

A Secular State for a Religious Nation: The Republic of Vietnam and Religious Nationalism, 1946–1963

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Most studies of the Republic of Vietnam's nation-building programs have focused on its security and land reforms. Yet spirituality was a fundamental element of Ngô Đình Diệm's Personalist Revolution. This article analyzes how the Republic of Vietnam attempted to channel the religious nationalism emerging from the First Indochina War. The spiritual dimension of the Republic's Personalist Revolution did not involve state interference in all religious activities. Instead, it promoted religious freedom and diversity, provided that the spiritual values they propagated opposed communism's atheism. In practice, this framework did not succeed in creating a religious alliance against communism. In fact, it strengthened a religious consciousness that would increasingly challenge the state, its assumption that religions opposed communism, and the very principle of religious diversity.

Keywords: atheism, Baha'i, Buddhism, Catholicism, communism, personalism, religion, Vietnam

IN JUNE 1963, BUDDHIST monk Thích Quang Đức sat down at a crossroads in Saigon and lit himself on fire in protest. A few days before, the Buddhist Intersect Committee had formulated five demands in order to find a solution to the “Buddhist crisis” that had erupted in May. Two demands criticized the government's handling of Buddhist demonstrations. Three others denounced a more systemic form of discrimination: it advocated the right to hoist Buddhist flags, it claimed the right to be recognized as a religion and not as an association, and it demanded religious freedom. Buddhism, in other words, was a victim of discrimination. Even after President Ngô Đình Diệm's fall in November 1963, Buddhists demonstrated against Catholics, whom they considered faithful to Diệm. This led some to conclude that Vietnam faced a war of religions, and to believe that only religious groups—and not political parties—could express the population's desire for political change (ICI 1963a). And yet only nine years before, when Diệm became prime minister in June 1954, the main political forces were not defined along religious lines.¹ How and why did religious groups become so politicized under the Republic of Vietnam? What kind of discrimination encouraged them to protest against the government?

Most explanations of the Buddhist crisis have focused on the infiltration of communist agents, Buddhist leadership, or an essentialized opposition of Buddhism

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¹Ngô Đình Diệm was nominated as prime minister in June 1954 and became president of the newly created Republic of Vietnam on October 26, 1955 (Chapman 2006; Miller 2013, 140). Political parties such as the *Đài Việt* and the *Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng* were secular, and religious groups like the *Cao Đài* and the *Hòa Hảo* had been defeated by the Army in the spring of 1955.

to Catholicism.² Recent works underline the role of Buddhist nationalism in the crisis (Miller 2013, 262; 2015, 1907). However, the importance of religion in the Republic still remains unexplained. Despite the president's Catholic origins and his kinship with one of Vietnam's first bishops, Ngô Đình Thục, the government never declared Catholicism the official religion, nor did it try to systematically suppress Buddhism.

This article argues that the Republic attempted to channel the political mobilization of religious groups, which had emerged during the First Indochina War. It also challenges the assumption that the Republic emerged from the elimination of religious groups and repressed religious diversity. Ngô Đình Diệm crushed Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo dissidents because they refused to give up their administrative and military autonomy. But Saigon did not repress religions altogether. It promoted spirituality as a core value of the Republic of Vietnam.

In fact, Ngô Đình Diệm attempted to enshrine the importance of religions to the Vietnamese nation in a similar fashion to what Sukarno, his Indonesian counterpart, had accomplished in the Republic of Indonesia. Sukarno proclaimed that faith in God was one of the *panca sila's* five principles at the core of Indonesian nationalism. He did not declare Islam as a state religion, nor did Ngô Đình Diệm make Catholicism or Buddhism Vietnam's national religion. The political formula Diệm used to promote this religious diversity, however, was entirely different. Unlike Jakarta, Saigon did not create a Ministry of Religious Affairs. It did not collaborate with communists either. In fact, the Republic of Vietnam never attempted to guide or control all religious activities, because it considered that religions remained a private affair. Such an authoritarian state let religions remain free from state control—at least initially—because of one central assumption of the Republic's Personalist Revolution: the idea that spirituality would spontaneously oppose communist atheism. This fragile political formula, of praising religion as a central value of non-communist nationalism without any precise policy, encouraged the reinforcement of a religious consciousness that increasingly challenged the Republic itself.

RELIGION, NATION, AND ANTICOMMUNISM, 1945–54

In contrast to political parties, which were subject to strict colonial repression, religious groups in French Indochina operated quite freely because colonial authorities saw religions as a moralizing agent in Vietnamese society (Keith 2012b, 168). Catholic and Buddhist churches expanded during the interwar period, and so did offshoots like the Hòa Hảo and the Cao Đài. During World War II, the Japanese also saw religion as an important political weapon, and trained the Hòa Hảo and the Cao Đài (Ho Tai 1983, 124–28; Jammes 2016, 255–56; Trần Mỹ-Vân 2005, 164–65). Even Vichy Indochina

²As the Buddhist crisis represents a tipping point of the Vietnam War, both supporters and opponents of American intervention have studied this crisis at length. Opponents of US intervention blame the sabotage of communist agents and others lament the manipulation of self-styled political monks, while those eulogizing the Buddhist 1963 struggle consider this to be a reaction of the Vietnamese against war escalation. For a recent historiographical analysis, see Miller (2015, 1906–7). None, however, explain why so many Buddhists—and not just a few infiltrated agents—thought they were victims of discrimination.

sponsored Buddhism and Confucianism to compete with Japanese pan-Asiatic religious societies (Raffin 2005, 112–13). But it was only when Vietnam declared its independence in 1945 that religions faced the question of whether to become involved in politics. The Việt Minh's call to mobilize against the return of French colonial rule in 1945 raised important questions: in which circumstances should religions engage in politics and in the armed struggle? Would this require religions to reinvent themselves, both spiritually and politically?

The opposition of many Vietnamese Catholics to communism is well known, but it was neither self-evident nor automatic. This process was uneven because the experience of the First Indochina War was different from one place to another. The clergy in the dioceses of Bùi Chu and Phát Diệm famously led their parishioners in the struggle for national independence. They initially formed an alliance with the Việt Minh and later joined the Associated State of Vietnam created in 1949, when the First Indochina War shifted from a war of decolonization to a civil war opposing Vietnamese communists against non-communists (Keith 2012a, 235; Trần Thị Liên 1996, 310–11).

Catholic experience of communist rule also varied. The diocese of Vinh in central Vietnam was one of the first places to experience communist rule, including Maoist rectification campaigns, political purges, and land reform. In contrast, Catholics in Hanoi had not experienced Việt Minh rule since December 1946, when the Democratic Republic of Vietnam retreated into the *maquis*. Yet many Catholics in Hanoi opposed communism just as strongly as their co-religionists in Bùi Chu, Phát Diệm, or Vinh. It was precisely because Catholics in Hanoi did not face communist confrontation on a daily basis that Hanoi could discuss what Catholics should do in the face of atheism, and who among the church, the clergy, or the laity had to become involved in politics.

Đạo Bình Đức Mẹ (The Legion of Mary), the weekly bulletin of the diocese of Hanoi appearing in 1952, urged its readers to oppose Vietnamese communism. Its name was inspired by the Legion of Mary, a lay Catholic organization created in Ireland in the early 1920s, of which one branch strongly confronted Chinese communists in Shanghai. Oddly enough, the periodical did not mobilize its readership by publishing news of clashes in other dioceses. It provided extensive coverage of communist attacks on Catholics across the globe, as well as on the priests and missionaries expelled from mainland China in 1951 (ĐBĐM 1952a, 5). Communism was a global threat, and what happened in China could also occur in Vietnam (ĐBĐM 1954a, 17). Yet the main reason why the readers had to mobilize against communism was because of its atheist threat.

Đạo Bình Đức Mẹ did not just publish the episcopal letter of November 10, 1951, in which the bishops of Indochina warned that communism was inimical to the Catholic faith. It also provided extensive comments. Twice in the following year, the periodical insisted that it was impossible to be both a Catholic and a communist and that any Catholic joining the Communist Party would be excommunicated (ĐBĐM 1952b, 1952c). This mobilization did not mean that all Catholics opposed communism, but multiple media outlets in Phát Diệm, Bùi Chu, Vinh, and now Hanoi claimed that the Catholic faith and communism were incompatible.

How to oppose communism in practice was a different matter. The church could not officially engage in politics, decolonization, or national independence movements. The

Vatican had signed several *modus vivendi* establishing diplomatic relationships with states and guaranteeing it would not interfere in their political affairs (ĐBĐM 1952a, 9). The moral duty to oppose atheism fell upon the laity. It would not be the church itself but its faithful who would defend the Catholic faith.

As early as 1952, conferences and workshops gathered Catholic intellectuals to discuss the political situation in Vietnam. In the same year, conferences on the Christian social doctrine organized by a missionary, Fernand Parrel, and a Vietnamese intellectual, Ngô Đình Nhu, created an important forum of discussion for finding alternatives to communism (ĐBĐM 1952d). One important idea put forward was personalism, a philosophy that Emmanuel Mounier, a French Catholic intellectual, had put forth in the 1930s economic recession as an alternative to both communism and capitalism. Like communism, personalism strongly rejected a world ruled by capital and supported a social revolution built around a communitarian economy. Yet unlike communism, it refused to reduce human beings to their capacity for production and strongly advocated the idea that people were spiritual beings as well. This philosophical thought spread from France to Vietnam over two decades and incurred substantial transformations (Phi-Vân Nguyen 2017). The Vietnamese phrase for personalism, *chủ nghĩa nhân vị*, seemed even more ambitious than its French equivalent. The basis for this philosophical thought was not the person (*người*) but *nhân*, a human being that is striving to become human. This particular vision of a communitarian revolution that would enshrine the spiritual nature of human beings offered a promising third way for Vietnam, which resonated with labor union activists (including Buddhists), intellectuals, students, and lay Catholics eager to find political solutions to help them defend their faith. But it was only towards the end of 1953, when the French struggled to hold the Indochinese Federation together, that the prospect of total independence stirred Catholic intellectuals into further mobilization.

Time for discussion was up. Catholics now had to move into action. A press conference gathering all Catholic periodicals in March 1954 urged lay Catholics to become involved in political affairs, whether it was in the active opposition to communism, in spreading the social doctrine of the church, or in loving their neighbor (ĐBĐM 1954b). Another article claimed that Vietnam faced two crises: one spiritual and the other political (ĐBĐM 1954c). On the one hand, the struggle for Vietnam's independence largely explained the political crisis. On the other hand, the incomplete spiritualization of Vietnamese society explained the influence of atheism and facilitated the spread of communist ideas. Christianity had arrived too late to pervade the entire population, whereas Confucianism had lost its influence. Because of this dual crisis, lay Catholics had to engage in both spiritual and political initiatives.

Spiritually, Catholics became involved in a new form of ecumenical dialogue, which involved much more than bridging the gap between one Christian church and another. Some started to examine the commonalities between Catholicism and other religious faiths. Catholics needed to accept that other religions existed and were just as committed to the defense of spirituality against communist atheism. *Đạo Bình Đức Mẹ* published a dozen articles between March and June 1954 on the Cao Đài faith, a syncretic religion created in 1926 in Cochinchina. Catholicism and the Cao Đài faith shared common points, in particular the religious hierarchy or the recognition of an almighty God. Most importantly, the article exhorted Catholics to stop thinking of the Cao Đài as a

heretical sect: “People are upset because the Cao Đài borrow the vocabulary used in the Catholic Church...: baptism, confirmation ... but the Cao Đài also adopted important principles of the Catholic faith: its institutions, its emphasis on charity and its doctrine” (ĐBĐM 1954d). Catholics had to overcome their prejudices and open their minds to coexisting with other, more eclectic, and unorthodox faiths. This raised an important question for the future of the church,

... which had been debated by Saint Thomas and other scholars of the Middle Ages: “Does the Catholic faith in the Orient have to eliminate the pre-existing conditions or philosophical foundations in the souls of these populations, and compel them to follow a religious tradition and practice as it was propagated in the West? Or on the contrary, should the Catholic faith only expunge the superstitious practices from this Oriental culture, and impregnate this foundation with a supernatural element, to inspire it, make it alive, and create a truly lively doctrine: the foundation of an Oriental Thomism, less concerned with reason and rationality and more grounded in intuition and symbolism?” (ĐBĐM 1954d)

The author of this article reminded his readers that the Catholic faith had not always been cut off from local beliefs. The spread of the Christian faith in Asia had incorporated a significant number of local spiritual practices until the pope settled the seventeenth century’s Chinese rites controversy in favor of spreading a pure, orthodox, and unaltered Christian faith. Now that Vietnam was deeply involved in the Cold War, and threatened by atheism, it was perhaps time to reconsider the church’s aversion to acculturation. While there is no evidence that this point of view was widely shared, this article still shows that the expansion of communism in Vietnam pushed some to imagine how religions could and should reinvent themselves.

The political crisis Vietnam faced also required lay Catholics to take action. An editorial in *Đạo Bình Đức Mẹ* argued that the creation of a Catholic party would attract many Catholic believers. But opponents would quickly misinterpret it as an attempt by the Catholic Church to become involved in politics. It was therefore necessary for Catholics to “collaborate in politics with patriots of other faiths or without faith, in other words, to become part of political parties that are not defined in religious terms” (ĐBĐM 1954e). One such party at the time was the Đại Việt, a nationalist party that emerged in the wake of the 1930s economic crisis. The Đại Việt advocated the survival of the Vietnamese race and the restoration of Vietnam’s past imperial glory. It was not a religious party, but it had developed a highly moral vision of men (Guillemot 2012, 132–33). Many of its members had close ties to religious groups and sometimes divided into Catholic and Buddhist factions (SHAT 1950a, 2–3). The Đại Việt moral vision figured in one formula, which would later be used to criticize communism in the Republic. A Đại Việt training manual seized by the French in 1954 asked its readers to imagine the nihilism communism would bring to Vietnam: “What is the theory of the ‘Three No’ (*Tâm Vô*)? This theory can be summarized by the following: no Family, no Homeland, no Religion” (SHAT 1954a). To the Đại Việt as well, communism seemed not just dangerous, but simply wrong. For them, this also meant that the family, the homeland, and the religion formed the main pillars of Vietnamese society.

The political collaboration of many Catholics with the Đại Việt had been latent during the First Indochina War. But cooperation increased dramatically following the French decision to unilaterally devalue the piaster in May 1953. The formation of a United Front (*Đại Đoàn Kết*) in September 1953 brought together the Bình Xuyên, a politicized criminal organization based in Saigon; the Cao Đài; the Hòa Hảo; the Catholics; and the Đại Việt into a common front rejecting colonialism and communism (Dommen 2001, 217–18; Guillemot 2012, 534–41; Miller 2004, 452–54; 2013, 49–51; Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ 1991, 62). This platform also merged Đại Việt and religious ideals. In its January 1954 Program of Action, the Front criticized Vietnam's downfall:

The spirit of the Great French Revolution, the political upheavals of the nineteenth century, and the democratic regimes have all stemmed from the principle of individualism. Yet they have brought disorder in all aspects of production and far too great social injustice. The human being is crushed by financial and economic power. (SHAT 1954b, 2)

A real democracy, the same declaration argued, should improve both the material and the moral conditions of human beings (3), allowing “the human being to realize his ultimate goal, which is to become perfectly virtuous,” so that “struggle for national sovereignty is not an end, but the means to realize a life fulfilling the human person” (SHAT 1954c, 5). Four out of the five groups composing the Front shared a metaphysical vision of human societies and claimed their rejection of communist materialism, which “had always opposed religious, political and military groups in Northern, Central and Southern Vietnam” (SHAT 1954d, 2). Therefore, the involvement of Catholics in politics was not a mechanical response to communism. Lay Catholics, and not the church itself, had to defend their faith and the Vietnamese nation by building bridges with other religious groups and joining political coalitions. This opposition to communism did not involve all Catholics. Many remained favorable or neutral to communism. They were no less Catholic for doing so. But those who engaged in politics as Catholics, or fought the war as Catholics, did not simply associate their faith with a religious lineage or the practice of religious traditions. Asserting one's Catholic faith in the public realm at the time also conveyed the vision of a nation liberated from communism.

Vietnamese Buddhists, on the other hand, did not stand in this United Front in 1953. At the end of the First Indochina War, there was no clear way to identify one or several Buddhist positions in the struggle between Vietnamese communists and nationalists. The Vietnamese state had sponsored the travel of monks to the 1950 World Buddhist Federation in Ceylon in the hope that Buddhist internationalism could turn into an anticommunist force (Ngô 2015, 282–84). But the Vietnamese sangha was more preoccupied with uniting the northern, central, and southern Buddhist associations. Nevertheless, the Buddhists also discussed the role of their faith with regard to the Vietnamese nation and debated the limits between their spiritual and political engagement throughout the course of the armed conflict.

While some monks used the war as an eye-opening opportunity to detach themselves from worldly matters (Huệ Hải 1954), many others, considered that Buddhism involved an

everyday engagement in social, economic, and political issues.³ In Hanoi, the Buddhist Association in the North expanded its publications and war relief initiatives (Mai 1959, 807), echoing the Vietnamese Catholic Action's work during the war (Keith 2012a, 155–62). These cultural activities and social outreach already manifested a strong attachment to the nationalist cause and support for the Việt Minh.

As early as 1945, Buddhist monks Thích Trí Đức and Thích Tâm Châu created the Buddhist Movement for National Salvation (*Đoàn Phật Giáo Cứu Quốc*) with the support of its Catholic equivalent (*Đoàn Công Giáo Cứu Quốc*) at the Đồng Đắc Pagoda, less than two miles from the diocese of Phát Diệm (Đoàn and Xuân 1973, 62; Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ 1991, 179). French observers commented that in the diocese, Buddhists supported the nationalist fight led by Catholic leaders, while pagans remained on the fence (SHAT 1950b). The periodical of the Northern Buddhist Sangha, *Diệu Âm* (The Sound of Contemplation), also reveals how the Buddhist faith supported the struggle for independence. This engagement in the nationalist struggle was not automatic, but the result of a complex intellectual process.

Diệu Âm came out in 1946, precisely when French troops took over the Chinese nationalist troops' occupation duties. Hồ Chí Minh's dissolution of the Indochinese Communist Party gave the impression that the Việt Minh was nationalist and not communist, although some doubts remained. Also, Hồ Chí Minh tried to negotiate Vietnam's independence with the French but it also was not clear whether peace talks would succeed or degenerate into an armed conflict. Yet the infallible support of this publication to Vietnam's independence shows the strong influence of the Việt Minh's call for the mobilization in the initial Buddhist involvement in national politics.

Diệu Âm stressed the importance of literacy and the teaching of patriotism using poems, quoting Plato and even Chiang Kai-shek (DÂ 1946a). An editorial also insisted on increasing the literacy level of the sangha: "In this world if we always rely on force to find satisfaction, whenever we lose this force we end up like a cripple without a cane..." (DÂ 1946b, 4). It added: "Monks, we have to become involved in national salvation" (6), while "every pagoda should become a literacy class" (8). But the written word was not the only means through which the sangha mobilized the faithful. It also manifested itself through prayers, expressing the Buddhist attachment to territorial unity and support for Vietnam's independence.

The Buddhist Committee for the National Salvation of Vietnam organized "the Day for the South," a celebration commemorating the Vietnamese who died during the violent return of French rule in the south in September 1945. Those prayers expressed "that the Buddhists in the North sincerely share their feelings with their patriots of the South in order to overcome all the obstacles in the unification of the North, the Center and the South and the total independence of Vietnam" (DÂ 1946c, 34). This ceremony brought Buddhists in the north in communion with their southern co-religionists and built a stronger sense of belonging to the Vietnamese nation.

Diệu Âm also published news from Buddhists across the Red River delta, in Phú Thọ in the province of Sơn Tây, mobilizing the Buddhist laity in youth and women's

³This contrasts with analyses claiming that Buddhism was either supportive (Fall 1960, 164) or neutral toward the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, as most studies only note the creation of the General Buddhist Association of Vietnam in 1951 (DeVido 2007, 281; Dommen 2001, 162; Gheddo 1970, 172; Miller 2015, 1914; Nguyen Anh Tuan 1967, 28).

organizations, or from the Sùng Nghiễm pagoda in the province of Thanh Hóa organizing a prayer for Hồ Chí Minh's attempt to obtain full independence from French authorities at the Fontainebleau Conference (DÂ 1946d). The monk heading Nam Định Province also joined these prayers. For the first anniversary celebrating the creation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the main pagoda organized a three-day celebration and "prayers for the total independence of the nation" (DÂ 1946e, 3). The monk explained that the Buddhist faith and nationalism were not incompatible: "Those prayers seem to extend to the realm of politics, yet in fact, they relate to Buddha's doctrine of mercy and sacrifice, and become a sacred duty of all Buddhists, who are in this moment the people of the nation" (DÂ 1946e, 3). Buddhism had a long tradition of praying for the nation, in India and in China as well as in the Vietnamese empire starting with the Lý dynasty in the eleventh century (4). "Believing in those prayers is believing in ourselves" (5), he insisted. Even though *Diệu Âm* alone could not represent the entire Buddhist population, those initiatives emerging from different parts of the Red River delta show that Buddhist involvement in the struggle for independence was real. Even the transformation of the armed conflict from a war of decolonization into a Cold War confrontation in 1949 did not shatter this mobilization.

The relationship of Buddhist monks with the Việt Minh did not always go smoothly, even though, by the end of the war, neither the sangha nor sizable numbers of lay Buddhists officially opposed or supported communism.⁴ Despite the lack of a clear political stance towards communism, Buddhism had not disconnected from Vietnamese nationalism. In an essay originally published in 1953 in Hanoi, Thích Tâm Châu (1964) analyzed the relationship between Buddha and men. Quoting Pythagoras, Blaise Pascal, and even Franklin Roosevelt, he suggested that Buddhism was just as adequate as any other political, philosophical, or religious thought in explaining the role of man on earth. His analysis of a man's relationship with his nation (159) quoted Giuseppe Mazzini's 1860 essay, *The Duties of Man*, a text central to the nineteenth-century Italian unification, which exhorted fellow Italians "to love their country as it gives them a family among all other countries." Thích Tâm Châu then added:

The nation is an organization comprised of various elements combined with each other: one language, one custom, one history and one territory. Because of its natural combination as well as its grandeur and decadence, it cannot *not* require significant duties from its citizens. The duties of the citizen are sacred and noble with regards to the loss or the existence of the country, the prosperity or the misery of its people, and therefore require citizens to commit wholeheartedly to the nation, to the people.

In his view, the war did not encourage detachment from worldly matters. It was a duty to commit to the creation and the protection of the Vietnamese nation. The Buddhist faith was thus not just compatible with nationalism; it also compelled the faithful

⁴The Viet Minh arrested Tuệ Quang and Tuệ Chiễu, who had joined in creating the first Inter Religious Front (Đoàn and Xuân 1973, 62), and sentenced Thích Tâm Châu to death in absentia (Schechter 1967, 163).

to defend their nation. While additional research is required to fully understand the role of religions during the Indochina War, evidence from the Catholics and the Buddhists shows that they had developed an important level of political consciousness, whose full potential still remained to be explored.

RELIGION IN THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM'S PERSONALIST REVOLUTION, 1954–59

The Republic of Vietnam's Personalist Revolution was an attempt to capitalize on this religious consciousness, in order to create a religious front opposed to communist atheism. After the war, Ngô Đình Diệm rose from the position of prime minister in June 1954 to the presidency of a new republic fifteen months later. While the Ngô family was Catholic and highly influential, at no point did Catholicism become a state religion.

Religion could not justify any kind of separatism or autonomy. Hòa Hảo general Lâm Thành Nguyên, for example, faced a categorical refusal to his plan for political and military autonomy over Châu Đốc and Hà Tiên provinces (ANOM 1954). In the spring of 1955, the repression of Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo resistance confirmed that Ngô Đình Diệm was ready to eliminate any kind of autonomy, even of religious origins. So religion would never justify the existence of a state within a state. This did not mean, however, that religions had to disappear. Vietnam's Personalist Revolution promoted the idea that the society—and not the state—should become religious. While recent studies analyze the agrarian reforms and communitarian development of the Personalist Revolution, little is known about its spiritual dimensions.⁵ How and why did the Republic promote spirituality to its population?

The Personalist Revolution's spiritual component would not involve a conversion of Vietnamese into believers. It would only guarantee freedom of religion without promoting any state religion or religious hierarchy. The draft of the Republic of Vietnam's Constitution in 1956 was a key moment in defining the role of spirituality. It borrowed elements from the American and French constitutions of 1787 and 1946 (Mende 1957, 927; Miller 2013, 146–47; Sidel 2009, 18), such as the idea of “an indivisible Republic” (art. 1), or the reciprocal bond between the state and its citizens (art. 5, art. 6). Yet two features made the Constitution stand apart. Communism was deemed contrary to the principles of the Constitution (art. 7), and the separation of church and state did not figure as a priority, as it was in the American First Amendment or the French Constitution. Religion was to become a national value, but there would not be a single state religion, nor a governmental control over religions. In other words, religion had to remain both diverse and independent from the state.

⁵Most researchers on the Republic have dismissed the spiritual dimension of personalism. Donnell (1961, 59) qualifies the Vietnamese writings on personalism as “abstruse.” Recent studies have focused on personalist land and security reforms (Catton 2002, 41–49; Miller 2013, 43–46; Stewart 2017). While research on the origins of personalism in Vietnam underlines the studies of Ngô Đình Nhu in France and the role of French missionaries in social movements (Keith 2012a, 195–97; Miller 2004, 448; 2013, 44–46; Wehrle 2011, 17), references to the personalist spiritual dimensions often boil down to Diệm's exaltation of Confucianism (Catton 2002, 43; Miller 2009, 378–81) or Madame Nhu's 1959 Family Law forbidding polygamy, divorce, and arranged marriages.

The Constitutional Assembly discussed the freedom of religion in article 17: “Every citizen has the right to freedom of belief and to religious practice and teaching, providing that the exercise of these rights is not contrary to morality.” Another mention figured as well: “The State respects all religions,” and the official journal added: “Not a single religion could be considered State religion” (CBVNCH 1956a). An analyst sarcastically noted that this mention was abandoned and prefigured the influence of Catholicism (Grant 1958, 444, 455–56).⁶ Yet a close look at the debates before reaching this final formulation shows the importance of religion—and not just Catholicism—as a core value of the Republic.

In the first session on this article (CBVNCH 1956b), representatives suggested that “the Nation respects all religions as the source of sacred vitality of its people,” “the Nation recognizes the truthfulness of God,” “the Nation will eliminate every superstition,” or that “the Nation respects the equal right of each religion.” While none of these made it into the final draft, it is striking that the representatives underscored the religiousness of the Republic and that their opponents did not attack the idea of a religious state, but worried about religious inequality.

A more heated debate related to the preamble, which proposed ten components in its original composition, three of which dealt with “the spiritual basis of each civilization and the faith in the Almighty [*Dâng tối cao*],” “the transcendent value of human beings,” and the “construction of a democracy respecting the Person” (CBVNCH 1956c). Personalism obviously figured as a fundamental source of inspiration, but the reference to God proved more divisive. A representative proposed the use of “the Almighty,” as this would let everyone refer to God differently according to their faith. Another representative argued that any mention of the religion, either in the words “the Lord” (*Thượng đế*) or “the Almighty” (*Dâng tối cao*) should be avoided, as this right was recognized in article 17, and this “debate would eventually create division among religions” (CBVNCH 1956c). Instead, he proposed to use the word spiritualism (*duy linh*), as this “would bring together all of those who are not intoxicated by Communism and shows clearly the path of the Vietnamese State in opposition to Communist materialism” (CBVNCH 1956c). The Assembly settled for this formula, thus suggesting that spiritualism, a more multifaceted derivative of religion, expressed the difference between the Republic and communism. The Constitution recognized the importance of spirituality in Vietnamese nationalism. It also consecrated a new idea, which was not widely shared by the end of the First Indochina War, except among some Catholics: that spirituality had to oppose communism.

Despite this focus on spirituality, the Republic did not intervene in religious matters. The only legislation was the 1950 Associated State of Vietnam’s Ordinance 10 requiring associations other than the foreign Catholic missions and Chinese congregations to obtain the Ministry of Interior’s authorizations. Except for civil servants who underwent intensive personalist training, people were free to seek spiritual education on their own. Religious education could give them the philosophical weapons to oppose communism (Trần Mục Đích 1960a, 1960b, 1960c). Spirituality would otherwise remain a private affair.

⁶The Assembly Chair decided to abandon mentions that the state respected all religions and the proscription of a state religion, since they were corollaries to the freedom of religion (CBVNCH 1956a, 3144).

In a manual printed in 1955, *Cuộc Cách Mạng Nhân Vị* (The Personalist Revolution), Father Trần Hữu Thanh, who taught personalism to civil servants, elaborated on the role of religion:

Religion is both aside and above politics. Aside, in the sense it should not interfere with politics. Above, however, in the sense that religion provides answers to the role and the salvation of human beings. This is why politics should not weaken its role; instead, it should provide all the material conditions for its development.... (Trần Hữu Thanh 1955, 82)

The state and the church were not coterminous to each other, but their coexistence was not doomed to failure as it was in Europe's absolutist regimes. Politics were supposed to guarantee a total freedom of religion, and offer the material conditions for religions to flourish (18). In fact, since the state would not define the terms of this spiritual turn in the Republic, theologians and scholars had to examine the full scope of this spiritualization.

Many religious leaders still associated their religion with a strong nationalist sentiment. Northern Catholic priests accompanying their parishioners in their migration to the south after 1954 explained that this exile was not "a singular curse, but the repetition of biblical history" (Hansen 2008, 258). Some Buddhists also stressed their attachment to Vietnamese nationalism and opposition to communism. The lay Buddhist Nghiêm Xuân Thiện, former governor of Tonkin and director of the daily *Thời Luận* (News Talk), wrote an article claiming that "any religion, including Buddhism, is contrary to the fundamentals of Communism" (TL 1955). Thích Tâm Châu, who went south in 1954, also shared this position. Two years later, he declared:

If you want to know what is the purpose of the Ghost Festival we organize this 14th of July of the lunar calendar, I believe I already provided you the answer earlier. But there is, however, an additional meaning. As the mother country is under the threat of the Three No and its virtues fall down to crumble, religious officials and intellectuals have the responsibility to maintain the spirit; there is a need for a greater virtue among the people in order to restore order; in order to reinforce the nation. (TL 1956a)

Thus, several figures among northern Catholics and Buddhists believed that religion was part of Vietnamese nationalism. An editorial in *Thời Luận* discussed Buddhism and politics:

Some people wonder how those two words Buddhism and politics can stand together as they believe Buddhism has nothing to do with politics ... because when it comes to politics, they think one should either be a monarchist or a democrat.... Put this way, everybody can understand how simplistic this reasoning can be. Engaging in politics does not mean supporting a person or believing in a political group. Any person or political group can disappear with time. But a nation, in contrast, remains forever. Therefore, becoming involved and engaging in the survival of the nation becomes an act of politics. (TL 1956b)

Politics and religion had two functions, a spiritual and a temporal one, both necessary and complementary to one another. Yet they did not exclude each other—at least at the time—as long as nationalism guided political action. Beyond the apparent incompatibility of religion and communism, some scholars believed that there could even be a united religious front. Just like the first attempts to bridge the gap between Christians and Cao Đài during the First Indochina War, the project of a religious alliance was imagined by Catholic intellectuals.

A requirement for the imagining of a religious alliance was to show that the coexistence of religions had roots deep into the past. A book entitled *Làn Sóng Tôn Giáo Trên Đất Việt* (The Religious Surge in Vietnam), published in 1959, analyzed the origins and practice of Confucianism, Buddhism, Catholicism, Caodaism, and the cult of local spirits in Vietnam (Tâm Ngọc 1959). Its introduction discussed why religions gained such a large and diverse admittance among the Vietnamese. Contrary to Đạo Duy Anh, an early Marxist historian and lexicographer who claimed that “Vietnamese religions are a bunch of disorderly beliefs and cults” (31), the introduction insisted that monotheist religions referred to the faith in a creator and to the existence of a human being’s soul, and valued spirituality rather than material conditions (32). Religious faith had fostered the Vietnamese people’s relentless struggle for national unity (36–37). Thus, Vietnam was inherently religious. This religiousness was not the expression of Vietnamese traditionalism, but an original and forward-thinking component of Vietnamese nationalism.

Another way to suggest religious solidarity was to show that communism threatened all faiths. An official French-language pamphlet criticized communist repression of religions in Vietnam and in the rest of the world. It stressed that “Communists hate religions, ranging from Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, Hinduism, Christianity to Judaism. This could not be different, as this hatred is based on both the rejection of any supra-natural being and the fear of morality, the cornerstone of each religion” (Revue Horizon 1956, 5). The pamphlet added that any sign of freedom of religion in a communist country was a temporary tactic, before the annihilation of religion. This was how the Chinese communists repressed Tibetan Buddhists (11), or the Soviet Union prevented Muslims from traveling to Mecca (13). It was precisely because communism threatened religions that all religions, in turn, had to unite against communism.

Underlining the political circumstances for a spiritual turn was not sufficient. A religious alliance against communism could not be strategic or coincidental. Even at the theological level, religions shared the same conception of the person. One essay explained in 1956:

In all faiths, the Person is both the ultimate goal and converging point of each legitimate religion:

- Buddhism: has a high consideration of the Mind, the Meditation and the Virtue so that human beings do not drown in materialism.
- Confucianism: has a high consideration of the Humanity, the Charity, the Piety, the Loyalty, in order to elevate the morality of human beings.
- Catholicism: gives a clear explanation of the nature, the reasons of being and the salvation of human beings as well as human beings’ freedom, thus approaching even better Personalism. (Huy and Hoài 1956, 10)

It was important to elaborate how Buddhism and Confucianism resembled Catholicism. This proved particularly challenging, because the Buddhist faith was often considered as a philosophy rather than a religion, and it did not worship any god, but advocated the learning of Buddha's teachings. Since Buddhists did not focus on the person, but encouraged the negation of the self, they could hardly engage in a Personalist Revolution. But even in these theological debates, personalist intellectuals proved extremely resourceful.

Father Trần Thái Đình dedicated an entire PhD dissertation to this topic in 1958. He challenged the idea that Buddhism was a form of nihilism and attempted to prove that it was compatible with personalism. Accordingly, the Pūgđalavada of the third century BCE was not the only Buddhist school focusing on the person. Parallels could be found even before, in what he called "primitive" Buddhism, that is, the early schools of Buddhism before the schism of the Second Buddhist Council in the fourth century BCE. In his introduction, he wondered: "Doesn't one find in the Sutra, disciples asking Buddha about this doctrine: Is the Self the body? Is it the living principle or is it different? Does the holy nirvana exist after death or not?" (Trần Thái Đình 1958, 10). In raising those questions, the scholar implied that Buddhism was compatible with personalism.

Confucianism also had to figure as an important spiritual force for the Republic. A 1956 article in *Gió Nam* (The Wind of the South), the magazine of the National Revolutionary Civil Servant League, emphasized the idea that personalism, although originating in France, could find its most fertile ground in Asia. Vũ Mộng Hàn (1956, 4–5) explained that Buddha and Confucius, who each tried to solve the material and spiritual conditions of human beings, could in fact have brought about the first personalist revolutions in history. Whether the Confucianist Vũ Mộng Hàn and the Catholic Trần Thái Đình were right or not is beyond the scope of this article. What seems striking, however, is their willingness to underline the importance of religion in Vietnam and to champion the unity of those religions. According to these views, religious diversity was not a weakness, but an asset in opposing communism.

In practice, the official endorsement of spirituality and the intellectuals' call for a religious alliance provided favorable conditions for the development of religious activities. Religions took an important place among associations, private educational institutions, and social activities. For instance, out of the eighteen associations creating or changing statutes in 1957, five regrouped youth, students, and alumni; four were cultural associations; three were sport clubs; and three were women's associations, while four were religious (CBVNCH 1957). In comparison to the tight censorship, the violent mobs, or the judicial prosecution restraining journalism (Fall 1958, 254), there was little restriction of religious activities. With the exception of Cao Đài or Hòa Hảo militants who contested Saigon's authority, as well as religious practices of the central highlands' ethnic minorities that were deemed backward, many other spiritual faiths developed exponentially.

Vietnamese Christians reached a total of 1.3 million in 1962, according to Fides, a proportion of 10 percent of the population, second only to the Philippines in Asia (ICI 1963b). The number of adult baptisms alone, excluding children's christenings, more than doubled from 16,323 to 37,429 within five years from 1956 to 1961, which did not even account for the 111,324 adult catechumens remaining at the

end of this period (ICI 1963b). Buddhist membership also soared. Between 1959 and 1963, the number of monks registered at the General Buddhist Association increased by 40 percent, and the number of lay Buddhists by 60 percent. Catholics built churches and schools and proselytized in the central highlands, while Buddhists organized preacher corps, trained thousands of youth, and offered free healthcare every day at the Xã Lợi Pagoda by 1962 (Ford 2017, 155–56; Gomane 1963, 56; Naïdenoff 1963b, 352). Their growing cult also materialized in large celebrations, such as the construction of the stations of the cross leading to the church of La Vãng or the Thích Ca Phật Đài, a gigantic statue of a meditating Buddha overseeing the hills of Vũng Tàu (Naïdenoff 1963a, 348). Even the Cao Đài and the Hòa Hảo did not disappear.

While several leaders escaped to Cambodia, opposed Saigon, or later joined the communist-led National Liberation Front (Quinn-Judge 2013; Werner 1981, 54–55), their religious practice continued and even expanded. Cao Đài branches in the western-most provinces of the Mekong delta continued their activities and even gained influence thanks to the weakening of the Tây Ninh branch (Tòa Thánh Tiền Giang – Minh Kiên Đài 1957). Even the most rebellious Cao Đài of Tây Ninh signed an agreement with Saigon in 1956, guaranteeing their freedom to proselytize and gather believers, provided that they abandoned political activities (Werner 1981, 54). Blagov (2001, 108–9), who used Cao Đài and provincial-level Communist Party documents, even observes a “Caodaist revival” in 1957, focusing on “revitalizing the religion in accordance with the Caodaist scriptures.” The Cao Đài Trần Văn Quê taught at the Faculty of Letters in Saigon (Jammes 2016, 277) and even published influential proposals for reforms within the Ministry of Education (Trần Văn Quê and Vũ Ngô Xán 1961). Thus, the Cao Đài did not end with the repression of some of their leaders’ dissidence in 1955. While most of their activities remained under close scrutiny, and many of them were arrested in the following years, their religious practice was not repressed.

Religious groups flourished, and so did the interest in spirituality. A bibliography compiled by the staff of the National Library in Saigon in 1968 confirms that most religious faiths published extensively under the Republic (Nhà Văn Khô và Thư Viện Quốc Gia 1968, 26–34). *Quốc ngữ* publications on spiritual doctrines with a microscopic or near absent following in Vietnam also proliferated. No less than twenty books introduced the practice of yoga, Theosophy, Krisnamurti, or Subud, a movement originating in Java in the 1920s (44–60). This suggested that other faith-based groups—completely new to Vietnam—could develop as well.

A revealing example of this is the Baha’i, a monotheist religion originating in Iran in the nineteenth century to promote the unity of humanity and of all religious faiths. Since the 1930s depression, the Baha’i had started to oppose materialism. Horace Holley, a man who rose to the highest levels of Baha’i elected assemblies, wrote *The World Economy of Bahá’u’lláh*, underscoring an impasse that the economic crisis had revealed:

Politics is no longer politics alone, and economics is no longer economics alone, but both are nothing else than facets of the one, indivisible substance of human life.... It would be just as logical to call the crisis “religious” and base our hopes of recovery upon the influence of the churches. In reality, the crisis is at once

political, economic and religious, but humanity possesses no responsible, authoritative agency capable of coordinating all the factors and arriving at a world plan which takes all factors into account. (BW 1932, 352)

Holley held that the 1930s crisis was evidence of the cyclical nature of human societies, which called for the revival of religion as the only solution to the salvation of humanity (356). This criticism applied to the international system too. “Up to the economic depression, world peace was held to be merely a political problem, a matter of treaties between the sovereign states. The depression served to reveal the fact that world peace in reality is a question of social justice and not merely the cessation of military strife” (357). Holley advocated the “oneness of humanity” (355) by eliminating national, religious, or social boundaries, and the creation of a universal tribunal protecting the rights of all (362). Only this world government

can effect disarmament, create a safe currency, reconcile the discord of classes, establish an education conforming to basic human needs, and overcome the sinister peril resident in the divergent theories of capitalism and communism. Not until world government exists can the divorce between “religious” and “secular” values be ended, the greatest curse in human experience. (358)

This analysis became the foundation of the “Aims and Purpose of the Baha’i Faith,” written by Holley in 1932 (BW 1934). In the following years, the rise of fascism only confirmed to the Baha’i the need to launch a World Crusade in 1953. Its spread in Asia was no small endeavor. While the religion had found a substantial following in Central Asia and in the Indian subcontinent, the presence of Baha’i in East and Southeast Asia was almost nonexistent prior to World War II. Yet Shoghi Effendi, the descendent of the Prophet, had substantial aspirations for its spread in Asia, hoping that such a crusade could provide “an effective antidote to the baneful forces of atheism, nationalism, secularism and materialism” (BW 1953a).

It was less because of a desire to contain communism than an attempt to achieve a worldwide crusade that Baha’i missionaries went to the Republic of Vietnam (BW 1953b). After a four-month visit by a Baha’i pioneer, Shirin Fozdar, the first missionary who volunteered for Vietnam was her son, Jamshed Fozdar, who worked in the United States in order to fund his trip (JPFC/SB 1957). Only one month after his arrival in Saigon in August 1954, he sent to Diêm a copy of *Baha’u’llah and the New Era*, the Prophet’s revelations, which received a warm response. The prime minister thanked him and considered that it was “a source of hope and consolation for mankind in this troubled world of ours” (JPFC/PI/1 1954; JPFC/SB 1954). Diêm even received Fozdar in November 1955 and introduced him to his family (JPFC/SB 1957). The parallels between the Baha’i faith and personalism were one reason for this warm welcome.

An article in the newspaper *Ngôn Luận* (Discussion) underlined the rationale of the Baha’i faith by referring to the analysis of British meta-historian Arnold Toynbee:

Both Communism and Western Liberalism worship not God, but man. It is a contest between two incompatible versions of the cult of a human idol. Liberalism worships the individual. Communism worships the collective human beast.

If the Western concept of democracy is to triumph, it must base its appeal on more than freedom, more than prosperity, more than the right to vote and to strike; it must base its appeal on religion. (JPFC/PI/1 1955)

In theory, there were commonalities between the Baha'i faith and personalism: both opposed capitalism and communism and placed an emphasis on spirituality for the salvation of humanity. In practice too, the introduction of the Baha'i faith in Vietnam took off seamlessly. Jamshed Fozdar created the first Local Spiritual Assembly in Saigon in 1955 and traveled northwards to proselytize, leading to the creation of a second Local Spiritual Assembly in 1957. The following year, six new assemblies appeared (JPFC/PI/1 1958), and the Baha'i even expanded their activities in the early 1960s with the creation of private schools in central Vietnam (JPFC/PI/1 1962a). Still, Baha'i proselytism achieved greater results elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

By the end of 1956, Indonesia already possessed five and Malaya had four Local Spiritual Assemblies (BW 1956a). The first Southeast Asian meeting was supposed to take place in Djakarta in 1957 and not in Saigon (BW 1956a). However, nowhere else in the region did the Baha'i gain state recognition as rapidly as in Vietnam. In the *Baha'i Administrative World Order*, a publication collecting all assemblies' documents on state recognition of their activities, four documents related to Southeast Asia, half of which referred to southern Vietnam alone. The Republic recognized Saigon's assembly as early as September 1955 (BW 1955) and approved its marriage certificate in January 1956, even though there were only twenty-six believers at the time (BW 1956b).

Hence the Republic did not try to prioritize Catholicism over other faiths. In fact, if a religious group pursued spiritual goals, respected the Republic's unity, and opposed atheism, it contributed to the Personalist Revolution. Yet it was precisely this political formula, of associating religion with anticommunism, while allowing religious autonomy and diversity without any clear intervention from the state, that proved counter-productive.

REACHING THE LIMITS OF THE PERSONALIST REVOLUTION, 1959–63

By the end of the Republic of Vietnam in November 1963, it seemed obvious that the legacy of the Personalist Revolution's spiritual component was mixed, and that projects to create a religious alliance against atheism had failed. Instead of a society composed of diverse religious faiths yet united against communism, the population became increasingly divided along religious lines. The state limitations to religious activities must have antagonized a few religious groups. What could explain this division? Was it a mere reaction to the state's restrictions on religious activities? Or was the Personalist Revolution doomed to failure?

Like in any other conflict between the state and religious groups, tensions emerged because of the lack of a clearly defined boundary between religious matters and the state. While the 1963 United Nations fact-finding commission exposed Vietnamese Buddhists' grievances, most religious groups, at one point or another, had questioned those limits too. The Catholic clergy, for example, criticized the limitations on their private schools. Catholic private schools, which had mushroomed thanks to state funding and

international aid after 1954, had to find alternative funding to meet their expenses once these programs ended. *Luyện Thép* (Forging Steel), the newsletter of the diocese of Vinh, displaced to the south, documented the dispute, as many of its priests were teachers. The Ministry of Education acknowledged that the situation was delicate in November 1956. On the one hand, the schools were private, as they were staffed and run by Catholic priests. On the other hand, most had been constructed with public funding (LT 1957, 22). Despite their hopes to remain independent, the schools eventually adopted the national education program, but this left several Catholic priests bitter (UNARMS 1963a).

At no point did state interference become more apparent than in 1959, when the war resumed and Saigon suspected communist infiltration. In 1957, recent Catholic converts already seemed out of control. Bernard Fall reported that an entire group of ex-communists, who had undergone a rehabilitation program and converted to Catholicism, had created considerable trouble in the province of Quảng Nam. Convinced that they stood above the law, they arrested thousands of “communist” suspects on their own initiative (Fall 1958, 258). As Ngô Đình Nhu later commented, he believed that infiltrated communist agents attempted mass conversions in order to radicalize Buddhists in the area (UNARMS 1963a, 44–45). Therefore, the Catholic faith did not guarantee anyone would remain above suspicion.

Even the Baha’i, despite their low numbers, complained to the United Nations about the restrictions they faced. Since 1958, their Spiritual Assembly requested from the Ministry of Interior the right to proselytize, meet, and purchase land in central Vietnam, because the authorization it had received in 1955 only covered southern Vietnam (UNARMS 1958). The case reproduced a 1962 letter from the Minister of Interior stating that Baha’i activities could be tolerated in central Vietnam “unless they performed actions out of the religious field” (UNARMS 1962). However, since the security situation had worsened, the minister prohibited the Baha’i from carrying out “any activities in Central Vietnam and Mountainous Provinces” in April 1963 (UNARMS 1963b). The state thereafter closed five centers, confiscated books, and forbade delegates from attending the Baha’i World Congress in London (UNARMS 1963c).

This points to another issue. Religious groups were connected with transnational networks, which could compete with, and even challenge, their loyalty to the state. Catholics looked to the Vatican. Buddhists worked with Theravada monks of Ceylon, who chaired the inauguration ceremony of the Thích Ca Phật Đài, or Mahayana Buddhists in Japan for the training of several monks (Nha Tuyên Úy Phật Giáo 1969, 16). The first time they complained about discrimination from the state was at the World Buddhist Congress (Ford 2017, 162). Even the Baha’i seemed more connected to their World Center in Israel than to Saigon itself. While it would be easy to conclude that the religious groups’ opposition to the state was the result of foreign interference, the most important reason lies elsewhere. It was the Republic’s formal encouragement of spiritualism that strengthened a religious consciousness that increasingly channeled popular discontent.

Even to the Baha’i, the state restrictions were not the most vexing issue. What really made the case for their discrimination, they claimed to the United Nations, was the Republic’s failure to recognize them as a religion, but only as a mere association (UNARMS 1963c). This question, which Buddhists raised as well in the May 1963

crisis, pointed to one essential shortcoming of the Personalist Revolution: if the Republic's goal was to promote spiritualism, then why did the Baha'i or the Buddhist faith have to remain an association? When would the state either guarantee the equality of religions or openly declare which one was a state religion?

Obviously the state and the religious groups had different expectations about what the Personalist Revolution should involve. For the state, it meant religious freedom with minimal interference. For religious groups, on the other hand, it meant equality among religious faiths. The lack of positive actions to promote equality raised concerns over the state's preference for Catholicism over other religious faiths because of the Ngô family's well-known Catholic faith. It also highlighted a more fundamental problem related to the difference between religious practice and religious identification. Religious practice in everyday life can be hybrid and fluid. Catholics can worship ancestors, or non-Catholics can worship the Virgin Mary. Religious identification, however, tends to be exclusive (Brubaker 2013). Since the Republic implicitly categorized its citizens as believers or atheists, it encouraged an internal division of the society along religious lines. Therefore, the main reason that Buddhists or Baha'i believers increasingly opposed the state was not just its restrictions; it was also because the Personalist Revolution had allowed the emergence of a social and political consciousness among religious groups.

The process leading to a Buddhist mobilization is a case in point. Buddhists widely associated their faith with nationalism during the First Indochina War, and some openly acknowledged Buddhism's incompatibility with communism in the early years of the Republic. Yet it was only because of the ambiguous framework of the Republic's religious turn that Buddhist monks increasingly came to see themselves as religious and political leaders. The periodical of the Central Vietnamese Sangha, *Liên Hoa* (The Lotus), provides important insights on this process.

Liên Hoa did not just emphasize that Buddhism represented the essence of Vietnamese nationalism, it now exhorted its readership to become engaged "as Buddhists" in their daily lives. The publication reprinted an article originally appearing in 1951 in *Viên Âm*, the journal of the Annam Buddhist Association, entitled "Hãy Tô Ra Minh Là Phật Tử" (Show That You Are a Buddhist; LH 1956, 30–36). According to the article, Buddhists should present themselves as Buddhist, thereby implying that being a Buddhist entailed a common religious practice, as well as a cultural, social, and even political stance. Any reticence to do so—because of modesty, fear of reprisal, or concerns about prejudice in one's professional life—was inappropriate. No one should ever be shy about claiming to belong to the Buddhist faith, the article declared.

The article also defined with precision the politics of inclusion and exclusion involved in Buddhist membership. It criticized those who expressed an interest in Buddhism, yet did not pray, eat vegetarian food on full moon days, attend a pagoda, and present themselves as Buddhists. This restraint "betrayed their faith and somehow showed that these Buddhists tried to have it both ways" (*bất cá hay tay*; 33). It also blamed the Buddhists who collaborated with those "opposed to our faith." Only working together with those who would spread the faith, or at least result in benefits for Buddhists, should be considered. Any other collaboration would violate the commitment to the "three jewels" (*tam quý*)—the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha—because Buddhists behaving in such a way would not only show disdain to their religion,

but also encourage others to hold Buddhism in contempt (34). While opponents of the Buddhist faith have always underscored its lack of organization, the article continued, it was precisely when Buddhists truly engaged “as Buddhists” that the faith could become powerful. The article used a metaphor presented by Malalasekera, the Ceylonese monk heading the World Buddhist Congress in 1950:

When the Indian Cobra shows its power, people die. Yet when the rattlesnake shows its power, people are unharmed. We only need to show our strength fiercely, and have to show our strength fiercely, in order to carry out our mission: implementing the teachings of Buddha. Doing so requires and demands everyone to assert oneself as Buddhist. (35)

Hence, being a Buddhist could not be reduced to a nominal belonging to the faith. It implied a rigorous practice; greater discernment between legitimate, uncommitted Buddhists or “those opposed to the faith”; and no concerns about the consequences of such mobilization. *Liên Hoa* called upon the faithful to become aware of a larger mission. Buddhism was not just a spiritual practice anymore; it also referred to a specific social and political consciousness.

Yet such consciousness would only become suspicious to the state if it openly criticized the assumption of the Personalist Revolution, that every spirituality would actively oppose communism. The resumption of the communist insurgency in the southern Vietnamese countryside in 1959 did not push either the sangha or the laity to mobilize the Buddhist faith. Ironically, it was the Chinese communist repression of the Buddhist uprising in Tibet in March 1959 that revealed, once and for all, how Vietnamese Buddhism defined its position towards communism.

The Superior of the General Association of Buddhists in Vietnam issued a letter to the sangha and the Buddhist faithful in Vietnam commenting on their prayers to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Buddhists (LH 1959a). The letter condemned communism by criticizing it as one of the most despicable attacks in history from “those without religions” (27). In so doing, it echoed the Buddhist demonstrations in Saigon condemning the Chinese communist crackdown in Tibet (Trần Nữ-Anh 2013, 98). But the letter did not conclude that Buddhists had to devote all their energy in opposing communism.

We Vietnamese Buddhists strongly support the Tibetan people, not because they are co-religionists, but because they fight for the common objective of defending Buddhism.

However, the barbaric force we just mentioned above does not only emerge in one form such as communists, and does not only threaten in one place such as Tibet.

Our Buddhism has always defended the aspiration, enhanced the unique and eternal principle or disseminating and preserving peace, and renounced the ambition to build one’s own strength by destroying others. It is perhaps because of these, because of this aspiration and this principle, that the forces threatening Buddhism are not scarce. They hide under different forms, and find one way or another, but act in the purpose of oppressing Buddhism in no few numbers, and no few places. (LH 1959a, 28)

The Chinese occupation of Tibet entailed the loss of holy sites and the exile of the Dalai Lama himself. Despite that, the Superior did not conclude that communism was the number-one enemy. Instead, its willingness to remind its congregation that there were multiple dangers, and not just one, was a warning: Since communism is not the only enemy, the faithful should pay attention to other threats as well.

Liên Hoa seized the opportunity offered by this turn of events to define more clearly how a Buddhist self-consciousness should operate. If Buddhism had to renew itself, it was not the laity, but the sangha that had to act as leaders (LH 1959b). This new direction was brought forward twice during the year 1959. The Third National Congress of the General Buddhist Association (LH 1959c) gathered both the sangha and the laity, while the Second National Congress of the Sangha, the first of which had taken place in Hanoi in the autumn of 1952 (LH 1959d), decided that the sangha in central Vietnam would take a more prominent role. From that moment on, *Liên Hoa* stopped being an organ for the sangha in central Vietnam only. Its views were widely shared, to the point that it became, in January 1960, the voice of the sangha in the entire territory south of the 17th parallel (LH 1959e). Thus, significant changes happened in 1959. Buddhists had stepped up the process of unifying the faithful, given a greater voice to the sangha in central Vietnam, and openly declared that they would not mobilize against communism.

As the government imposed increasing limitations on religious meetings starting in 1959, the Buddhist critics soon identified the government as a threat to their movement. It is in this context of governmental repression that Buddhist monks increasingly represented their faith not just as a religious group with a political consciousness, but as a canvas for political change. In January 1960, in the first editorial following the new mission of the periodical, *Liên Hoa* explained the mission of Buddhism in the year ahead:

There is one event that is often referred to in the history of the word: when a movement, a regime, or a popular organization is about to collapse and disintegrate, the leaders become increasingly rigid and dictatorial and push for the implementation of every order, causing difficulties in subordinate levels. On the other hand, when a movement, an organization, a popular initiative rises up, the masses support it and create favorable conditions for its direction and its leadership. Vietnamese Buddhism is in this second situation. (LH 1960a)

Accordingly, Buddhism was enjoying wide support, whereas a declining regime was becoming increasingly unpopular and used authoritarian rule to govern Vietnam. Later in 1960, *Liên Hoa* pinpointed who seemed to lose control by imposing their rule with brutal force. Starting in 1960, *Liên Hoa* identified the state as the main obstacle to the Buddhist movement. In May, the periodical reassured its readers that it was following up on the petition sent to protest the state's restrictions on the Vesak celebrations in the central province of Quảng Ngãi (LH 1960b). Again in August 1961, *Liên Hoa* published an editorial openly calling upon the government to guarantee the Constitution's liberties; this happened precisely when Catholicism was being widely celebrated in Vietnam as one of its churches became a minor basilica.⁷ These events were ominous signs that

⁷The Catholic site of La Vang was recognized by the episcopacy as a site of national pilgrimage, and the Vatican designated this church as a minor basilica.

Vietnam was about to be entirely converted to Catholicism and that the state, instead of preventing the Vatican and bishops from holding lavish ceremonies, was allowing them to rise above other faiths.

This ideal of religious coexistence and respect for one another was central to Buddhist values: “no Buddhist in the reigns of Ashoka and Harsha in India, or under the Lý and the Trần dynasty ... had used the Buddhist doctrine to overthrow other religious faiths” (LH 1960c). A true freedom of religion not only implied freedom from state oppression and restrictions, but also entailed freedom from other religions’ influence, they believed. In a time when every other religious group was facing restrictions, the Buddhist movement needed the government to guarantee the liberties set by the Constitution and the principle of religious diversity advocated by the Personalist Revolution. The failure of the government to intervene confirmed their impression that the Catholic Church would end up winning out over other faiths.

This led the sangha to wonder about the potential reach of Buddhist activism. Since the state would not fulfill its responsibilities, how could Buddhism influence political change? It seemed highly unlikely that Buddhist government officials would assert more firmly their Buddhist lineage. An article in *Liên Hoa* expressed regret that certain members of the Vietnamese government did not present themselves as Buddhists and align their political visions and programs with Buddhist ideals, as was the case for U Nu, the prime minister in Burma, or Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike in Ceylon (LH 1960d). If Buddhist politicians could not implement reforms from the top down, the alternative was to build a Buddhist revolution from the bottom up.

In April 1961, a lecture delivered by the Organizational Committee of the Vesak in central Vietnam explicitly linked Buddhism and revolution. As it highlighted how the dharma brought peace to the chaos prevailing in India before the birth of Buddha, the lecture insisted that Buddhism was both democratic and revolutionary: democratic, as Buddha’s teachings emphasized the elimination of injustice, and revolutionary, because no one before had addressed these internal divisions. This Buddhist interpretation had implications for politics in Vietnam, the lecture concluded: “In summary, 8–4 [the Eighth of the Fourth Lunar Month] is the coming of the only savior of all species. 8–4 is the beginning of a new historical time for the glory of revolution and democracy” (LH 1961). Therefore, the Republic provided important conditions for the emergence of a Buddhist political consciousness that by the early 1960s clearly meant an influential role for the sangha and increasing calls to oppose the government.

Another important point of contention was the principle of religious diversity itself. From the first calls for an interreligious dialogue in 1953, the Personalist Revolution had inspired theologians to underscore commonalities among religious faiths. An important after-effect of this debate was for some theologians to wonder if similarities would justify a synthesis of all religious faiths: since the diverse faiths of Vietnam shared so much in common, could one particular form of spirituality encompass all other religious beliefs?

Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Liên, unlike his counterpart Thích Tâm Châu, was more connected to international Buddhism than with fellow fighting Catholics. He spent the First Indochina War in Chợ Lớn, in Huế, and at the University of Ceylon, from which he graduated in 1956. Several passages of his 1958 essay, *The Buddhist Thought*, were censored, but what remained still conveyed ideas opposed to personalism

(Bhikkhu Quảng Liên 1958). Thích Quảng Liên did not find similarities between Catholicism and Buddhism, but saw differences. Quoting Roman poet Lucretius, he wrote: “Each man could gain salvation for himself without the mediation of priests or reference to gods.” The monk also criticized idealism, materialism, realism, rationalism, singularism, pluralism, and dualism, and deplored that some “philosophers mixed religions in their theories” (119). To him, these doctrines pointed back to India six centuries before the Common Era, when the first manifestations of materialism, logical thinking, and dualism had already emerged (120). Thus, because of its antiquity and comprehensiveness, Buddhism seemed superior to personalism itself.

This even led some to question whether one unique religion could supersede religious diversity. Mai Thọ Truyền, a Buddhist layman heading the Society for Buddhist Studies in southern Vietnam, also made claims along these lines. In a special issue of the monthly *France Asie*, he insisted that the Buddhist Revival in Vietnam found its origins in the intellectual elite, “disappointed with Western materialism” (Mai Thọ Truyền 1959, 807). The 1930s deadlock of materialistic ideologies had thus provided a major thrust to Buddhism too. He added:

In principle, there are three main religions in Vietnam: Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. But in fact, there is only one religion, which is the result of the hybridization of the three aforementioned doctrines, each of those providing one aspect of this larger whole.

Undoubtedly, a few obstinate believers, either clergymen or laymen, profess an exclusive practice of Taoism or Buddhism. It is however a small minority. The masses in general have no prejudices and refuse embarrassing distinctions.... The most illiterate Vietnamese as well as non-Buddhists, fear the consequences of their karma, which they imagine through the Ten Courts of Hell.... The influence of this religious array also took an important place in the arts, with a clear Buddhism predominance. Architecture, painting and sculpture all have drawn their inspiration from two key ideas of Buddhism: purity and compassion. (807–8)

Mai Thọ Truyền acknowledged the diversity of religious beliefs and practices in Vietnam. Yet only Buddhism had infused Vietnam the most, to him. Buddhists were not the only ones making claims that one unique religion, rather than religious diversity, could fit Vietnam the best. Catholic scholars shared a similar vision.

French missionary Fernand Parrel, who had been a major advocate of personalism in the early 1950s, also started to wonder whether Catholicism could consolidate all of Vietnam’s spiritual needs. In an article destined for fellow missionaries, he raised the question of how far missionaries should go in indigenizing the Catholic faith. To him, the success of Catholicism in Vietnam not only depended on proselytizing in Vietnamese, or creating a national church and establishing a Vietnamese hierarchy; it also had to incorporate local beliefs. As he praised the moralizing influence of Confucianism, he wondered:

It is necessary to remind the teachings of the Christ himself: I did not come to abolish the Law, but to complete it. The Confucian basis was valuable, and we could have constructed something solid on it. Why has nothing been tried in this

respect to this day? Without a doubt, this is unfortunate. However, nothing is lost and a synthesis remains possible. Isn't Saint Thomas Aquinas said to have baptized Aristotle? Why wouldn't we witness the same baptism of Confucius? (Parrel 1957, 1024)

Just like Mai Thọ Truyền or his co-religionists during the First Indochina War, Parrel imagined that Catholicism could assimilate Vietnamese culture and become the only legitimate religion. The Baha'i too, despite their small following, wanted to take the credit for creating religious unity under their leadership. For the first time, in Saigon they organized World Religion Day on January 21, 1962; seven religious representatives, including Mai Thọ Truyền, came to discuss the "fundamental oneness of religion," a debate that was repeated the following year (JPFC/PI/1 1962b, 1963). Thus, the growing conflict between the state and religious groups was not only rooted in occasional tensions, but also based on more profound, theoretical grounds.

CONCLUSION

In May 1963, the flag controversy was key to the dispute between Buddhists and the government. A decree banning any other flag but the national flag was implemented during the May 1963 Buddhist manifestation in Hue, while a few days before the Vatican flag had been flying over Danang for the ordination of a priest. As French Jesuit George Naïdenoff commented, this flag issue was significant. Many postcolonial states had endorsed the importance of religion in their nationalist movements and included religious symbols, such as the Muslim crescent, in their national flag. Other newly independent countries, however, had not exactly sorted out this matter (Naïdenoff 1963b, 353). The Republic of Vietnam was one of them. Just like the Republic of Indonesia, Saigon attempted to promote religious diversity as a core nationalist value while keeping the state secular. In theory, spirituality was recognized as a fundamental value of the Republic's Constitution because it marked a clear opposition to communist atheism. Personalist scholars further imagined that religions in Vietnam could form a united front against communism. Yet, in practice, the state did not intervene and only guaranteed freedom of religion. Over the years, the autonomous development of religions faced government limitations, and eventually challenged the assumptions that religions would oppose communism or even stand equal in a united front. Three conclusions emerge from this study of religions in the Republic of Vietnam.

First, the Republic did not emerge from a systematic elimination of religious groups. While it repressed the political and military activities of the Cao Đài or the Hòa Hảo, it never advocated the conversion of the population to Catholicism, nor did it implement assimilationist policies. In fact, it promoted religious freedom and religious diversity, which not only contrasts with Western democracies' two-centuries-long secularization, but also contradicts most studies of church-state relations, claiming that modernization entails an attempt by the state to coopt, sponsor, or suppress religions. The Republic pledged to defend freedom of religion—at least initially—and promoted religious diversity. Ironically, it was precisely because the state could guarantee neither religious equality nor absolute noninterference in religious affairs that religious groups started to challenge its authority.

Second, the historical circumstances of the First Indochina War and the spiritual turn of the Republic increasingly led religious groups to redefine their mission both spiritually and politically. Spiritually, the increasing demands on Vietnamese society to engage in the struggle against colonial rule, or in the fight against communism, inspired several scholars to explore a possible religious alliance, further religious acculturation, and even religious supremacy. Politically, religious membership not only refers to a religious lineage or to the respect of a religious tradition, but also conveys a political vision. Asserting oneself as a Catholic or as a Buddhist obviously meant something different in 1945, when Vietnam had just declared its independence, and in 1963, towards the end of the Personalist Revolution. Many other people of faith remained uninvolved in politics, and were no less Catholic or Buddhist for doing so. But the First Indochina War provoked the emergence of a Catholic political consciousness that would oppose communist atheism, and the Republic, which would expect other religious groups to have the same epiphany, encouraged instead the reinforcement of a Buddhist consciousness opposed to the state itself. This shows to what extent religions and politics are not separate from one another, and that the political implication of religious groups relates to two processes. It implies the redefinition of religious membership and, as a consequence, the rethinking of the politics of inclusion and exclusion. It also involves a significant reconsideration of how faith informs daily forms of political and social action for the priesthood and the laity.

Third, the importance of spirituality and religion in postcolonial Vietnam points to a new periodization of the Cold War. While most analyses of the ideological struggle in the postcolonial world focus on the clash between capitalism and communism, the Cold War was also a debate about the nature of human societies and the opposition of spirituality to materialism. Recent scholarship has underlined the importance of philosophy among the 1960s southern Vietnamese intellectuals in this debate (Gadkar-Wilcox 2014, 388). Yet it is striking to see that most of the religious or political movements that would grow in Vietnam in the 1950s emerged in the wake of the 1930s economic crisis. The Personalist Revolution found its origins in that decade. So did the Đại Việt party, the Buddhist Revival, and even the new Baha'i objectives. All four challenged the materialistic cosmology of both capitalism and communism and attempted to carve a third way. This aspect of the Cold War points to a common origin in the 1930s, and raises the question of whether this religious resurgence against communism could have outlasted the end of the Cold War itself.

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