

TRANSFORMATION OF RELIGION IN VIETNAM'S PUBLIC LIFE: THE CASE OF CHRISTIANITY

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Introduction

In the last two decades we see really a boom in religious worship in Vietnam. Religions are becoming more visible. Everywhere there are new and newly renovated pagodas, temples and churches. In addition there are hundreds of tourist and temple festivals. There are religious transformations in public rituals, in the movies and in the other arts as well as the mass media. Not only peasants, intelligentsia and workers who were typical worshippers in traditional Vietnamese society, but now also officials and businessmen are active in worship. On the other side, the Communist party of Vietnam (CPV) step by step departs from Marxist doctrine and carries out a relatively open policy on religious affairs since

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its 24th Resolution in 1990 as a consequence of the collapse of the Communist block. In many cases the authorities have compromised or even co-operated with churches and faiths, especially the Buddhists.

But despite the fact that the relationship between the authorities and some religious organizations in Vietnam is radically improved, it is not always clear in the case of Christianity. What are the perspectives of religion in Vietnamese society and just what is the relationship between the authorities and religious organizations in Vietnam? Which role do the cultural-religious factors really play in state policy on religious affairs? These are some of the questions we hope to answer in this paper seen from a cultural-religious viewpoint.

I. Traditional non-Christian religions and faiths in public places

Vietnam is a multi-religious country. Religion played a very important role in Vietnamese history and culture. Even ancestor worship had its origins before the Sinization and Indization in the country. In the first centuries of the Christian era Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism were widespread in Vietnam. Buddhism was a state religion of Dai Viet from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. King Tran Nhan Tong (1258-1308) was a founder of Vietnamese Zen Buddhism or *Truc Lam Yen Tu*.

From the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries the role of state ideology was replaced by Confucianism. In reality neither Buddhism nor Confucianism, but a syncretism of the “three teachings” (*tam giao*) of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism was the character of the traditional spiritual life of the Vietnamese people.¹⁾ In North Vietnam Mahayana Buddhism was widespread and under the influence of Sinization. In South Vietnam where Indization was stronger Theravada Buddhism predominated.

1) See: Ta Chi Dai Truong, Than, *Nguoi va Dat Viet* (Ghosts, Man and Vietnamese Land), Nha Xuat Ban Van hoa Thong tin, Ha Noi, 2006.

Generally polytheism and secularism bring about tolerance of the Vietnamese in their worship, especially in North Vietnam where Mahayana Buddhism dominates. Tran Trong Kim had it right when he wrote: “The Vietnamese are often not deep in their heart. They believe reverently in ghosts. They are active in worshipping, but not devout with any religion.”²⁾ In any case in history as well as in the present we could not discuss the Vietnamese traditional culture without its religions and faiths.

But meanwhile there are conflicts between adherents of different religions in most Southeast Asian nations such as between Muslims and Catholics in the Philippines, between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia, and between Muslims and Buddhists in Thailand and Myanmar. Vietnam has its own problems. Here the relationship between the native authorities and religious organizations were not always positive. The situation became very serious when Christianity was introduced in modern times. There was a severe Christian persecution under the Nguyen dynasty. There were massacres of Catholics at the time of the movement of killing Frenchmen and Catholics at the end of nineteenth century. The relationship between the authorities and religious organizations is not always smooth in the post-colonial period, either. In the case of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in South Vietnam there was discrimination against Buddhism.³⁾

The situation was even worse with the Communist regime when any role for religion and faith in social development, including the role of Buddhism, was denied. Under the influence of Marxist doctrine the authorities considered religion as something very negative simply because these Communists were not capable of differentiating it from superstition. Until the 1980s religious life in Vietnam was a drab picture. All religious activities were limited: hundred of pagodas, temples, village common houses and other places of worship were used as department stores,

2) Tran Trong Kim, *Viet Nam su luoc* (Vietnam: A Short History), Publishing House of Da Nang, Da Nang, 2003, p. 15.

3) See: Piero Gheddo, *Buddhisten und Katholiken in Vietnam*, Verlag Pfeiffer Muenchen, 1970; Thich Nhat Tu, Nguyen Kha (ed.), *Phap nan Phat giao 1963, Nguyen nhan, ban chat va tien trinh* (Accident of Buddhist Dharma in 1963: Origins, Nature and Process), Nha xuất bản Hong Duc, Ho Chi Minh City, 2013.

school classrooms or anything similarly secular. Some places of worship were destroyed in various ways during the Vietnam war and then later by the “collectivizing” policies of the regime in the countryside. Under the “left” banner of anti-imperialism (*phan de*) and anti-feudalism (*phan phong*) the authorities struggled against religion in different ways. Except from the Marxist theory all other doctrines, including traditional Confucian and Buddhist teachings, were underestimated or denied. The National Assembly in February 1953 had approved the abolition of native faith worship with the purpose of building a so-called New Socialist Society. These policies were actively carried out during the land reform and collectivizing programs. Many temples, churches and village common houses' land and property (in some case even Bibles, Buddhist sacred texts and paintings) were confiscated and destroyed. The period of a half-century after the 1945 establishment of the DRV was an unusually dark time for religion in Vietnam.

The situation changed radically only since the 1990s in consequence of the collapse of the Communist block. This was the first time the Vietnamese government could carry out its relatively independent policy in religious affairs. Religion is now more and more visible. There is a transformation of attitude regarding religious worship in the public sphere, in movies and in the mass media. There are thousands of pagodas, temples, and newly built or renovated churches in these last decades. Some of them have a massive architecture. Some religions, such as Buddhism and the traditional faiths, have a definite increase in the number of their foundations over the last two decades.

According to what follows in table One, we see an increasing number of pagodas, temples, and other worship centers between 2001 and 2005 in Vietnam. Buddhism and some of its branches show an increase in numbers of congregants as well as in numbers of places of worship.⁴⁾

4) See: Government Committee for Religious Affairs, *White Book on Religions and Faiths and Government Policy in Regard to Religious Affairs in Vietnam*, Hanoi 2006.

Table One. Registered Religious Followers, Clergy and Religious Establishments

	2001	2005
1. Buddhism		
Registered Followers	9,038,345	about 10,000,000
Places of worship	14,043	16,972
Training centers	37	40
Buddhist Institutes	3 (1,000 Buddhist monks and nuns)	3 (1,141 Buddhist monks and nuns)
Buddhist Colleges	4 (842 Buddhist monks and nuns)	6 (1,000 Buddhist monk and nuns)
Immediate Buddhist Training centers	30 (3,000 Buddhist monks and nuns)	31 (3,726 Buddhist monks and nuns)
Charity and Humanitarian centers	1,076	1,076
2. Hoa Hao Buddhism		
Registered Followers	1,232,572	1,232,572
Religious Establishments	19	34
3. Pure Land Buddhism Home Practice Association		
Registered Followers	Data not available	1,450,000
Meeting Houses	Data not available	201
4. Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa		
Registered Followers	Data not available	70,899
Religious Establishments	Data not available	76

Source: Government Committee for Religious Affairs, *White Book on Religions and Faiths and Government Policy in Regard to Religious Affairs in Vietnam*, Hanoi 2006, pp. 87-91.

These facts signify an awakening of religious life in Vietnam. There are many new mega-pagodas and temples such as the pagoda of Bai Dinh in Ninh Binh province. Some pagodas and temples have high towers even though some Buddhist monks do not measure their so called "competition" with the Christians according to the height of their towers.

Even some Taoists open their ambition to challenge with Buddhism in increasing of their worshipping places in public sphere and has some its

own mega temples. Taoist temple (Dao quan than tien) in Thach That district, about 30 km far from Hanoi center, hat a great architecture similar to that in pagoda of Bai Dinh. Except from Islam which has not clear increasing in public sphere, other religions have almost the same situation as Buddhism in transformation of their worshipping.

Table Two: Other non-Christian religions

	2001	2005
1. Islam		
Registered Followers	64,991	66,695
Islam	Data not available	25,688
Bà-ni	Data not available	41,007
Places of worship	77	77
2. Cao Dai Religion		
Registered Followers	2,148,418	2,270,418
Religious Establishments	1,079	1,335
Temples	836	935
Shires	175	296
Monasteries and Convents	68	84

Source: Government Committee for Religious Affairs, *White Book on Religions and Faiths and Government Policy in Regard to Religious Affairs in Vietnam*, Hanoi 2006, pp. 87-91.

There are about twenty five thousand religious establishments in Vietnam now. Almost half of them are new or newly renovated since 1990. There is no period in Vietnamese history when so many pagodas, temples, village common houses or churches are new or newly renovated in such short time. Some officials and businessmen spend money extravagantly to build temples and pagodas. The pagoda of Bai Dinh in Ninh Binh province is no exception. There are also some other famous mega-pagodas and temples like the pagoda of Ba Vang in Quang Ninh province, the Taoist temple Than tien in Hanoi and the pagoda Tram Be in

Tra Vinh province.⁵⁾

But the newly renovated religious establishments are only one side of a waking up in Vietnamese spiritual life. We see religious worship and festivals in the mass media, in movies and in the transformation of rituals. Besides these, we see religious statues, altars, and pictures in the public domain. Also they are in restaurants, in shops, in offices, in institutes and in universities. We see the presence of religion everywhere, in state institutions and in CPV offices (for example an altar and two amulets are in the philosophy faculty, VNU-Hanoi where Marxist-Leninist doctrine is taught). There are not only the cults of national heroes such as general Tran Hung Dao (1228-1300) and Quang Trung king (1753-1792) as it was often in the past, but also a lot of altars for Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969) and temples for other Communist leaders such as Truong Chinh (1907-1988), Pham Van Dong (1906-2000), Le Duan (1907-1986), and very possibly for Vo Nguyen Giap (1910-2013), a famous general of the battle of Dien Bien Phu.

However, differing from those in Europe, Communists in Vietnam are not atheists. In different ways they follow Vietnamese traditional religions and faiths. In 1927 Nguyen Ai Quoc (later Ho Chi Minh), in exile in Guangzhou, showed his discontent with the Chinese authorities who denied the cult of Confucius. He even called himself once indirectly a follower of Confucius, Jesus Christ, Karl Marx and Sun Sat Yen.⁶⁾ Even in the golden era of Marxism and during the Vietnam War when hundreds of temples, churches and village common houses in North Vietnam were in different ways transformed either into department stores, classrooms or something similar under the banner of “anti-feudalism” (*phan phong*), Vietnamese

5) Thich Minh Hanh, a young Buddhist monk in Ba Danh pagode (Ha Nam province about fifty km far from Hanoi) told me that he began the building of five pagodas. Some officials and businessmen already spent ten billion VND in donations (about 500,000 USD) for those works.

6) See: Ho Chi Minh, *Khong Tu. Noi ve Khong Tu, Giesu, Mac va Ton Dat Tien. Trong: Ve van de ton giao tin nguong* (On Confucius. In: Collected Articles and Speeches of Ho Chi Minh on Religion and Faith Issues), Publishing House of Social Sciences, Hanoi, 1998, pp. 140-142, 185.

Communists did not throw away their ancestor worship altars from their houses, unlike South China where ancestor worship has been radically suppressed since the Cultural Revolution.

The collapse of the Communist block was a good opportunity for the Vietnamese Communists to integrate back into their traditional culture. It was a stimulus for a so-called spiritual awakening (*thuc tinh*) in Vietnam which has some of the following explanations.

Firstly, we must say something about the development of the market economy in the last decades in Vietnam which increased the worship of officials and businessmen. M. Weber once analyzed the mutual relationship between market economy and religion in modern Europe where Protestantism had become a stimulus to the capitalist spirit and reforms.

However, we see now in Vietnam a similar situation. During the period 1945-1986 the CPV tried to develop a so-called “socialist” economy which bases itself on state and collective property ownership to overcome the socio-economic crisis. All people's common ownership (*so huu toan dan*) was a political slogan and any private ownership was considered simply a product of the old class societies based on the exploitation of man by man. But the situation changed since 1986 when the CPV carried out a reform (*Doi moi*) to develop a market economy. That was the first step to depart from Marxist doctrine. Although there was no equality in state policy and a weakened law system, the private sector gradually played a more and more important role in the economy of Vietnam. Businessmen are active in religious worshipping. We see altars overall, in shops, enterprises, factories, etc. In the context of a stiff competition and the beginnings of a market economy where there was a weakened law system (even no laws concerning competition), religious worship, on the one side, was a stimulus to economic development, and on the other hand, it played the role of a “medication” against the social stress caused by a market economy. The similar situation we see among ethnic groups. Results of our field studies say that the living standard of new Protestant Hmong community in Northwest provinces is more improved than that in traditional Hmong villages.

Secondly, the boom of religious activities in Vietnam was within the context of globalization. We must emphasize that Vietnam during the Cold War had contact mostly with only the Communist Block and it therefore became a relatively closed society. Some social evils such as prostitution, AIDS and drugs were rare and usually were considered as “products Western civilization”. In more recent times Vietnamese society fell into a social-ethical crisis. Corruption is rampant in society, especially among government and local officials.

In those circumstances it is understandable that many people in spiritual need look to religion. Together with that we should emphasize another factor. Since the end of the 1980s Vietnam welcomed foreign investment. Along with economic and business activities as well as with cultural exchange, some foreign businessmen, including Koreans, carry out missionary work in different ways, an important factor for the growth of Protestantism in Vietnam. Taiwanese and Arab officials and businessmen in Vietnam are active in worship. It is not surprising that there are now “new religions” which are in Vietnam only recently -- for example Protestant sects and the Jehovah's Witnesses, Adventists or the offshoot of Islam known as Baha'i, as well as some Buddhist sects such as “Lord Supreme Maitreya with Long Hoa” (*metteyya*).

Thirdly, it should be emphasized that a more open state policy since 1990 is an important factor helping to explain the current religious boom. During the Cold War Vietnam's policy was under pressure from the Communist Parties, especially that of the former Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Only since the 1990s did Vietnam carry out a relatively independent domestic and foreign policy. In 1991 there was a diplomatic normalization between Vietnam and China. In 1994 US President Bill Clinton abrogated the trade embargo against Vietnam and the next year restored diplomatic relations with Vietnam. In 1995 Vietnam became a member of ASEAN. In 2000 United States President Bill Clinton visited Vietnam, the first American president to do so since Vietnamese unification. In 2008 Vietnam became a member of World Trade Organization (WTO) and also tried to join the Trans-Pacific Strategic

Economic Partnership Agreement (TPP).

Vietnam's policy on religion must be analyzed in the domestic and international context of the post-Cold War period. The authorities had to compromise or even co-operate with religious organizations to win international and domestic support, especially in view of the tensions and the increasing disputes between China and some ASEAN countries over Paracel and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea (East Sea named in Vietnamese).

Lastly, and we should analyze this in more detail, the crisis of the state ideology as a “great tradition” and consequently stimulating a “spiritual vacuum” usually assists in developing the “lesser traditions” such as simple the village rituals.⁷⁾ In addition, let us recall that Vietnam is a multi-religious country. Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism came from China and India. Those religions syncretized with native religions and faiths. However, the Vietnamese are generally not devout as such. Harry Benda was perhaps the first to observe the so-called “spiritual vacuum” phenomenon in Vietnamese society:

Interestingly enough, rural Vietnam thus came to exhibit a religious vacuum which in subsequent centuries, and well into modern times, allowed the mushrooming of a plethora of religious beliefs and practices and, with them, of a wide range of ecclesiastic personnel.⁸⁾

A “spiritual vacuum” exists in the context that most Vietnamese, on the one side, consider religion very important and we see presence of religion and faith in most important events in their life from their birth, marriage, occupation, house building, death and after death,⁹⁾ but on the other side,

7) See: Woodside B. Alexander, *Vietnam and the Chinese Mode. A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, Harvard University, Cambridge/ Massachusetts and London, 1988.

8) Harry Benda, *The Structure of Southeast Asian History: Some Preliminary Observations. Continuity and Change in Southeast Asia*. Collected Journal Articles of Harry Benda, Yale University Southeast Asia Studies. Monograph Series. No. 18, New Heaven, 1972, p. 132.

9) See: Leopold Cadieré, *Vẽ văn hóa và tín ngưỡng truyền thống người Việt*, tập III,

they are generally not devout, as we have already observed, and so they have little difficulty accepting new exotic religions and values. This so called a “spiritual vacuum” is very clear when the state ideology as a 'great tradition' comes to a deep crisis and in a consequence of that it usually stimulates to develop the 'lesser traditions', the village cultural-religious rituals.¹⁰⁾

In Vietnamese history we saw many Buddhist pagodas such as the Perfume Pagoda (*Chua Huong*) in Ha Tay, the Pagoda of the Heavenly Mother (*Chua Thien Mu*) in Hue and others built in the period of the Trinh-Nguyen dynasties of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. That was the period when Vietnamese society fell into a social-political and cultural-spiritual crisis and the Confucian state ideology was seriously weakened. There was crisis in all areas of social life. The central authorities were powerless. Everywhere there were peasant rebellions. Besides that, in traditional Vietnamese society there was a gap. The elite intelligentsia stratum was influenced by Confucianism while the lower strata were under the influence of Buddhism and Taoism. Most peasant rebellions in Vietnamese history were led either by Buddhists or by Taoists. Since the Le Dynasty villages in the Red River delta relative independence from the central administration expressed by this motto: "The king's regulation of behavior comes after village customs" (*Phep vua thua le lang*).¹¹⁾

A somewhat similar situation can be seen in Vietnamese society in the last two decades. Before the collapse of the Communist block, Marxist ideology was considered to be the “state religion” and the model of a “socialist society”. Without the socialist theory the CPV automatically lost

Người dịch Đỗ Trinh Huệ, NXB Thuận Hóa, Huế, 2010, tr. 75-76 (Croyances et Pratiques religieuses des Vietnamiens, tome III, translated in Vietnamese by Do Trinh Hue, Hue, 2010, pp. 75-76)

10) See: Alexander B. Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model, A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1988.

11) Le Thanh Khoi, *3000 Jahre Vietnam. Kultur und Schicksal eines Landes*, München, 1969, S. 232.

its legitimacy. But everything changed after 1990. The Vietnamese were disappointed with those utopias. Together with the development of a market economy, the renaissance of nationalism and a boom in religious worship, the combination of these three factors ended the golden age of Marxist ideology (including the theory of class struggle, socialist ideas on equality and common ownership of property, and proletariat internationalism) in Vietnamese society. Due to the decline of the Marxist state ideology there exist a “vacuum” for religions and faiths to develop for themselves. Several officials and businessmen, including high members of CPV, are Communists and Marxists in word only and already they participate in worship activities.

Seen from the cultural-religious viewpoint in history as well as presently, it is simpler between the Vietnamese authorities and the non-Christian organizations to have compromise or co-operation on religious affairs than between those same authorities and the Christian churches. That the co-operation between the authorities and the Buddhist religion in Vietnam established in 1981 with the support of the authorities followed the motto “Dharma, Nation and Socialism” (*Dao phap, Dan toc va Chu nghia Xa hoi*), is not surprising although this co-operation is debated by some. Based on support from the officials, some Buddhist monks spent more time on their social-political agenda than on strictly religious projects. The United Buddhist Church in Vietnam (*Giao hoi Phat giao Thong nhat*) which does not follow the “banner of Socialism” since Vietnamese unification faced obstacles from the authorities. This was also the situation of the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh who was exiled to France.

II. Religion in public life. Christians versus the Vietnamese authorities

Let me begin by analyzing the tense relationship between the authorities and the Christian churches. Police forces in January 2010 destroyed a

cross in Dong Chiem, Archdiocese of Hanoi, simply because the Catholics built this cross in a public place outside the parish church itself. Thousands of Catholics demonstrated against the authorities. Ten bishops in North Vietnam launched a petition and they were in full accord with the Hanoi archdiocese. Clashes between the two sides are occurring more often in recent times and these pose a potential for social-political instability in Vietnam.

The relationship between the Vietnamese Christian community and their fellow-countrymen is a long history. Christianity (both Catholic and Protestant branches) with about eight millions adherents is now the second largest religion in Vietnam after Buddhism. The Christian missions had an impact on trade between Vietnam and Europe in the pre-colonial period. The Trinh Dynasty in North Vietnam and the Nguyen Dynasty in South Vietnam back then bought weapons and gifts from Europe by way of those trade relations. European missionaries, among them Alexandre de Rhodes, created the Vietnamese national script (*quoc ngu*). Western cultural values and ideas, including medicine and healing, were widespread. Christians were involved since the end of the eighteenth century in most of the historical events in Vietnam. On the other side, there was the so-called "ritual question." There were also differences between Christians and non-Christian communities in their worldviews and in their cultural-religious values and ceremonies.

Table Three: Christians and non-Christians compared

Traditional non-Christians	Christians
Under the influence of traditional East Asian Confucian culture	Under the influence of Christian-European culture
Loyal to the emperor (<i>trung quan</i>) above all	Loyal to the emperor, but Christ comes first
Patriarchy: male-conducted ancestor veneration and property inheritance; polygamy.	Gender equality: Woman is emancipated; monogamy.
Parents-children: piety with ancestor veneration.	Parents - children: piety but without ancestor veneration.
Cultural-religious life: polytheism, not committed to any one religion.	Cultural-religious life: monotheism, commitment to a single faith.
Religiously inclusive and tolerant.	Religiously exclusive.
Religious activities: private, without church organization.	Religious activities: collective, with church organization.
Relationship with God: a relative distance.	Relationship with God: an absolute distance.
Time: Lunar calendar, traditional festivals.	Time: Gregory calendar, Christian festivals.
Hierarchy: by age and social position	Hierarchy: by church-appointed position

Seen from the cultural-religious point of view the gaps between Christianity and Vietnamese traditional religions and faiths are bigger than those among traditional religions and faiths themselves. In the context of Confucianism as a state ideology under the Nguyen Dynasty, the “ritual question” had not only cultural-religious aspects but also some political ones. The main point was not just the fact that Christians before the Second Vatican Council were not permitted engage in ancestor worship. The more Christianity became widespread, the more endangered was the legitimacy of the Confucian court. Meanwhile loyalty to the emperor was the most important virtue in a Confucian society. In the Christian spiritual life not the emperor but Jesus Christ comes first. Unlike the traditional non-Christians, the Christian community had its own Gregorian calendar

and holidays. Christians accept monogamy. Differing from those of the non-Christian, in a Christian family there was relative gender equality. Christians had their own wedding and funeral ceremonies which again differed from those of the non-Christians.

That explains why the suppression of Christianity was unavoidable and it became a popular phenomenon in whole East Asian Confucian world. There was Christian persecution in Japan in the Tokugawa period (1600-1868). The Christian mission was carried out in Japan by Jesuits, among them Francis Xavier. In the beginning the Christian mission in Japan was very successful. But the fact that the Christian mission was so successful and that so many Japanese followed Christianity made the whole “ritual question” a serious one since the authorities feared Western influence. The Tokugawa regime was suspicious about European traders and missionaries, especially after the Philippines were occupied by Spain and Portugal had a Catholic diocese in Macao. There followed was a severe Christian persecution. Almost all trade between Japan and European countries was disrupted.¹²⁾

There was persecution of the Christians also in China under the ruler Kangxi (1654-1722) more than a century before the first Opium War broke out. This was not about the relationship between the Christian mission and colonialism, but it concerned the “ritual question.” This question included a prohibition for Christians in China to practice ancestor worship. The emperor was disappointed with the “conservative position” of the Dominican missionaries and also those from the Mission Etrangères de Paris (MEP).

In the doctrinal conflict regarding ancestor worship, the Confucian thought the Catholic position unacceptable and heretical because it went against the mores and the norms of society; the Catholics feared that ancestor worship might constitute an act of idolatry prohibited by God in the First Commandment.¹³⁾

12) See: Nguyen Van Kim, *Chinh sach dong cua cua Nhat Ban thoi ky Togugawa. Nguyen nhan va he qua* (Japanese Closed Policy during the Tokugawa period. Reasons and Consequences), Nha xuất bản The gioi, Ha Noi, 2000, tr. 94.

13) Grant S. Lee, *Persecution and Success of the Roman Catholic Church in Korea*.

Christian missions were widespread in Korea from 1784 when they were conducted by the MEP. There were Christian persecutions in 1801, 1815, 1827, 1839 and 1846, and especially including the great persecution between 1866 and 1871 beginning with the withdrawal of Russian military forces from Korea. Nine French bishops and priests and eight thousand Christians were executed meanwhile at that time the Christian community in Korea had only about twenty thousand adherents!

Differing from the situation in Vietnam and some other countries in the region, the relationship between Christian missions and colonialism in Korea was dark because French colonialism had little interest in Korea. The so-called “ritual question” caused friction between Christian and Confucian cultural values and rituals. In an edict of King Honjong (r. 1834-1849) we read:

King Chungjong, my pre-cessor, was a man blessed of Heaven, and yet he was pestered by Sung Heung who purchased every sort of Western book that he could find, calling Christianity the “Religion of God” . Wholly unauthorized by our tradition, with all manner of subtlety, and in a way no native Sage ever thought of, this cult increased and grew so as to fascinate and deceive the people until it brought to us a world of barbarians and wild beasts (⋯) Be careful, I beg of you, my people and my administrators! As a parent teaching a child, or an older brother a younger one, I address you. Study how to lead these people away from such a place of danger.¹⁴⁾

It was undoubtedly the “ritual question” which caused the Christian persecution in 1866.

This final persecution was a resolute attempt by the Prince Regent and the conservative faction of the Confucian bureaucracy to eradicate once and for all the pernicious influences of Western culture as symbolized by the strange Catholic doctrine.¹⁵⁾

See Korea Journal, Vol. 28, No. 1 January 1988, p. 19.

14) Grant S. Lee, *Persecution and Success of the Roman Catholic Church in Korea*. See Korea Journal, Vol. 28, No. 1 January 1988, p. 21.

It should be emphasized that the state ideology of all East Asian countries at that time was Sung Neo-Confucianism which was more extreme than the Confucius-Mencius doctrines. Christianity became widespread in China and in Korea when Confucian ideology was in a period of decline. If there had not been a close tie between Christian missionary efforts and European colonialism, the persecution of the Christians might have been avoidable.

In the case of Vietnam from the cultural-religious point of view, there was the so called "ritual question" as well as differences between the Christians and the traditional non-Christians in their worldviews and in their social-ethic values. There were Christian prohibitions centuries before this country became a French colony at the end of nineteenth century.

The Vietnamese traditional order could not tolerate such evangelism, because Vietnamese institutions were based not upon the modern Western concept of the separation of church and state but upon the concept of the state as the political expression of the elite Confucian ideology. Catholicism, if it made inroads among the elite, would obviously change the nature of the elite's ideology.¹⁶⁾

Vietnam is a multi-religious country. Because of Christianity being a monotheist religion the gap between Christianity and the non-Christian religions is bigger than the gaps among non-Christian religions and beliefs. Nguyen Khac Vien once wrote:

When I was treated in a hospital, I met some priests, nuns and Christians every day. I had in my hand some books on Christianity and an opportunity to study (seriously) this religion. I must say this religion is very different from traditional Vietnamese religions and faiths. I cannot imagine a God-man or a supernatural Father or that on behalf of this supernatural Father there is the pope,

15) Cited in: James Huntley Grayson, Korea. *A Religious History*, Clarendon Press. Oxford University Press, New York, 1989, p. 184.

16) *In Search of Southeast Asia. A Modern History*. Revised edition, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1987, p. 135.

bishops and a bureaucratic church which has an absolute power. I do Indian Zen exercises, but I do not accept an other-worldly life.¹⁷⁾

A Confucian court based on Confucian ethic-political doctrines lost its legitimacy if Vietnam became a Christian country. That was why the “ritual question” caused some Christian prohibition under the Trinh and the Nguyen families. Despite of the fact that Nguyen Dynasty formally had allowed Christian mission freedom since the agreement Nham Tuat in 1862 conflict between Christians and non-Christian was very seriously during the “killing both Frenchmen and Catholics” (*Binh Tay Sat Ta*) movement at the end of nineteenth century. Hundred thousand victims in those Christian persecutions and massacres. Not only relationship between Christian mission and colonialism, but also contrary between Confucian and Christian ideology in world outlooks, cultural-religious values and rituals were main factors for Christian persecutions under Minh Mang and Tu Duc emperors. However, Confucian scholars were worrying about the fact that not only a Confucian court lost its legitimacy but also Vietnamese traditional culture is in danger when Vietnam a day became a Christian country as some European missionaries once had dreamed. Those movements had a purpose against French as well as to support Confucian civilization.

From a cultural-political viewpoint we could to say that Christian prohibition was unavoidable even in case there was not relationship between Christian mission and colonialism. Other words, the cultural-religious gap between Christians and non-Christian court was a main reason caused Christian persecution in China, Japan and Vietnam. The Christian prohibition in all East Asian nations long time before colonial aggression in this region was evident. Even in Korea where there was not clear relationship between Christian mission and colonialism, but Christian persecution under the Choson dynasty was very harsh.

The situation was even worse when the communist conquest to power in 1945. The fact that most communists have non-Christian origins plays

17) Nguyen Khac Vien, *Ban ve dao Nho* (On Confucianism), The Gioi Publishing House, Hanoi, 1993, p. 63-64.

really an important role in policy of DRV regards to Christian community. Christian (both Catholic and Protestant) community of course is not pleased with Marxism as a state ideology in Vietnam. There were conflicts between the authorities and Catholic church during the land reform when church land and property were liquidated and confiscated. E. Moise remarks unavoidable conflict between communists and Catholics during the land reform in 1950s.

“The DRV had an official policy of freedom of worship. However, even when local officials obeyed this policy (which they often did not), there was conflict. Catholicism was not simple a religious institution; it was a system of political, economic, and paramilitary power. The communists were not willing to let the Catholic church retain large amounts of land or any strong influence over local administration, much less locals militias” .¹⁸⁾

The situation of relationship between Catholic church and the authorities was relative the same in next decades. Until the end of 1950 all European missionaries including the Apostolic Vicar John Dooly, had to leave from North Vietnam. Almost all priest seminaries in North Vietnam were closed. Joseph seminary in Hanoi was closed in 1959 and re-opened only in 1982. There was no contact between Catholic church in North Vietnam with outside world. There was no its representative in second Vatican council. It was not surprising that Catholic church in North Vietnam at that time was so called as “silent church” (*giao hoi tham lang*). Both Christians and non-Christians took part into “boat people” crow in first years after Vietnamese unification.

There is a transformation of Christian worshipping establishments in last two decades. Although due its legitimacy CPV continues to support Marxist doctrine, in any case the role of Marxist theory in recent Vietnamese society is really much weaker than it had been two decades ago. As we see in part above, Catholicism is not an exception in a waking up of

18) Moise, E. Edwin (1983), *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam, Consolidating the Revolution at the Village Level*, the university of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill/London, p. 193

religious worshipping. There are some new built or renovated churches and monasteries. Catholic church in Vietnam has now six priest seminaries. Until 1980s almost all dioceses in North Vietnam lacked serious parish priests, so that a priest had to responsibility in three or four parishes. The situation now is radical improved. There are not only churches with European baroque architecture, but some of them try to have a combination between baroque and East-Asian architectures and look similar as pagodas or temples. In colonial period it is well-known Phat Diem church. There are more and more similar church architecture types in last time. Following is the picture about both Catholicism and Protestant branches in Vietnam now.

Table Four. Adherents and religious establishments: Christianity

1. Catholicism	2000	2005
Registered Followers	5,324,492	5,950,000
Parishes	Data not available	2,565
Priest Seminaries	6	6
Seminarian	1,044	1,479
Charity and Humanitarian Centers	1,007	1,041
2. Protestantism		
Northern Church		
<i>Registered Followers</i>	<i>6,333</i>	<i>6,370</i>
<i>Churches</i>	Data not available	<i>12</i>
Protestant Church in Northern Highland		
<i>Followers</i>	<i>90,005</i>	<i>110,000</i>
Southern Church		
<i>Followers</i>	<i>461,903</i>	<i>503,598</i>
Churches	Data not available	253
Christian & Missionary Alliance		
Followers	Data not available	21,819
<i>Churches</i>	Data not available	<i>4</i>
Protestant Branches in Binh Phuoc province and Central Highland		
<i>Registered Members</i>	Data not available	<i>293,208</i>
<i>Denominations</i>	Data not available	<i>51,427</i>

Source: Government Committee for Religious Affairs, *White Book on Religions and Faiths and Government Policy Regards to Religious Affairs in Vietnam*, Hanoi 2006, pp. 87-91.

A gap between the non Christian communist authorities and Christian churches is a main factor caused the fact there are little Christians in state administration in Vietnam. It was true there were some Catholics in first cabinet of DRV government in first months after August revolution such as chairman of National assembly Ngo Tu Ha (1882-1973) or

economy minister Nguyen Manh Ha (1912-1993). Vu Dinh Huynh was secretary for Ho Chi Minh bureau in relationship with Phat Diem diocese. In context of encyclical *diviny redemptoris* of Pio XI and extreme anti-communist view of the Holy See under Pio XII Ho Chi Minh could surprisingly mobilize some those Catholic intelligentsia in his struggle for national independence. Those Catholics had played an important role in DRV government during the first Indochina war.

But situation changed after People Republic China's establishment, especially after the Geneva agreement. In central level there is no Christian minister in DRV cabinets since 1954. Despite of the fact that relationship between the authorities and Catholic church is improved in last decades the percentage of Christian communist is in general very low. Most officials are non-Christian. Even no Christian among thousand members of Central Committee of CPV since its establishment. There are less than ten Christians among more than four hundred members of National Assembly meanwhile Christian community (both Catholic and Protestant branches) consist about ten percent of Vietnamese population. Among about 3.5 millions members of CPV there are only 18,486 Christians (18,212 Catholics and 374 Protestants), also only about 0.6% (See: Appendix 3).

At local level the situation is not improved. Even in some Christian villages Christians have only relative lower positions in local administration. Main reason is the fact that there are only little Christian communists. Although village of Phung Khoang is a Christian and Catholics are about forty five of population here there are only five Catholic communists, also less than ten percent of communists in communist cell of Phung Khoang. Among thirty three chairmen in Trung Van since 1945 there was only one Catholics. Catholics have some positions like members of People Committee (*Hoi dong Nhan dan*), Fatherland Front (*Mat Tran To Quoc*) or People Inspection Committee (*Ban Thanh Tra Nhan Dan*) or something like that.

Other example we see the case in Khanh Hoa province. Christians consist about 11.07% of the whole population in Khanh Hoa province, but

there are only 32 Christian communists in this province (25 Catholics and 7 Protestants). Among 8,200 new members of CPV in period from 1996 to 2005 in Khanh Hoa province there are only nineteen Christians (fifteen Catholics and four Protestant adherents), also less than 0.3% (2007).¹⁹⁾

It is no exaggerate to say that state administration is extreme secular. Most of officials are people who identify themselves as “none religion”. It is not occasionally. Generally members of CPV have simply something more chance in their works than other in state administration. According to Government Committee for Religious Affairs, there are more twenty five million adherents, also is less than one third of Vietnamese population (here is not account the number people who follow Buddhism and traditional faiths).²⁰⁾ But there are only 25,837 members of CPV are adherents, also about 0.3% of communists (Among communists of CPV there are 18,212 Catholics, 4,854 Hoa Hao sect, 2,090 Cao Dai sect, 374 Protestants, 251 Muslims and 59 adherents of other religions).²¹⁾

However, religion had played an important role in Vietnamese history. Buddhist pagodas were cultural centers under the Ly and the Tran dynasties. From fifteen century Vietnamese traditional scholars were either Confucian or Buddhist. There were some Catholic universities, schools, hospitals in colonial period, including academy of Pio X in Da Lat or Saint Paul hospital in Hanoi, etc.

After 1975 all Catholic schools, academy and hospitals were confiscated. Till now the authorities do not permit all religious organizations to carry out any activities or have their impacts in national educational system, both schools and universities except from kinder garden and pre-school education. Formally it is not simple for priests or Buddhist monks to have lectures at the state universities, colleges or schools. Catholic church as

19) Phong tu lieu. Ban to chuc tinh uy Khanh Hoa. *Tu lieu nam 2006* (Communist Cell in Khanh Hoa. Library. *Documents 2006*)

20) See: Government Committee for Religious Affairs, *White Book on Religions and Faiths and Government Policy Regards to Religious Affairs in Vietnam*, Hanoi 2006

21) See: Ban to chuc Trung uong, so 41-BC/BTCTW, *Bao cao so ket thuc hien quy dinh so 123-QĐ/TW của Bộ chính trị, Quy định số 127-QĐ/TW và Thông tri số 06-TT/TW của Ban bí thư*, Hanoi, ngày 9 tháng 1 năm 2007

well as Buddhist church have no chance to have their own hospitals or schools. Even Caritas and relief activities could carry out only with permission of the authorities in co-operation of Fatherland Front. Although SRV has officially no privilege for any religion, but in reality administrative formalities to build a new pagoda or temple are more simple than those to build a new church. Almost four decades after Vietnamese unification the authorities and Christian community have now following three issues in their relationship.

First, the government faces to issues of land and property compensation. During the war a lot of church, pagodas properties were confiscated and liquidated. Now church struggles for its land and property compensation. On the one side, the authorities stand before a dilemma: if they give property back to the Christian churches other religious institutions such as Buddhist church could follow the Christian churches to demand the authorities to give back property. On the other side, government could not deny its land law of 1992 (with some mends in 2013) which has rather political than economical purposes and that recognizes only socialist state land ownership although this land law causes a lot of social un-equalities and reactions of peasants.

Second, in context of increasing of gaps between the rich and the poor as well as of corruptions and social un-equalities some bishops and priests want to play really an opponent of state policies. Those bishops and priests stand behind back bloggers reporters, writers, lawyers, and peasants who are active in struggle for social equality and democracy and who are worrying about social-cultural and ethic crisis. All those people are disappointed with the authorities and struggle active against corruption and un-equalities. Some bishops and priests give their hand, stand on the side of peasants who lost their land and who struggle for land compensation. Some blogs such as *bauxit*, *anhbasam*, *que choa*, *nguyensexuandien*, etc. which play really a role to oppose state policies.

Third, the collapse of communist block is a good opportunity for rebirth of Vietnamese nationalism. Because of historical and cultural relationships Vietnamese nationalism closes always with China in the past as well as at

present. Vietnamese nationalism has a stimulation impulse from dispute between Vietnam and China over Paracel and Spratly islands. Some intelligentsias, writers, lawyers, etc. bishops and priests, play a vanguard role in struggle for national sovereignty. On their opinion leaders of CPV have so closed relationship with China which damage Vietnamese interests. They have un-trust about policy of CPV and worry about un-equality in trade between China and Vietnam.

In any case Christian community in Vietnam tries to play a more active role in civil society and to have more influences upon all social strata. But the authoritarian authorities see those demands with suspicious eyes and till now are not yet already to meet those needs. To avoid their conflicts needs a new mechanism in relationship between them.

In sum, seen from a cultural-religious point of view there are at least two challenges in relationship between the authorities and Christian churches in Vietnam. On the one side, Catholic church since second Vatican council tries to take part into a cultural integration and is looking for a "Asian theology". Catholics follow ancestor worshipping, too. There are some churches which have a combination between baroque and East Asian traditional architecture. It seems to be some Protestant branches are till now relative conservative in this field and there are some socio-cultural conflicts between new Protestant Hmong community and traditional Hmong in Northwest provinces.

On the other side, in Vietnamese traditional Confucian society the king as son of Heaven had ultimately both secular and supernatural powers. A Confucian court could not accept a Western model of separation between state and church in which church has its own relative independent hierarchy clergy from state administration. From this viewpoint Communist regime is not much different from that of Confucian society. Beside of it, both Catholic church and communist party have the same organization type as "secret societies" which have contrary doctrines and ideologies. It is no surprising when communist regime till now do not accept some opposition organizations, even civil society which is relative independent from state administration.

Conclusion

We should not deny or underestimate the role of cultural-religious factors in relationship between Christians and non-Christians in Vietnam. In some cases, for example under the Nguyen Dynasty, those factors had even some cultural-political characters. It was undoubted that a so called “ritual question” caused Christian persecution. If there was not relationship between Christian mission and colonialism the Christian prohibition was possibly un-avoidable. After 1945 the situation of relationship between the communist authorities with religious organizations is not much differ from that under Nguyen Dynasty especially before 1990 in context of cold war and leaders of CPV followed truly the Stalinism.

The situation changes radically since the collapse of communist block. In international and domestic context in post- cold war period religion in Vietnam earns some fruits in government open policy to religious affairs and to increase their role in public sphere. But differ from other Vietnamese poly-theist traditional religions and beliefs Christianity (in general monotheism) faces some hindrances in transformation in publicity meanwhile the authorities and Christian churches have deep un-trust with each other.

The question could be radically resolved not in near future, but is a long way only on the base of a Vietnamese secular rule of law state, on the one side, and cultural integration of Christian community, on the other side. Despite of the fact that relationship between the authorities and churches not always fluently and religious life in Vietnam in general is not jet “normal” as it should be the increasing of religion role in contemporary Vietnamese society is unavoidable. In any case Christian community in Vietnam has more freedom than those in China.

Key words: Religion, Christian community in Vietnam, communist authorities

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Appendix 1

List of chairmen of Administrative Commune Committee (UBHC) Trung Van since 1945

	Name	Year
1	Nguyễn Công Thường	1945
2	Nguyễn Đình Lợi	1945
3	Tạ Văn Đước	1945
4	Nguyễn Công Thường	1946
5	Nguyễn Đắc Sinh	1946
6	Nguyễn Văn Đắc	
7	Bạch Ngọc Thụ	1948
8	Nguyễn Hữu Văn	1949
9	Nguyễn Đình Mười	1949
10	Nguyễn Văn Vinh	1950
11	Đào Đăng Tinh	1951
12	Nguyễn Viết Tam	
13	Đào Đăng Phương	
14	Lê Quốc Hùng	
15	Nguyễn Gia Hậu	
16	Nguyễn Công Chiến	
17	Đào Đăng Báo	
18	Nguyễn Văn Phục	
19	Nguyễn Thị Điểm	
20	Nguyễn Xuân Thơi	
21	Hoàng Thị Kim*	
22	Nguyễn Đắc Tắc	
23	Đỗ Minh Thặng	
24	Nguyễn Thị Lý	
25	Tạ Văn Lý	
26	Bạch Đình Cảnh	

Source: Dang bo xa Trung Van, *Lich su Dang bo xa Trung Van* (Communist Cell of Trung Van, History of Communist Cell in Trung Van), Ha Noi, 1998, p. 254

**Catholics*

Appendix 2

Adherents in Khanh Hoa province

Religion	Adherents and clergy			Adherent/ clergy	Percentage population	Establishment
	Clergy	Adherents	Sum			
Buddhism	780	154,753	155,533	199	13.60	371
Catholicism	461	113,948	114,409	248	10.00	156
Protestantism	35	12,172	12,207	348	1.07	13
Cao Dai	120	8,688	8,808	73	0.77	21
Hoa Hao	0	258	258	0	0.02	1
Sum	1,396	289,819	291,215	208	25.49	562

Source. Bureau for Religious Affairs. Khanh Hoa province. 2007

Appendix 3

The number of Vietnamese adherent communists

Religion	Number of adherent communists	Percentage
Catholicism	18,212	42.94
Buddhism	16,576	39.08
Hoa Hao	4,851	11.44
Cao Dai	2,090	4.93
Protestantism	374	0.88
Islam	251	0.59
Others	59	0.14
Total	42,413	100

Source: Ban to chuc Trung uong, so 41 - BC/BTCTW. Bao cao so ket thuc hien Quy dinh so 123-QD/TW cua Bo chinh tri. Quy dinh so 127-QD/TW va Thong tri so 06 cua Ban bi thu, Hanoi, 9/1/2007

Appendix 4

Number of Buddhist and Christian adherents in Khanh Hoa (1 April 2009)

	Adherents				Total population	
	Buddhism	Catholicism	Protestantism	Sum		
Nha Trang city	92,329	29,697	2,059	134,085	392,279	10,72
Cam Ranh city	22,000	16,454	1,743	40,197	121,050	3,47
Ninh Hoa	16,429	6,123	552	23,104	230,390	2,00
Van Ninh	9,512	4,493	138	14,143	126,477	1,22
Dien Khanh	11,593	11,972	174	23,739	131,719	2,05
Khanh Vinh	663	2534	5893	9090	33714	0,79
Khanh Son	434	500	2,183	3,117	20,930	0,27
Cam Lam	18,020	29,842	984	48,846	100,850	4,22
Truong Sa		1		1	195	0
Sum	170,980	101,616	13,726	286,322	1,157,604	24,73

Source: Khanh Hoa province statistics in November 2010. Population and Living quarter, pp. 187-213

Appendix 5

Statistics of communist-adherents in whole Vietnam and Khanh Hoa province

Religion	Communists -adherents		Communists-adherent in Khanh Hoa	
	Number	%	Number	%
Catholicism	18,212	42.94	25	0.14
Buddhism	16,756	39.08	266	1.60
Hoa Hao	4,851	11.44	0	0
Cao Dai	2,090	4.93	9	0.43
Protestantism	374	0.88	7	1.87
Islam	251	0.59	0	0
Others	59	0.14	0	0
Sum	42,413	100	307	0.72

Source: Ban To chuc Trung uong, so 41-BC/BTCTW, Bao cao so ket thuc hien Quy dinh so 123-QD/TW cua Bo chinh tri, Quy dinh so 127-QD/TW va Thong tri so 06-TT/TW cua Ban bi thu, ngay 9/1/2007 (Central Personal Committee of CPV, Report on Results of Resolution of Politbureau, Resolution No. 127-QD/TW and Resolution No. 06-TT/TW of Secretary Committee dated Januar 9, 2007.

<Abstract>

TRANSFORMATION OF RELIGION IN VIETNAM'S PUBLIC LIFE: THE CASE OF CHRISTIANITY

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nguyen Quang Hung (Vietnam National University)

In the last two decades we see really a boom in religious worship in Vietnam. Religions are becoming more visible. Everywhere there are new and newly renovated pagodas, temples and churches. There are religious transformations in public rituals, in the movies and in the other arts as well as the mass media. Not only peasants, intelligentsia and workers who were typical worshippers in traditional Vietnamese society, but now also officials and businessmen are active in worship. On the other side, the Communist party of Vietnam (CPV) step by step departs from Marxist doctrine and carries out a relatively open policy on religious affairs since its 24th Resolution in 1990 as a consequence of the collapse of the Communist block.

But despite the fact that the relationship between the Vietnamese authorities and some religious organizations in Vietnam is radically improved, it is not always clear in the case of Christianity. There are many reasons for that situation including of the relationship between this monotheist religion and colonialism during the colonial period and during the both Indochina and Vietnam wars. But beside of those, the cultural-religious factors should be not underestimated. The contrary between Christian and Marxist world outlooks have sometime even political characters as we have seen situation under the Nguyen dynasty. Also, the relationship between the communist regime and Christian churches should

be analyzed wider in context of relationship between Christian and non-Christian communities because of most communists follow their non-Christian religions and faiths.

Key words: Religion, Christian community in Vietnam, communist authorities