

# Youth Spirituality and Human Dignity in Buddhism and Catholicism

Venerable Kalalgoda Sudarshika

Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies,  
Sri Lanka International Buddhist Academy (SIBA), Kandy

[dilmihansani2000@gmail.com](mailto:dilmihansani2000@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

This study explores how Buddhist and Catholic youth negotiate faith, morality, and belonging within the complex realities of a pluralistic and globalized age. Drawing on qualitative insights, the research examines how young adherents of both traditions reinterpret spiritual teachings amid secular influences, digital engagement, and multicultural exposure. Findings reveal a pronounced movement toward personalized spirituality rather than strict adherence to institutional doctrines. Buddhist youth emphasize mindfulness, compassion, and self-cultivation, while Catholic youth foreground relational ethics, confession, and community service as means of spiritual growth. Both groups encounter tensions between traditional moral norms and contemporary issues such as LGBTQ+ inclusion, technological influence, and academic pressure. Yet, communal participation through rituals, peer groups, and online faith spaces that serves as a vital anchor for moral and emotional stability. The study also highlights an emergent interfaith curiosity and dialogical openness, suggesting a generational shift toward inclusive and reflexive spirituality. These insights contribute to broader discussions on youth religiosity, interreligious dialogue, and the reconfiguration of faith in a pluralistic modern world.

## Introduction

In the twenty-first century, humanity finds itself amid a profound transformation of religious and moral consciousness. The processes of globalization, technological advancement, and intercultural exchange have reshaped the ways in which individuals encounter and express faith. Particularly among the younger generations, spirituality is no longer confined to institutionalized religious structures but is increasingly characterized by personal interpretation, hybrid identities, and experiential forms of belief. Within this pluralistic landscape, young people must navigate a multiplicity of worldviews, moral expectations, and communal affiliations often balancing inherited traditions with contemporary sensibilities shaped by secularism, consumer culture, and global communication networks.

The dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity has brought new complexity to religious belonging. While secularization theories once predicted the decline of organized religion, recent scholarship suggests that spirituality is being reconfigured rather than erased. Youth, in particular, are reinterpreting religious doctrines in ways that align with personal authenticity, social engagement, and emotional well-being. This shift underscores a critical need to examine how spiritual and moral frameworks are being reconstructed within living traditions. Against this backdrop, Buddhism and Catholicism emerge as two profound yet contrasting systems of thought and practice, each offering distinct understandings of moral cultivation, community life, and transcendence. Despite their historical, doctrinal, and ritual differences, both traditions share a commitment to ethical transformation, compassion, and communal harmony. Their global presence, particularly in multicultural societies, renders them ideal for comparative inquiry into how young people negotiate faith in an era of cultural pluralism.

This research explores how contemporary Buddhist and Catholic youth experience, interpret, and embody their spirituality in a rapidly changing social context. It investigates how these individuals conceptualize moral values, construct meaning, and cultivate belonging amid competing ideologies and digital influences. Through comparative analysis, the study seeks to uncover the continuities and divergences in how young practitioners from both traditions integrate their religious teachings with the lived realities of modern life. It pays special attention to how digital media, interfaith dialogue, and global education shape moral reasoning and spiritual engagement among youth. In this sense, the study not only examines faith as a doctrinal or institutional phenomenon but as a lived and evolving experience that intersects with identity, ethics, and community.

Furthermore, this inquiry situates youth spirituality within the broader discourse of religious pluralism. It questions how exposure to multiple belief systems influences young Buddhists' and Catholics' understanding of moral responsibility, social justice, and personal purpose. In multicultural societies where religious coexistence is both a challenge and an opportunity, the capacity to sustain faith while engaging empathetically with difference becomes an essential aspect of moral maturity. By exploring how Buddhist and Catholic youths negotiate these tensions between tradition and modernity, individuality and community, belief and doubt and this research contributes to a deeper understanding of spiritual resilience and adaptive religiosity in the modern age.

Ultimately, the study aims to illuminate how young people within these two faith traditions reimagine spirituality as a dynamic and dialogical process. It reveals how their search for

meaning transcends rigid orthodoxy, emphasizing relational belonging, moral reflection, and the desire for social harmony. By engaging with these lived experiences, the research offers valuable insights into the evolving nature of faith in a pluralistic age, where spiritual commitment must coexist with diversity, critical thinking, and global interconnectedness.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach, utilizing thematic analysis of in-depth discussions, field observations, and content analysis of youth-centered religious texts, sermons, and online platforms. Data was collected from selected Buddhist viharas and Catholic parishes in urban multicultural settings in Sri Lanka, where youth engagement in religious and interfaith activities is evident. The focus remained on open-ended discussions rather than structured interviews, encouraging natural sharing of thoughts on spirituality, ethical decisions, and belonging.

## **Research Problem**

While extensive research exists on religious doctrines and traditional practices, there is a notable gap in comparative studies examining how contemporary Buddhist and Catholic youth construct spiritual and moral meaning in pluralistic societies. Questions arise as to how these youth reconcile religious teachings with modern moral dilemmas, how they form ethical identities in relation to community norms, and whether traditional religious structures adequately support their spiritual and social needs. The research problem centers on the lack of nuanced understanding regarding how young followers in both traditions perceive and embody faith within multicultural, interconnected environments.

## **Literature Review**

Prior studies on youth religiosity (Smith & Denton, 2005; Possamai, 2018) highlight the fluid and negotiated nature of spiritual identity among young people. Buddhist youth have been studied in terms of mindfulness practices and lay devotionalism (McMahan, 2008), while Catholic youth research emphasizes sacramental life and moral teachings (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006). However, few works have addressed the lived experiences of youth across these traditions in tandem, particularly in relation to communal belonging and moral agency. Emerging research also emphasizes the importance of dialogue, digital influence, and the decline of institutional affiliation (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005), which further informs this study.

## **Results and discussion**

Preliminary findings of this comparative inquiry reveal that both Buddhist and Catholic youth exhibit a marked inclination toward personalized expressions of faith, signaling a shift from institutional religiosity to individual spirituality. This pattern aligns with global sociological trends that describe the “subjunctivization of religion,” wherein individuals prioritize inner experience and personal conviction over dogmatic adherence or clerical authority. Among the Buddhist participants, spirituality was primarily understood through experiential and introspective dimensions that centering on meditation, mindfulness, and compassion as guiding principles for ethical living and psychological well-being. These practices, rather than formal monastic rituals or canonical study, were perceived as accessible pathways for cultivating peace, self-awareness, and moral sensitivity in a complex modern world. Catholic youth, by contrast, framed their spiritual engagement through relational and communal ethics, emphasizing the significance of service, forgiveness, and confession. These elements were not merely ritualistic but interpreted as mechanisms for moral renewal and emotional reconciliation within both personal and social contexts. Thus, while both groups diverge in doctrinal emphasis, they share a common trajectory toward internalizing and reinterpreting faith in ways that affirm personal meaning and authenticity.

A recurring theme among participants was the tension between traditional moral frameworks and contemporary socio-cultural realities. Both Buddhist and Catholic youth expressed difficulty reconciling inherited moral norms with emerging ethical questions, particularly those concerning LGBTQ+ inclusion, digital exposure, and the pressures of academic competition. These issues often surfaced as sites of moral negotiation, where religious teachings were reassessed in light of personal experience, empathy, and social awareness. Buddhist youth tended to approach such dilemmas through the lens of compassion and non-judgment, invoking the principle of *karuṇā* to navigate ethical ambiguity. Catholic youth, on the other hand, reflected a struggle to harmonize Church teachings on sexuality and morality with evolving human-rights discourses and inclusivity movements. In both cases, these negotiations demonstrate how young believers are not passive recipients of doctrine but active interpreters of moral truth, constructing hybrid moral identities that bridge traditional ethics with pluralistic and humanistic sensibilities.

Despite these challenges, communal belonging emerged as a crucial stabilizing factor in the spiritual lives of participants. For Buddhist youth, engagement in temple activities,

meditation retreats, and online Dhamma communities provided spaces for reflection and shared moral dialogue. These communal settings functioned as vital nodes of moral reinforcement, enabling young practitioners to sustain mindfulness and compassion amidst secular distractions. Catholic youth likewise found a sense of belonging within parish communities, youth groups, and social service initiatives. These spaces offered emotional support and moral accountability, fostering a collective identity rooted in shared faith and service. Importantly, both Buddhist and Catholic youths utilized digital platforms, including online prayer groups, YouTube Dhamma talks, and Instagram faith collectives as extensions of spiritual community, transforming the digital sphere into a locus of both devotion and dialogue. This digital religiosity reflects a new mode of communal engagement in which traditional rituals coexist with virtual participation, redefining how faith communities function in the age of technological mediation.

An especially noteworthy observation was the emergence of interfaith curiosity and dialogical openness among participants from both traditions. Many youth expressed respect for alternative spiritual paths and showed willingness to learn from other religious worldviews. This pluralistic orientation signals a generational shift toward what might be termed “inclusive spirituality” that a form of religiosity characterized by empathy, openness, and cross-traditional resonance. Buddhist youth frequently referenced admiration for the ethical commitment and social engagement seen in Catholic social teaching, while Catholic youth voiced appreciation for Buddhist mindfulness practices and their psychological benefits. Such mutual curiosity reveals a growing interreligious literacy that transcends sectarian boundaries and encourages collaborative moral understanding. This evolution of faith consciousness suggests that the younger generation is fostering dialogical religiosity, in which engagement with difference becomes a vital component of spiritual maturity rather than a threat to doctrinal purity.

These insights bear significant implications for faith-based education, interreligious dialogue, and pastoral strategies in pluralistic societies. The findings suggest that educational programs must acknowledge youth’s need for interpretive freedom while offering frameworks that connect moral reflection with lived experience. Similarly, interfaith initiatives can leverage this emerging openness to promote empathy, peacebuilding, and shared moral vision. For religious institutions, the results invite a re-examination of pastoral care that encouraging leaders to create spaces where questions, doubts, and diverse perspectives can coexist without fear of exclusion. Ultimately, the study underscores that faith among youth in the pluralistic age is not diminishing but transforming from rigid institutional allegiance to dynamic,

reflective, and inclusive modes of spiritual practice that resonate with the moral and existential realities of contemporary life.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this comparative inquiry into contemporary Buddhist and Catholic youth spirituality reveals that faith in the modern pluralistic world is undergoing a profound transformation rather than a decline. The study demonstrates that young adherents are actively reinterpreting their religious traditions through the lens of personal experience, ethical reflection, and social awareness. Instead of passively inheriting doctrines, they are engaging in what can be described as reflexive religiosity which a process of questioning, re-evaluating, and reimagining faith to align with the demands of a globalized, technologically mediated, and morally diverse world. Across both traditions, there is a discernible shift from rigid institutional conformity toward a more personalized and experiential spirituality grounded in compassion, service, and self-understanding. Buddhist youth articulate their faith through practices of mindfulness and moral self-cultivation, while Catholic youth emphasize relational ethics, community service, and sacramental participation as modes of moral and spiritual growth. These distinctive expressions converge in their shared aspiration for authenticity and inner coherence amid the dissonance of modern life.

At the same time, the findings illuminate the challenges that arise when traditional moral frameworks encounter the ethical complexities of the contemporary era. Issues such as LGBTQ+ inclusion, digital morality, and the pressures of performance-oriented education test the adaptability of religious ethics to new social realities. Yet, rather than signaling a crisis of faith, these tensions often become catalysts for moral innovation and dialogue. The ways in which youth negotiate these dilemmas illustrate their capacity for ethical creativity that the ability to draw from religious principles while engaging critically with modern moral discourse. Moreover, the study highlights that belonging continues to be a vital dimension of youth spirituality. Participation in community rituals, volunteer initiatives, and online faith networks provides emotional grounding and moral orientation in an increasingly fragmented world. These shared spaces, whether physical or digital—nurture a sense of connectedness that transcends individualism and fosters collective moral consciousness.

Perhaps most significantly, this research underscores the emergence of interfaith empathy and dialogical spirituality among the younger generation. Exposure to pluralistic environments and digital interconnectivity has encouraged Buddhist and Catholic youth to appreciate the moral and contemplative insights of other faiths. This openness points toward a new paradigm

of religiosity defined not by exclusivity, but by relational understanding and mutual respect. In this sense, young people are not merely inheritors of religious traditions but architects of a new spiritual ethos that one that harmonizes fidelity to one's own faith with recognition of the shared human search for meaning, justice, and transcendence. The implications of these findings are far-reaching: religious education and pastoral care must evolve to support this integrative spirituality, fostering spaces where doubt, diversity, and dialogue are embraced as pathways to deeper faith. Ultimately, the study affirms that in the pluralistic age, spirituality among youth remains a vital force of moral creativity and communal renewal, a bridge between tradition and transformation, rooted in compassion and sustained by the quest for authentic belonging.

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