than Islam. He explained more that Buddhism shares some aspects according to his definition of religion. He compared Buddhist belief and Communist belief that both believed in a superhuman order of natural and immutable laws that should guide human actions. Whereas Buddhist believe that the law of nature was discovered by Siddhartha Gautama, Communists believed that the law of nature was discovered by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (Harari, 2015). He further compared more similarities in terms of holy script, prophetic books, holiday, and festivals. The most importance here is not similarity between Buddhist and Communist belief but humanist religion. What Harari concerned is about humanist religion that sanctify humanity. He stated that the most important humanist sect is liberal humanism, which believes that 'humanity' is a quality of individual humans, and that the liberty of individuals is therefore sacrosanct. This is the sacred nature of humanity resides within every individual *Homo sapiens*. According to Harari, the new religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be humanist religion which can sanctify humans because the inner core of individual humans gives meaning to the world and is the source for all ethical and political authority (Harari, 2015). He, further, explained that if we, as human, should look inside and listen to the inner voice of humanity when we encounter an ethical or political dilemma. Harari divided humanist religion into three sects: 1) Liberal humanism, 2) Socialist humanism, and Evolutionary humanism because *Homo sapiens* has a unique and sacred nature that is fundamentally different from the nature of all other beings and phenomena. The supreme

good is the good of humanity. In each sect, humanity was defined accordingly and there is supreme commandment. For example, the supreme commandment of liberal humanism is to protect the inner core and freedom of each individual *Homo sapiens*, Socialist humanism to protect equality within the species *Homo sapiens*, and Evolutionary humanism to protect humankind from degenerating into subhumans and to encourage its evolution into superhumans respectively (Harari, 2015). It can be concluded that for Harari the new religion is humanist religion because it can sanctify humans and gives universal value.

From Harari's proposal on new religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it found that new knowledge is sanctifying humanity. Even though new younger millennials reputed religiosity, they still believed in humanist core, freedom, and universal values. Blasphemy younger millennials as immoral person is misunderstanding. In the democratic atmosphere, humanist religion according to Harari became acceptable for younger millennials in this sense. Without blasphemy, the younger millennials probably use the postmodern perspective on moral crisis to argue against conservative believers of traditional religions.

### **Postmodern Perspective on Moral Crisis and Moral Judgement in Kalama Sutta**

Zygmunt Bauman (1925-2017), a polish philosopher, wrote the book postmodern ethics. He began to analyze moral crisis that the moral agenda of our times is full of items which ethical writers of the past hardly ever touched or did not touch at all and for good reason: they were not articulated then as part of human experience (Bauman, 1996). He suggested the marks of moral condition from the postmodern perspective:

1. Humans are morally ambivalent.
2. Moral phenomena are inherently 'non-rational.'
3. Morality is incurably *aporetic*.
4. Morality is not *universalizable*.
5. Morality is and is bound to remain irrational.
6. Morality has no foundation; no cause, no determining factor.
7. Postmodern perspective on moral phenomena does not reveal the relativism of morality (Bauman, 1996). Bauman extended criticism to moral responsibility and ethical rules that we faced moral uncertainty in two dimensions: practical and theoretical dimension. Since humans are morally ambivalent. No logically coherent ethical code can 'fit' the essentially ambivalent condition of morality. Therefore, moral conduct cannot be guaranteed. What we can do is to learn how to live without such guarantees and with the awareness that guarantees

will never be offered. We as human beings hope perfect society and ethical rules because such rules may guide our conduct towards others and other towards us. Bauman stated that we live and act in the endless multitude of other human beings, seen or guessed, known and unknown, whose life and actions depend on what we do and in turn influence what we do, what we can do and what we ought to do and all this in ways we neither understand nor are able to presage (Bauman, 1996).

The most influential postmodernist philosopher is Jean-Francois Lyotard. He analyzes the condition of postmodernism as incredulity towards grand narratives. Grand narrative means the legitimacy of particular ideology which its prominence was used to prescribe human actions. The legitimacy was designated by discourse, logical statement, and phrases in term of rationality. In the case of knowledge, for example, Copernicus stated that the path of the planet is circular. At that time, this proposition was validated as true (Kaewpetch, 2016). In Kalama sutta, grand narrative might be asserted either belief or person. For example, the last warning of the Buddha that consideration “This is our teacher” [samano no garu] is a person. Even though almost of Lyotard’s works did not concern more about ethics, his suggestion of incredulity towards grand narratives could be applied reputation of religiosity because religion is a kind of belief and grand narrative.

For Bauman’s remarks of moral condition and moral judgement in Kalama sutta, it found that new knowledge can be attained by sanctifying human and social values where both individuals and society evaluated beneficial gain. Moral conduct and moral responsibility are needed in multi-cultural society. But morality is self-constitution rather than legislative product of society where legislation did not sanctify human dignity. Similarly, moral judgement in Kalama sutta suggested that when you (Kalamas) yourselves know: “These things are good; these things are not blamable; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness,” enter on and abide in them’ (A.I. 189). Thai younger millennials and traditional believers probably uphold this attitude in order to avoid blasphemy and conflict.

## Conclusion

It is found that the cause of reputation of religiosity of Thai younger millennials is lack of critical faculty of moral justification. Then, it is not surprising that they denied moral principle in religion, including religion itself. The organization of religion also must adjust itself in the disruptive age in order to serve humanist core and freedom. The new religion in the

21<sup>st</sup> century should sanctify humanity because humanism is a belief that the unique nature of humans the most important thing in the world and it determines the meaning of everything that happens in the universe. The supreme good is the good of *Homo sapiens*. The unique nature of humans was known as ‘human right.’ The sects of humanist religion are liberal, socialist, and evolutionary humanism. Even though moral conduct cannot be guaranteed, the new religion in this sense protects the inner core, freedom, equality of each individuals. Furthermore, the supreme commandment of evolutionary humanism is to protect humankind from degenerating into subhumans and to encourage its evolution into superhumans. Bauman proposed that moral crisis of modern time has two dimensions: practical and theoretical dimension. He called moral uncertainty. In practical dimension, what we and other people do may have profound, far-reaching and long-lasting consequences, which we can neither see directly nor predict with precision. For Thai younger millennials, the strong argument against religiosity is not to reputation of religiosity but to consider the possibility of any moral justification. Taking the postmodernist perspective on ethical condition illustrated by Zygmunt Bauman and incredulity towards grand narrative proposed by Lyotard would be critical reaction to obsolescent moral justification. What occurred in Thai society, for Bauman, is the ambivalence of moral judgement where the Thai younger millennials confused because they believe in the advance of modernity and hope that all human conduct can be embraced by precise rules, especially math and science. For younger millennials, moral principle is neither universalizable nor certain. But in fact, moral conduct and moral responsibility are still needed.

To the author’s perspective, Thai younger millennials might accept humanist religion proposed by Yuval Noah Harari because it shares some aspects of universal value which sanctifies humans and all human can live together peacefully. The younger millennials still have right to claim that they are non-religious person until they have not harmed human right of others as same as they recognized. As a traditional religious believer, we cannot blame them as immoral person either. The new knowledge can be found in this paper is the possibility of new religion in the new paradigm shift where the core and freedom of each individual and equality within the species *Homo sapiens* have been met.

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