

# Creating “Good” Thai Citizens: Religions in Thai Textbooks

Kakanang Yavaprabhas

*Faculty of Sociology and Anthropology, Thammasat University*

*Pathum Thani 12120, Thailand*

*Email: kakanang.yava@gmail.com*

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## Abstract

Religions form part of the content in textbooks and are typically seen as standard knowledge. This study examines how religions appear in Thai textbooks, an important but relatively unexplored topic of study. Using an anthropological approach to textbooks and critical discourse analysis, I analyze 42 textbooks of primary school levels that are used for three subjects. I propose that there are three main discourses formed by religions: discourses about us and others; about goodness; and about Buddhism, Thai-ness, and the Thai state. I argue that these discourses show how the Thai state uses religions in the hope of creating desirable “good” citizens, while simultaneously stigmatizing those who fail to conform.

**Keywords:** textbooks, religions, Buddhism, Thai state, discourse analysis

## Introduction

If we ask students enrolled in Thai schools what materials they use for studying, one of the answers would be “textbooks.” Textbooks<sup>1</sup> are part of the modern Thai education system and are typically seen as providing standard knowledge. Importantly, this knowledge is seldom questioned or criticized in Thai society.

Scholars, however, have observed that the content of textbooks worldwide is not necessarily appropriate knowledge, in the sense of

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<sup>1</sup> “Textbooks” in this article refer to textbooks that are constituents of formal education from primary to high school level, and do not include higher education or adult education textbooks.

being factual and indisputable. Instead, the content is material that has been selected by those in power who have their own interests (Apple and Christian-Smith, 1991: 1-4). For example, Grinker (1998) proposes that presentations of North Korea in South Korean textbooks instill particular visions of nationalism, which help to legitimate the power of the South Korean government. GroBheim (2018) likewise shows that Vietnamese history textbooks selectively depict the past and do it in a way that gives political legitimacy to the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam. As for Thai textbooks, scholars point out that their contents are manipulated by the state (e.g. Panwichai, 1999; Iaosriwong, 2014). From the time of modern educational reform during the reign of King Rama V (r.1868-1910) textbooks have been constantly monitored by the state. Currently, although textbooks do not have to be written by those in the Ministry of Education, they must be checked and certified by the ministry to be officially available in the schools (Wangmee, 2000: 34).<sup>2</sup>

Some of the information presented in Thai textbooks concerns religions. Notably, the subject area is called “Buddhism” and not “Religions.” At the same time, Buddhism and other religions are covered in other subjects, particularly Social Studies, Religion and Culture (*Sangkomsueksa Satsana lae Watthanatham*) and Duties of Citizens (*Nathi Phonlamueang*). Students enrolled in Thai schools are required to study all of these subjects, and thus, their understanding of the world is likely to be formed, more or less, in relation to religions. Moreover, most Thais (93.5 percent) self-identify as Buddhists (National Statistical Office, 2020: 11). The Thai state, which governs the contents of textbooks, also has long had a close relationship with Buddhism (Tambiah, 1976).<sup>3</sup> Thus, it is intriguing to see how Buddhism and other religions are manifested in the textbooks.

Yet the topic of religions in Thai textbooks remains relatively unexplored. Thus far, academic works on Thai textbooks can be categorized into two main groups: 1) works that evaluate textbooks according to certain standards, most of which are set by the state, and

2) works that critically analyze ideologies and discourses in textbooks, particularly in relation to the state. Most of the works available belong to the first group and are in the field of education. One example is a study evaluating textbooks according to the National Economic and Social Development Plan (Jiamwilak, 2018). This group of works, regardless of its value, is not directly relevant to the present study. In the second group are works that critically analyze ideologies and discourses in textbooks in general (Iaosriwong, 2014; Sukwisith, 2011) and studies that focus on specific topics. To illustrate, there are studies focusing on nationalism in textbooks (Bang-Or, 2013; Chutintharanon et al., 2014; Sukata and Bunnag, 2015), on multiculturalism (Arphattananon, 2013), on political ideologies (Panwichai, 1999; Wangmee, 2000; Pungkanon, 2009; Nimnuan, 2016; Intarit, 2018), on discourses about children in Thai society (Panpothong, 2015), and on gender and sexuality (Ekthamsut, 2006; Thepphanich, 2016). Of all these studies, only Iaosriwong (2014) briefly pays attention to the topic of religions in textbooks when he examines discourses in textbooks in general. Notably, although Iaosriwong uses the word “religion” in his work, it is exclusively about Buddhism. The present study, therefore, aims to examine this rather neglected topic of religions not limited to Buddhism in Thai textbooks.

In this study, I use an anthropological approach to textbooks and critical discourse analysis to examine discourses formed by religions in textbooks and their importance. To clarify, what I mean by “an anthropological approach to textbooks” is that I adopt an anthropological approach to “texts” to study textbooks. In an anthropological view, “texts” refer to both written and verbal ones. Texts can be separate entities that are also entangled in their contexts (Barber, 2007: 3). Written texts, in particular, are embedded in their material forms, and thus should be understood in relation to their production and distribution (Barber, 2007: 212-213). Texts are “forms of action” that can be used to “do things” (Barber, 2007: 3), and are “social and historical facts whose forms, transformation, and dispersal can be studied empirically” (Barber, 2007: 200). Following this approach,

<sup>2</sup> Schools here refer to public schools, which constitute the majority.

<sup>3</sup> The form of Buddhism dominant in Thailand is Theravada.

I put “texts” in Thai textbooks in their historical and cultural contexts, as well as in the current national curriculum, which frames the “texts” in the textbooks analyzed.

In this study, I use critical discourse analysis because it focuses on discourses and ideology, as well as issues of power and inequality (Waring, 2018: 197-198). It is pertinent to this study, as it examines manifestations of religions in textbooks, which are governed by the state and thus can be used to the state’s own benefit. Of the three influential figures of critical discourse analysis—Fairclough, Dijk, and Gee—I follow Fairclough’s view. According to Fairclough, critical discourse analysis has three principal elements: relational, dialectical, and transdisciplinary (Fairclough, 2010: 3). It is relational as it does not focus on a discourse as an entity, but on social relations in the discourse and between the discourse and other entities, such as institutions (Fairclough, 2010: 3). It is also dialectical as these social relations are dialectical, and they have to be analyzed as such (Fairclough, 2010: 4). This focus makes critical discourse analysis transdisciplinary (Fairclough, 2010: 4). In Fairclough’s view, the social world is socially constructed, and discourses are vital in its construction (Fairclough, 2010: 4-5). These discourses tend to be influenced by those in power “to create the commonsense assumptions to their own advantages” (Waring, 2018: 188). The task of critical discourse analysts is to disclose this “naturalization” (Waring, 2018: 189), and, in turn, help lessen or correct the “social wrongs” emerging from unequal power relations (Fairclough, 2010: 7-8).

I chose primary school textbooks for this study because students at this level are at the age of developing critical thinking and ways of seeing the world. In total, I analyzed 42 textbooks of four publishers that are used for the following three subjects: 1) Social Studies, Religion and Culture, 2) Duties of Citizens, and 3) Buddhism.<sup>4</sup> They belong to

<sup>4</sup> For each subject, three publishers were selected. One of them is the Office of Welfare Promotion Commission for Teachers and Educational Personnel (OTEP) as it is the only publisher whose textbooks have been written by those in the Ministry of Education itself. Apart from OTEP, other publishers are the Institute of Academic Development (IAD) and Aksorn Charoenthat (ACT) (18 textbooks in total) for textbooks on Buddhism. For textbooks on two other subjects: 1) Social

the current national curriculum of 2008 (Basic Education Core Curriculum 2008 (B.E. 2551)).

In this article, I first place textbooks in general in their historical and cultural contexts, focusing on those relating to religions. I then explore textbooks analyzed according to their context, namely, the current national curriculum of 2008 in relation to religions, before looking at discourses formed by content relating to religions in the textbooks. I propose that there are three main groups of discourse formed by religions: 1) discourses about us and others; 2) those about goodness; and 3) those about Buddhism, Thai-ness, and the Thai state.

### **Textbooks, Religions, and Thai Education: Historical and Cultural Contexts**

When textbooks are placed in their historical contexts, we can see that they have always been in a close relationship with religions and education in Thailand. In the 17th century, the so-called first Thai textbook, *Jindamani*, appeared (Punnothok, 1999: 31-32). It was widely used in places providing education at that time: palaces for royals and Buddhist temples for commoners (excluding women and slaves). As commoners outnumbered royals, the primary educational sites were Buddhist temples, which had been functioning as such since the 13th century (Watson, 1973: 515). Monks themselves served as teachers, and Buddhist morals permeated the contents to be studied (H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, 2018: 4-5). After *Jindamani* was written, more textbooks were gradually produced, including more versions of *Jindamani* itself (Punnothok, 1999: 32-35). Notably, their uses remained as unstructured as the education system before the 19th century.

In the 19th century, important changes happened to education in Thai society. King Rama IV (r. 1851 to 1868) adopted Western-style education for royals and elites. For the first time, secular subjects like

Studies, Religion and Culture and 2) Duties of Citizens, there are ACT and McEducation as well as OTEP. OTEP and ACT include these two subjects together in one textbook, while McEducation separates them. In sum, there were 24 textbooks analyzed for these two subjects. In total, there were 42 textbooks in the three subjects analyzed.

mathematics and geography were taught (Suksod-Barger, 2014: 44-45). The king also embraced a new printing technology that had come to the country through an American missionary by ordering the government to use it for the public (Suksod-Barger, 2014: 44-45). The availability of the printing press meant that textbooks could be produced much more quickly and in much larger quantities than in the past when they had to be copied by hand. The real change in Thai education occurred in the reign of King Rama V with modern education reforms. First, school education was adopted for the first time in the Royal Palace and then gradually expanded to commoners. The first groups of schools for commoners were established in Buddhist temples, where male commoners traditionally received their education, and the first school for commoners was founded at Wat Mahannapharam Worawihan (Wat Mahanop) in 1884 (Wangmee, 2000: 11). Monks continued their roles as teachers in schools in this early period (H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, 2018: 7). While Buddhist temples and monks played important roles in education for male commoners, Christian missionaries played a part in initiating school education for female commoners (Jirasatiporn, 2017: 1; Suksod-Barger, 2014: 64-65). In 1874, female commoners could, for the first time, receive their formal education in a Christian school that was supported by the king (Suksod-Barger, 2014: 59).<sup>5</sup> Second, during this era, in 1887, the Department of Education was established and in 1892 became the Ministry of Public Instruction (*krasuang thammakan*) (the current Ministry of Education) (H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, 2018: 7; Punnothok, 1999: 136-138). It was the first time that official administrative bodies focusing on education were created. Third, importantly, there were attempts to standardize textbooks and their uses. In 1875, the king decreed that those teaching at Buddhist temples must all use similar textbooks, known to as “royal textbooks” (*baeprian luang*) (Punnothok, 1999: 127). Later, in 1895, the Ministry of Public Instruction released the first-ever written curriculum of Thai education, which included usage of textbooks at every level of study (Punnothok, 1999: 138-139).

<sup>5</sup> See Suksod-Barger (2014) and Jirasatiporn (2017) for further details on female education in Thailand.

In the reign of King Rama VI (r. 1910 to 1925) textbooks became more standardized as the Royal Department (*krom ratchabandit*) under the Ministry of Public Instruction came to be in charge of them in 1912 (Punnothok, 1999: 190). Importantly, in 1921 the king proclaimed the Law of Primary Education, which made education compulsory for all, requiring everyone aged 7-15 to attend school (Suksod-Barger, 2014: 117). This law also stated that schools for commoners must provide education in accordance with the ministry’s curriculum. This led to standardization and monopolization of education by the state (Pomrin, 2017: 18). Since then, all textbooks have had to either be produced or be approved by the ministry, which is now the Ministry of Education (Panwichai, 1999: 110).

Although current textbooks are not mainly used in Buddhist temples as they were in the 17th century when the first textbooks appeared, they are still not far removed from the past. Many contemporary schools are established in Buddhist temples and are called “Buddhist temple schools” (*rongrian wat*). In these schools, boys from poor families could become “temple boys” (*dek wat*), helping monks do errands, and in return receive standard school education (Fry, 2018: 64-65). In this way, we can see that textbooks, Buddhism, and Thai education still have close relationships with one another.

Moreover, looking at textbooks in their cultural contexts, we can see that traditional values attached to books in general may be linked to the long relationship between textbooks, religions, and Thai education. These traditional values concern the sacredness of books. Traditionally, books in Thai society have been regarded as sacred (Untekkheng, 2017; Watson, 1973: 521) and the giving of books to monks in temples is considered a way of making merit (Thai Junior Encyclopedia Foundation 2021). These books in temples were further used in the traditional education provided there (Thai Junior Encyclopedia Foundation 2021).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> In the past, before modern books, books in Thai society could generally be classified into two types: *bailan* books and *samud thai* books (Thai Junior Encyclopedia Foundation, 2021). *Bailan* books are incised on palm leaf, are usually written in Pali, and exclusively contain contents relating to Buddhism, especially the Buddha’s teachings, while *samud thai* books were originally written on accordian-folded paper manuscripts and contain various secular topics (Thai Junior Encyclopedia Foundation, 2021). Books used for textbooks at that time should be in the second category.

In the past, when a person wanted to study, he had to first pay ritual respect to textbooks before studying (Untekkheng, 2017). Even at the present time, textbooks still play a part in the national annual ceremony of paying homage to teachers (*phithi wai khru*) (Untekkheng, 2017). There are also traditional beliefs relating to books that underlie their sacredness. For example, books should not be stepped upon or stepped over. If one happens to do so, one must pay respect to the books.<sup>7</sup> While these beliefs are debatable in modern society, they highlight the importance of textbooks and their contents.

### **Textbooks, Religions, and the Current National Curriculum (2008)**

After having placed textbooks in general in their historical and cultural contexts, the present study now analyzes them in “contexts,” namely, “the national curriculum.” The focus is still on contexts related to religions. Since modern educational reform began, the current Ministry of Education has been implementing various curricula to standardize the quality of education nationally.<sup>8</sup> Each curriculum includes deciding which subjects should be studied at each level and the kind of content that should be in each subject’s textbooks. After the 1932 revolution, which made education more available for all,<sup>9</sup> seven national curricula, including those at the primary school level, have been implemented one by one (1937, 1948, 1955, 1960, 1978, 2001, 2008). The current national curriculum being considered here is the most recent one of 2008.

Looking at this 2008 national curriculum, we can see that religions, particularly Buddhism, permeate it.<sup>10</sup> The curriculum states

<sup>7</sup> Growing up in Thailand, I have regularly heard about these folk beliefs. Netizens also discuss them on web boards. For instance, there are topics such as “Who also feels guilty stepping on books?” (Pantip Web Boards, 2017) and “Where do beliefs forbidding a person to step over books come from? [I] get in conflicts with a friend because of it” (Pantip Web Boards, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Over time there have been various curricula with diverse names. In this article, I refer to them all as “national curricula” as they function similarly to guide on what everyone should be taught and have learned in the nation’s school systems.

<sup>9</sup> There was the 1921 Law of Primary Education that makes education legally available for all, as mentioned. However, it was not until three years after the 1932 revolution in 1935 that this law was nationally implemented (H.R.H Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, 2018: 9).

<sup>10</sup> See Preechapermpasit 2013 for the development of Buddhism as a subject in national curricula.

that one of its five overall objectives is to create students who “are moral, ethical and have desirable characteristics. Have self-esteem. Have self-discipline and follow the Buddha’s teachings or those of one’s own faith. Adhere to the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (*pratya settakit pho phiang*)” (Ministry of Education, 2008: 5). The curriculum also lists the eight “desirable characteristics” of students, one of which is “to love nation, religion, and king” (*chat, sat, kasat*) (Ministry of Education, 2008: 7).

Moreover, the curriculum sets standard learning outcomes as objectives for every learning domain and study level. Here I discuss the learning domain of “religion(s), morals, and ethics,” which is the most relevant to this study. In this domain, the curriculum sets two main standard learning outcomes with “study level indicators” (*tua chiwat chan pi*), specifying the knowledge and skills that students should know and be capable of after completing each level. The first main learning outcome is to “know and understand history, the importance of the Dharma, or those of one’s own faith, as well as of other religions. Have the right kind of faith. Adhere to and follow the Dharma in order to live together peacefully” (Ministry of Education, 2008: 138). Its indicators mainly concern Buddhism, some ending with phrases like “or a religion that one believes in,” to be more inclusive. Interestingly, there is an indicator stating that students should be able to “analyze the importance of Buddhism as the national religion or the importance of the religion that one believes in” (Ministry of Education, 2008: 138). This indicator shows that only Buddhism is regarded as the national religion of Thailand. The second main learning outcome is to “understand, be aware of, be a good believer. Help (in) sustaining Buddhism or the religion that one believes in” (Ministry of Education, 2008: 144). Its indicators concern being religious, going to religious sites, participating in religious rituals, and observing important religious days. These two standard learning outcomes clearly demonstrate that students are expected to be religious. They have to be religious in the “good” and “right” way, which is undoubtedly defined by the state. They also have to realize that Buddhism alone, of all religions, is “the national religion.”

All textbooks to be used in schools currently must be certified by the Ministry of Education so that their contents are synchronized with the 2008 national curriculum. Undoubtedly, the curriculum’s objectives influence the way religions appear and form the textbooks’ discourses.

### **Discourses Formed by Religions in Textbooks**

Here I explore how religions form discourses in the textbooks by looking at the word, “religion(s),” and words signifying religions—“Buddhism,” “Christianity,” “Islam,” and “Judaism”—to see how they compose sentences, relate to their contexts, and form discourses. Overall, the words, “Christianity,” “Islam,” and “Judaism” occur only rarely compared to the words, “religion(s),” and “Buddhism,” in any grammatical form, and they do not form discourses.

In the textbooks analyzed, I found seven main recurring discourses formed by religions, as follows:

- 1) Associating “we”/ “us” with Buddhism
- 2) Associating “Thais” with Buddhism
- 3) Creating otherness for religions that are not Buddhism
- 4) Associating goodness with religions, especially Buddhism
- 5) Associating Buddhism with peacefulness in society and the prosperity of the nation
- 6) Associating Buddhism with Thai-ness
- 7) Presenting Buddhism as a national institution and the national religion

I further categorized these discourses into three groups, according to their focus: 1) we/us and others (discourses 1, 2, and 3); 2) goodness (discourse 4); and 3) Buddhism, Thai-ness, and the Thai nation (discourses 6, 7, and 8).

#### **Discourses about “Us” and “Others”: “We Are Thai Buddhists”**

In all the textbooks I studied, Buddhism is associated with “us” and being Thai, while other religions are ordinarily portrayed as “the others.” For example, OTEP, which presents contents through the narratives of

various characters, depicts all their characters as Thai Buddhists. Phrases such as “all students are born into Buddhist families” (Buddhism, level 6, p.12) and “Thais have to strictly follow Buddhist etiquette” (Buddhism, level 5, p.1) are also common in the textbooks. In rare occurrences where other religions are presented, their otherness is simultaneously created. For instance, a young Buddhist character asks her father, “I have a friend who has blue eyes and blond hair. He invites me to church on Sunday. Why should he go to church?” (Social Sciences and Duties of Citizens, level 2, p. 32). “Blue eyes and blond hair” are, notably, not common features among Thais.

ACT often names their units of study, “Our religion,” and their contents are limited to Buddhism (see, for example, Social Sciences and Duties of Citizens, Unit 1 of levels 1 and 5). Phrases such as, “As we are Thais and Buddhists...” (Social Sciences and Duties of Citizens, level 2, p. 4), “What should we do to be good Buddhists?” (Buddhism, level 4, p. 78), and “Buddhism makes Thais feel like they belong to the same group” (Social Sciences and Duties of Citizens level 5, p. 3) are also common. Similar types of units and phrases can also be found in the other two publishers: McEducation and IAD.

These discourses concern creating “we” or “us” and “others.” Those who are counted as “we” or “us,” – Thais – have to be Buddhists, while those who do not uphold similar religious beliefs are subtly presented as “others.” While as many as 93.5 percent of Thais self-identify as Buddhists (National Statistical Office, 2020: 11), the other 6.5 percent are also Thai citizens. Following the approach that sees texts as having the power to shape the social world, these discourses do not create “we/us” and “others” only in the world of textbooks. They also play a part in creating “we/us” and “others” in the social world. The 6.5 percent is thus framed as others in society—“others” who are not “we/us” and not Thais, just because they are not Buddhists.

#### **Discourse about Goodness: “All Religions are Good”**

In all of the textbooks that I analyzed, goodness is closely associated with religions, especially Buddhism. For example, OTEP has phrases

such as “religions are spiritual guidance that makes everyone behave as a good person” (Social Sciences and Duties of Citizens, level 5, p. 49). In its Buddhism textbooks, the connection to goodness and particularly to Buddhism is more obvious. A level 3 textbook describes “a child who is far from temples” (*dek klai wat*) as a child who rarely goes to temples and, as a result, lacks spiritual guidance and becomes a bad person (Buddhism, level 3, p. 43-44).

In McEducation’s textbooks, phrases that link goodness with religions are common. For example, “all religions teach people to be good people” (Social Sciences level 6, p. 273) and, “Religions are spiritual guidance that teaches people to do good things” (Duties of Citizens, level 3, p. 20). However, several times the textbooks reiterate that Buddhism is the religion specifically tied to goodness. For instance, a unit of study in level 2 is named “Seeking Goodness” and its contents concern only Buddhism (Social Sciences, level 2, unit 11). ACT and IAD publishers also include similar types of phrases.

The discourse here equates goodness with religions, particularly Buddhism, and it can be vital to the moral and ethical formation of students using the textbooks. Associating goodness with religion implies that being a good person means having to be a religious person. This may not sound surprising, considering that one purpose of this curriculum is to create a person who has religion in his or her life. However, tying goodness to religion as in this discourse can be problematic in many respects. First, because a good person is associated with being a religious person, a non-religious person can be seen as “not good.” While less than 0.1 percent of the population self-identify as non-religious in Thai society (National Statistical Office, 2020: 11), they do exist. These non-religious people can be viewed suspiciously by a society that identifies goodness with religion(s) as in this discourse. Furthermore, this discourse of associating goodness with religions can impede critical thinking about anything related to religions. In any case, it is hard to criticize “goodness.” Thus, people can overlook the socio-political dimensions of religions, which can lead to dangerous situations, such as monopolization of power by religious organizations.

### **Discourses about Buddhism and Thai State: “Buddhism is the National Religion and Indispensable Institution of the State”**

In all the textbooks analyzed, Buddhism is regularly associated with peacefulness in society and prosperity of the nation as well as Thai-ness. It is also commonly presented as a national institution and national religion. Notably, only Buddhism, not other religions, is tied to Thai-ness and the Thai nation in the textbooks. Phrases such as, “We should all follow the Buddha’s teachings and then our society will be peaceful” (Social Sciences and Duties of Citizens, level 1, p.1) and, “Buddhism’s Dharma is a principle for developing the nation and making it peaceful” (Buddhism, level 5, p. 2) in ACT’s textbooks are examples of associating Buddhism with peacefulness and prosperity of society. As for equating Buddhism with Thai-ness, phrases like “...such uniqueness of Thais stems from believing in Buddhism” (Social Science, level 4, p. 177) and “Buddhism is an important foundation for Thai culture...” (Social Science, level 6, p. 221) in McEducation’s textbooks are examples. Buddhism is also regularly presented in the textbooks as a national institution and national religion. For instance, OTEP uses phrases such as, “Buddhists have to know and understand the value of Buddhism as the national religion of Thailand” (Buddhism, level 1, p. 43), and one of the characteristics of those who uphold Buddhism is to “be loyal to the nation, religion, and king” (Buddhism, level 3, p. 119).

The discourses here indicate the place of Buddhism in the eyes of the Thai state. It is clear that Buddhism is viewed as having a close relationship with the state as its main institution. These discourses reflect and strengthen the already close relationship between Buddhism and the Thai state, which has long been recognized by scholars (e.g. Tambiah, 1976). An exemplar of this close relation is the dominant ideology of “nation, religion, and king” (*chat, sat, kasat*), which also appears in these discourses. In this ideology, the word “religion” refers exclusively to Buddhism, which is glorified as “the religion that is superior to other religions in this world” (Sattayanurak, 2005: 4). Importantly, this ideology is also the heart of the dominant discourse of Thai-ness, which is normally thought of as real, unchangeable, and

existing continuously from the past (Sattayanurak, 2005: 3, 6-8, 26), although it is actually continuously constructed, and its construction is governed by elites (see, in particular, Sattayanurak, 2005). Moreover, the ideology further links to a particular image of nation and nationalism that is deemed, “Royal nationalism” (*Racha chatniyom*), in which the king is the heart of the nation along with Buddhism (see, particularly, Winichakul, 2016). In brief, the discourses show that the Thai state sees Buddhism as a part of itself and uses it to create a particular sense of belonging and nationalism.

The vision and action of the state here, however, can be worrisome in two ways. First, the close relationship between Buddhism and the state is in contrast to liberal thought. Liberals have long proposed the separation of religion and state to prevent the use of religion as a justification for power holders (Thawisak, 2017: 158, 171-172). Without separation of Buddhism from the state, Buddhism can become the state’s tool rather than a means of spiritual guidance.<sup>11</sup> Second, associating only Buddhism with the nation and Thai-ness suggests that it is superior to other religions.<sup>12</sup> Simultaneously, it undoubtedly creates the otherness of different religions apart from Buddhism.

## Conclusion

We can see that textbooks, Thai education, and religions, particularly Buddhism, have long been in a close relationship. The national curriculum of 2008, as another “context” for textbooks of this study, is also permeated with religions, especially Buddhism. In analyzing discourses formed by the content about religions in the textbooks, I found

<sup>11</sup> One of the most prominent Thai thinkers who proposes the separation of Buddhism and the state in Thailand is Suraphot Thawisak (see, for example, Thawisak, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Notably, this superiority of Buddhism to other religions is underlined in the textbooks through the use of language. The word for “religion” in Thai is “*satsana*” and all religions, except Buddhism, appear in the textbooks with the word *satsana* at the beginning. For example, Christianity is “*satsana chris*” and Islam is “*satsana itsalam*.” Buddhism, however, is always referred to as “*phra phuttha satsana*” and not merely as “*satsana phut*.” “*Phra*” is the word meaning “excellent or sublime” (*prasoet*). The word “*phra phuttha satsana*,” thus, implies that Buddhism is a sublime religion, superior to other religions that are not prefaced by this word.

that there are three main discourses: 1) those about “us” and “others,” 2) about goodness, and 3) about Buddhism, Thai-ness, and the Thai state.

Notably, these main discourses are relatively synchronized with some previous scholarship on Thai textbooks that focuses on different dimensions. In the same way, they reveal that textbooks have the potential to achieve the following three goals: 1) creating “us” and “others,” 2) instilling particular types of nationalism, and 3) creating a preferred version of citizens of the state. Regarding the first goal, existing scholarship shows that textbooks can create ideas about “us” and “others” in ways different from those in this study. To illustrate, textbooks are reported to refer to people in neighboring countries as “others” who are inferior to “us,” Thais (Chutintharanon et al., 2014), and to construct “Isan people” (people in the Northeastern region) as “a homogenous ethnic group” and as “the other,” who are different from and inferior to “us” (Mangkhang, 2017).<sup>13</sup> Second, existing works reveal that textbooks can instill certain types of nationalism in students. To reiterate, research has shown that textbooks inculcate the desire to uphold ethnic nationalism in students: the belief that being ethnic Thai is best and superior to others (Bang-Or, 2013; Chutintharanon et al., 2014; Sukata and Bunnag, 2015), and royal nationalism: believing that the institution of the king is central to the Thai nation as conveyed in the ideology of “nation, religion, and king” (Bang-Or, 2013; Sukata and Bunnag, 2015). Finally, textbooks are reported in existing scholarship as aiming to create the preferred type of citizen. Textbooks are seen as the apparatus of the state for the political socialization of students (Wangmee, 2000; Pungkanon, 2009; Nimnuan, 2016), making them into citizens that the state wants. Notably, through time, the main characteristics of citizens that the state wishes to create remain loyalty to the institutions of nationhood, religion, and king (Wangmee, 2000; Pungkanon, 2009; Nimnuan, 2016; Intarit, 2018), and particularly the latter (Panwichai, 1999). These preferred characteristics of citizens are the traits of royal nationalism, discussed by scholars who focus on

<sup>13</sup> In fact, people who live in the Northeastern region consist of those from diverse ethnic groups; they are not homogenous at all.

nationalism in textbooks. The present study further adds that textbooks can also create “us” and “others” in terms of religions. They do so by highlighting the place of Buddhism ideologically through the way it is linked to the Thai-ness and prosperity of the nation, and show how religions, in particular, are used in the attempt to create the state’s preferred citizens.

Indeed, formal education in schools is regarded as one of the most important tools of the state to create desirable citizens (Lazar, 2016). Textbooks, monitored and monopolized by the state, are vital educational resources that can be used by the state to disseminate its preferred discourses. This is particularly important as textbooks’ discourses have the power to shape the reality of the social world and to create “the commonsense assumptions” of citizens. Moreover, the historical and cultural contexts of Thai textbooks enhance the possibility of these discourses to achieve naturalization.

Here, the discourses formed by religions in textbooks reveal that “good” citizens of the state must be religious, preferably Buddhist, and have a particular sense of goodness and national identity. They should equate goodness with religion, and thus not question anything related to religion. They should also believe in the ideology of *chat*, *sat*, *kasat*, and see it as goodness and a necessity for Thai-ness and the Thai state. I argue that the way in which religions form discourses in textbooks shows how the state uses them in hoping to create its preferred version of “good” citizens. At the same time, it stigmatizes those who fail to conform as “others,” who are not morally good and simply are not “us.” In presenting this argument and revealing these discourses formed by religions, I hope to help disclose the possible naturalization of these discourses and raise questions about the appropriateness of the way in which religions are currently manifested in Thai textbooks.

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