

‘New’ or ‘Old’ Religions: Changing Religious Policy in the Central Highlands, Vietnam

Nguyen Bang Nong^a, ^aInstitute of Anthropology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Email: nongbangnguyen@gmail.com

Over the last 30 years, Vietnam has dramatically changed its economic system from centralization, bureaucracy, and subsidy to a socialist-oriented market. While economic policy has opened doors, policy for “new” religions still shifts depending on background and situation. As a consequence, in the 2000s, many protests and conflicts took place throughout the Central Highlands. Research reports point to migration, land conflict and the impeding development of ‘new’ religions as causes. This paper examines the religious policy of the Vietnamese government in the Central Highlands. Particularly, the authors focus on the concept of ‘new’ religions. For the Vietnamese government, the emergence of new religions creates a significant misunderstanding that must be addressed. This misunderstanding fails to create trust between the ethnic people and the State. Rather, it creates additional conflict when the State fails to realise and act upon the positive influence of new religions.

Key words: *Vietnam, indigenous ethnic minorities, new religion, policy.*

Introduction

From the summer of 2014 onwards, a study about the Central Highlands has focused on indigenous peoples in Ma, Churu, Ede, and Jarai. The main religions of these minorities are Protestantism and/or Catholicism. In Pang village, Ia Glai commune, Chu Se district, Gia Lai Province, nearly 100% of Jarai people follow the Protestant faith. This in-depth study reveals that all villagers do not smoke or drink alcohol. When asked as to why, people claimed that they were educated by the local pastor. This was markedly different to indigenous peoples’ traditional values in the Central Highlands where smoking and alcohol consumption facilitated communication amongst people. For hundreds of years, indigenous peoples of the Central Highlands have been affected by many external influences. More importantly, in the



past 30 years, since the *Doi Moi* (Innovation) Policy (1986), changes to these indigenous communities have become more distinct. In the communities studied, the conversion from traditional to new religions by ethnic minorities' in the Central Highlands after 1986 was noticeable. There are now more than 400,000 ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands who identify as Protestants, compared with 15,000 in 1975.

Up to now, many indigenous peoples in the Central Highlands followed Catholicism and/or Protestantism. A report by the Vietnam Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs showed that 10% of indigenous peoples in the Central Highlands follow a particular religion. In fact, there were many indigenous people who are seen as highly religious: Churu (94.5%), Ma (83.6%), Koho (83.7%), and Xtieng (79.3%) (Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs, 2016). In general, religious followers in the Central Highlands were either Catholic and/or Protestant.

We now know that religious and traditional beliefs of indigenous ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands focus on a system of worship relating to heaven, earth and forests. This polytheism prevails in the minds of many ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands (Nong, 2018, & Nong et al., 2018.). Because of this, the need to investigate religions in the Central Highlands became apparent. More than 11 indigenous people have lived in this area for a long time, long before the arrival of the Vietnamese. Religious history in the Central Highlands has shown that Catholicism and Protestantism appeared at the time of French colonisation. For example, Kon Tum province was the earliest Catholic settlement in the Central Highlands (Truong, 1997.)

Reports of the People's Committee of Ia Glai commune note that many annual reports still mention Jarai people who are Protestants and held great "dissatisfaction with the main right." There are many reasons for this dissatisfaction, but they mostly come from land, immigration and religion (Nong, 2017.). During the early years of the new millennium, the Central Highlands was a hot spot for ethnic violence. At that time, violence was partly associated with religion, in particular Protestantism (Human Rights Watch, 2002). Underpinning this research is the fact that many people have been involved in this violence. Until now, the mass media presents ethnic minority and religion (mainly Protestantism) as two groups in dispute with the state management agencies. Meanwhile, the scientific perspectives that inform this research show, through the literature, that religion is only one part of the problem. Lack of available land for production, corruption and social management methods are the foremost problems.

Religious management between ethnic peoples and the State poses a clear and apparent problem. In other words, trust between ethnic peoples and the State does not exist. Given this, a focus on "new" religion phenomena and associated policies is necessary. This paper argues that the inequality in indigenous people's management not only relates to economics but also

to religion (Van de Walle & Gunewardena, 2001). It is true that the indigenous peoples of the Central Highlands believe egalitarianism is much more important than differences in social status. What the Vietnamese government knows about the Central Highlands is quite different to the current reality. The government tries to resolve problems via many policies and these policies have little to no effect. Therefore, perceptions of change in the Central Highlands needs to take account of indigenous perspectives and social changes in a dynamic context.

Definition about “New” Religions in Vietnam

Currently, there are only sixteen religions recognised by the Government of Vietnam, including Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Caodaism, Hoa Hao Buddhism, Islam, Baha’i, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon), Tinh Do Cu Sy Phat Hoi, Tu An Hieu Nghia, Buu Son Ky Huong, Minh Su Dao, Tam Tong Mieu, Balamon Islam, Hieu Nghia Ta Lon, Co Doc Giao Phuc Lam. Additionally, Vietnam has more than 100 religions defined as “new” religions. These “new” religions have not been legally recognised until now. In the Central Highlands, the “new” religions are Tin lanh De ga (Montagnard Dega), “Ami Sara”, “Po Khap Brau”, “Tin lanh Dang Christ Viet Nam”, “Lien Huu Lutheran Viet Nam va Hoa Ky”, “Cay Thap Gia Chua Jesu Chrits”, “Phuc Hung Tin lanh” and “Ha Mon” These “new” religions are related to Catholicism or Protestantism.

According to Le et al. (2014), “new” religions refer to all groups and sects and have the following common characteristics: strong belief in the leader of the sect, volatility, self-contained community organisation, cultural values, lifestyles and other ethical norms. These characteristics are oppose traditional or mainstream religions. Hoang (2014), states that “new” religions are defined only by researchers from government research organizations. Nguyen defines “new” religions as those different to traditional religions and that these differences can be found in organisational structure, content of activities and new characteristics (Nguyen, 2016.) Nguyen emphasises two important characteristics of “new” religious phenomena: ‘escaping the orthodoxy of traditional religions and introducing some new ritual teachings’ (pp. 14.). The second characteristics is stated in another research paper, Nguyen et al. (2017), where he argues that there were many terms applied to “new” religions in Vietnamese contexts, such as “new religion”, “evil cult”, “heresy” and “mystery”. Based on a study about “new” religions in the Central Highlands, Nguyen (2017), suggests “new” religions, in the context of political security relations, are ranked in two ways: (i) political factors; and (ii) policy solutions. In other words, Vietnamese officials defined “ta dao” (heresy) in Vietnamese when they saw it for the first time (Ramsay, 2007.)

Researchers of religious groups in Vietnam provide neutral definitions such as “new religious phenomena”. Pham & Nguyen (2008), for example, propose that the division of “new” religions belongs to one of four categories as listed below:

- i. Propaganda superstition, lethal, material damage, affecting morality and human personality;
- ii. Political influence, obstruction against the Party, State policies and propaganda causing national unity;
- iii. Less harmful but affecting individuals, families and communities, and society;
- iv. Normal religious activities towards good.

Based on the relationship of religious origin, Do (2001) divides “new” religions in Vietnam into three categories: (i) detached or rooted from a large religion; (ii) integration and establishing “new” religion and; (iii) imported from abroad (p. 11.) Clearly, “new” religions are categorised and viewed in different ways by researchers. It is difficult to locate a complete categorisation that meets all the criteria when studying “new” religions in Vietnam. The problem becomes even more complex when “new” religions combine original and traditional beliefs. Moreover, “new” religions are politically motivated and create conflict for the Vietnamese government. Consequently, “new” religions are still not recognised by law.

“New” Religions Phenomena Concerning Indigenous Ethnic Minorities in the Central Highlands, Vietnam

Vietnamese researchers of “new” religions agree on the geographical location and time of arrival of “new” religions in Vietnam. Such religions in Vietnam appeared in the South prior 1975. From 1986 onwards, “new” religions mainly appeared in the North, especially in the northern delta and midlands (Le, 2017; Nguyen, 2014.) Nguyen (2014) observed that “new” religions appeared in indigenous ethnic minority areas in Vietnam until the beginning of the 21st century. Over the last 10 years, the situation has brought change: “new” religious phenomena emerged and developed in indigenous ethnic minority areas, particularly in the Central Highlands. By 2016, 26 “new” religions existed and fell into three main groups: (i) a Central Highlands group; (ii) groups from other religions in the country and; (iii) foreign delegations. In light of their nature and teachings, these groups can also be identified as: (i) a group attached to Protestants and Catholics and; (ii) a group inherently linked to Buddhism or traditional beliefs (Nguyen, 2017, p. 243.) The heads of “new” religions were generally female rather than male (Le, 2015; Nguyen, 2017), had a low level of education and were mostly peasants, retired civil servants or dignitaries. Followers of “new” religions were quite diversified in age, gender, occupation, family circumstances and social status. The majority of followers were farmers who were confronted with personal and/or family difficulties or illnesses.

With regards to religious doctrine, most “new” religions borrowed or followed existing canonical doctrines. Many “new” religious groups in the Central Highlands mixed or modified traditional religions with Catholic or Protestant principles. For example, Le (2014) showed that specific cases in the Central Highlands were typical of the Ha Mon religion and strongly informed by Catholic doctrine. In the teachings of “new” religions, the heads found the appropriate spiritual features and teachings to suit the community and its followers. Nguyen et al. (2017) pointed out two characteristics of doctrine and content of “new” religions in the Central Highlands: 1. Bringing boldness, rights the mystical personal spirit of the leader and the gift of the spiritual beings that the organization believes in; 2. Content and activities associated with specific issues arising in the lives of people and localities where they reside; particularly urgent issues that people cannot resolve by themselves.

The practice of rituals and worship of “new” religions was simple. Many ritual practices took place in family or in a public space. One of the distinguishing features of “new” religious groups was the semi-open teachings and gatherings. Nguyen (2017) showed that many “new” religions existed and operated secretly, or semi-openly, when detected by local authorities. Those who violated the law would be silenced, renamed, or transferred to other areas for concealment or censure. Because of this, the size and number of organisations fluctuated making it difficult to identify accurate statistics. Followers who were unaware that they were participating in these “new” religions failed to recognise that they were breaking the law. This was especially the case for heads (p. 245.).

Policies of the Communist Party and State of Vietnam on religions *Before Doi Moi policy (1986)*

The Communist Party of Vietnam was born on February 3, 1930 and ended a period of political crisis and ideology for the Vietnamese people. This political and ideological crisis had affected the country since the second half of the nineteenth century. From 1930 onwards, a political party based on Marxism-Leninism created and provided the ideology for the Vietnamese nation. Recognising the role of unity in gathering national strength in the struggle for national liberation, the Party paid attention to religious issues. The fundamental view of the Party was freedom of religion and belief.

The instruction of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CCCPVN) on the establishment of the Alliance Against Allies (November 18, 1930) affirmed the right to freedom of belief. , “Collective activities or practices of the people to join a revolutionary organization, gradually to revolutionize the masses, but guarantee the freedom of belief of the masses, smashed anti-propaganda rhetoric. Communism is anarchist, homeless, and non-religious.” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 1998, p. 231.)



With a strategic vision and an order to curb the abuse of religion, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam proclaimed freedom of religion. The Constitution of January 6, 1946 stated that the ‘citizens of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam enjoy freedom of belief, with or without a religion.’ Previously, in 1945, the provisional government, led by President Ho Chi Minh, attracted many religious individuals, especially Catholics such as Nguyen Manh Ha (later Minister of National Economy), Ngo Tu Ha (later Deputy Minister of Labour), Vu Dinh Tung (later Minister of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs). From that moment on, the Party’s policies had special concerns for Catholicism. President Ho Chi Minh confirmed that ‘the purpose of our government is to fight for independence and to bring happiness to the people, but to achieve that happiness for everyone, it is necessary to build socialism. If Jesus was born in our time and had to face the sufferings of his contemporaries, he would have been a socialist seeking the way to save mankind’ (Tran, 1988, p.79.)

On June 14, 1955, the First National Assembly issued *The Ordinance on Religious Affairs* (known as Decree 234) and outlined the main policies of the Party and Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. It focused on issues of religious freedom and worship, and, at the same time, clearly and comprehensively delineated specific guidelines to ensure the freedom of people. In response to actual needs, Decree 234 was quickly adopted by religious followers. This was the longest-lived Decree, which lasted until 1975 (Tran, 1988, p. 230.). Following in 1959, the Party established the Religious Affairs Subcommittee and its work and influence permeated from the central to provincial level. This Subcommittee was a special agency under the leadership of the Party Committees and was to administer religions at all levels (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2004, p. 924.)

After unification, building a socialist, prosperous, free, democratic and civilised country, the prosperity of Vietnam became the goal of the Party and the people. In this period, divisive activities that took advantage of religion to incite the people of hostile forces were complex. In order to stabilize the situation, the Party and State issued many resolutions, directives and decrees. In 1981, Resolution 40 was promulgated by the Party. This was considered to be the last imprint before religious renewal. The resolution consisted of three parts: religious situations and works of the past, Party guidelines and policies governing religions, and leading and directing implementation (CCCPVN, 1981.). This was a policy about the relationship between religion and politics. This policy, for Catholicism, required a renewal of church activities in line with Vietnamese laws and regulations. For Protestantism, the policy aimed to enlighten followers to fight the isolation of the reactionaries. In general, religions, particularly in the Central Highlands, were not allowed to organise into active groups (CCCPVN, 1981.). It can be said that the period of 1975-1986 was a transitional period where specific regulations of Central Highlands’ religions and traditional belief did not exist.



From Doi Moi to now (after 1986)

In 1986, the 6th Communist Party of Vietnam undertook comprehensive reforms that included the reformation of religious policy as a solution for social and economic development. In 1990, the CCCPVN released Resolution 24-NQ/TW on *Strengthening the work of religion in the new situation* and identified that ‘religion is a long-standing issue. Religions and belief were the spiritual needs of a part of the people. Religious ethics has many things in common with the construction of a new society’ (CCCPVN, 1990.). The 1991 platform continued to affirm ‘religions and belief are the spiritual need of a part of the people, and people use religion to harm the interests of the country and the people. Subsequently, the renewal of religious views and policies in Vietnam expanded, particularly with regards to epistemology. It was the Party’s perception that long-standing religions provided a multi-dimensional view both for the present and past.

On the basis of achievements and weaknesses to be overcome by the implementation of Resolution No. 24 and the 1991 Platform, CCCPVN held the 7th Conference on religious affairs (Resolution 25/TW dated March 12th, 2003). The Resolution requested Party committees at all levels and sectors to unite awareness of the following views and policies:

- 1) Religions and belief were the spiritual needs of a part of the population that were and continued to exist with the people in the process of building socialism in Vietnam. Followers were a part of the great national unity bloc. Consistent implementation of policy respected and ensured the freedom of belief, even for people who followed or did not follow any religion. People had the right to religious in accordance with the law. Religions had to operate in the framework of law and in equality before the law.
- 2) The Party and State consistently implemented the policy of great national unity. (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2003.)

For many years, the Party and State dealt repeatedly and consistently with religious policy. In 1991, the Prime Minister issued Decree No. 69; on July 2nd, 1998. This was followed by the Political Bureau issuing Directive No. 37-CT/TW. In 1999, the Prime Minister promulgated Decree No. 26; on March 12th, 2003. At the 7th meeting of the Central Committee of the 9th National Congress, the Party issued Resolution No. 25-NQ/TW on religious affairs; and in 2005, the Government issued Decree No. 22/2005/ND-CP guiding the implementation of the *Ordinance on Belief and Religion*. In December 2012, Decree No. 92 was disseminated to replace Decree No. 22. This Decree added a number of provisions on the recognition of religious organisations and some provisions on religious activities of foreigners were also mentioned and to a greater extent. These documents, along with many other regulations, decrees, directives and circulars, show the development of the Party and State’s innovative thinking on religion in Vietnam.

Therefore, through congresses, documents showed the consistency of religious policy in Vietnam. The political platform of the 11th Party Congress confirmed ‘respect for and guarantee of the freedom of belief, religion and non-belief and religion of the people in accordance with the law.’ Moreover, in a Political Report, the Congress stated that ‘Vietnam continues to perfect policies and laws on religions and belief in accordance with the Party’s point of view.’ (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2011, p. 37.) Accordingly, the Party and State gradually improved their stance and views on religions and, subsequently, prepared the Law on Religion which was released in 2016. Once again, at the 12th Congress, religions were confirmed as ‘continuing to perfect the policies and laws on religions and belief; promoting the cultural values; good morals of religious education; paying attention and creating conditions for religious organisations to operate according to the charters and regulations of religious organisations recognised by the State ... fighting against acts of abusing religions and belief to divide and destroy the great national unity bloc or religious and belief activities contrary to law provisions’ (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2016, p.165.).

The reformation of thinking and reshaping Party and State policies on religious issues saw many important achievements. However, Resolution 24 affirmed that religion was a long-standing issue and its development was very complex, especially for Catholicism and Protestantism. After unification, the Catholic Church in the North and South of Vietnam merged into one, facilitating exchanges among Catholicism in the two regions. The religious activities, management and propaganda of this religion concerned the State of Vietnam and was reflected in Decrees and Ordinances. In 2005, the Government issued Decree No. 22/2005/ND-CP that guided the implementation of articles on the *Ordinance on Religion*. Accordingly, Catholicism was respected and was permitted to carry out its normal activities. Its followers were not only Vietnamese’s (Kinh people) but also ethnic minority groups, including indigenous people. The Vietnamese Government attached great importance to international relations, especially with the Vatican. It should be remembered that Decree No. 22 was released after the Central Highlands crises.

Since 1986, Protestantism has developed dramatically in the Central Highlands and Northwest Vietnam. However, up until the new millennium, many demonstrations took place and led Tin lanh De ga (Montagnard Dega). This group took advantage by political rioting, overthrowing and establishing a secessionist state in the Central Highlands. Facing the complicated evolution of Protestantism in the Central Highlands and the Northwest, the Party issued timely directives, announcements and notices clearly expressing guidelines and policies for Protestants. In its Notice of Conclusion No. 255/TB-TW, dated 7-10-1999, the Politburo published *the Policy for Protestantism in the new situation* (CCCPVN, 1999.) The Party and State affirmed consistent policy control of religious and non-religious freedom to all citizens. Each Protestant denomination, when chartered and guided in accordance with



policy and law, would be considered permissible. Other unrecognised sects limited their own religious activities to home and at religious establishments, and not unifying organizations, Protestant organizations (Nguyen, 2015, p. 17-18).

Clearly, it was necessary to establish a methodology to recognise the relationship between the State of Vietnam and religious organisations. The chief issue in solving the differences between the State and religions in Vietnam is a legal one. Even though Vietnam openly recognised religious organisations, a lack of legal clarity prior to the Law of Religion (2016) was not enough.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From a country founded on Marxist-Leninist tenets and, in light of Ho Chi Minh ideology in religious management, Vietnam gradually changed. Through this change came an open approach to religions in Vietnam and the Central Highlands. In general, while socio-economic issues are carefully discussed, Vietnam has important changes to make in institutional and management terms. This study has shown that religion is considered a political issue and, therefore, is managed closely. Through numerous religious and over a significant time frame, it can be seen that “new” religions were not recognized in the first instance because of ideological and policy barriers. Today, many “new” religions are considered true religions in line with the Law on Religion (2016).

The analysis provided in this article sheds light on religious management in the Central Highlands: Firstly, Vietnamese policies are always flexible and suit the current reality. Through the presentation of religious policy, it can be seen that the Party and State of Vietnam restrain the development of politically motivated religions. Secondly, “new” religions are not only associated with worship, ‘good life, and good religion’, but also with political factors. This is contrary to the provisions of the Constitution and the Laws of Vietnam. Therefore, the perceived and real gap is a barrier, a divide that exists between the Vietnamese State and the ethnic minority communities at the centre of this study. Ironically, the policies intended to unify in fact promote a further widening of the divide. The further the gap, the sparser the policy becomes. This, in turn, lowers the credibility of the State and Government in recognising and managing old and new religions in Vietnam.

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