

## 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 economic dimensions. 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 which would increasingly challenge the State, its assumption that religions opposed Communism, and the very principle of religious diversity.*

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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” which 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.<sup>1</sup> How and why did religious groups become so politicized under the Republic of Vietnam? What kind of discrimination encouraged religious groups 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 to Catholicism.<sup>2</sup> 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 with 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 every religious activities, because it considered that religions remained a private affair. The reason why such an authoritarian state let religions free from state control – at least initially –, was 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 which increasingly challenged the Republic itself.

#### **RELIGION, NATION, AND ANTICOMMUNISM, 1945–1954**

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 the 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, 124–128; Trần Mỹ Vân 2011, 164–165; Jammes 2016, 255–256). Even Vichy Indochina sponsored Buddhism and Confucianism to compete with Japanese Pan-Asiatic religious societies (Raffin 2005, 112–113). But it was only when Vietnam declared its independence in 1945, that religions faced the question of becoming 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 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 armed

conflict was different from one place to another during the First Indochina War. The clergy in the diocese 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 into a civil war opposing Vietnamese Communists to non-Communists (Trần Thị Liên 1996, 310–311 ; Keith 2012a, 235). 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 it could discuss in detail 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 1920's, 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 gave extensive coverage of Communist attack 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.

The periodical did not just publish the episcopal letter of 10 November 1951, in which the bishops in Indochina warned that Communism was inimical to the Catholic faith. It also provided extensive comments. Twice in the following year, the periodical stressed 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; ĐBĐM 1952c). This mobilization did not mean that all Catholics opposed Communism, but multiple media outlet 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 discussing the political situation in Vietnam. Conferences on the Christian social doctrine organized by a missionary, Fernand Parrel, and a Vietnamese intellectual, Ngô Đình Nhu in the same year, created an important forum of discussion for finding alternatives to Communism (ĐBĐM 1952d). One important idea put forward was Personalism, a philosophical thought Emmanuel Mounier, a French Catholic intellectual had imagined in the 1930's 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 of

production and strongly advocated the idea that men were spiritual beings as well. This philosophical thought spread from France to Vietnam over two decades and incurred substantial transformations (Nguyen 2017). The Vietnamese word 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 or 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, as well as 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 a 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 crisis: a spiritual crisis and a political crisis (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 the Vietnamese society explained the influence of atheism and greatly facilitated the spread of Communist ideas. Christianity had arrived too late to impregnate 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. According to this line of thought, 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 of articles between March 1954 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 an 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 prejudice 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? (ibid.)

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 for 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 of *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 of the 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 emerging in the wake of the 1930’s 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, 132–133). Many of its members has 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 famous 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” [Tam 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 the 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 devalue unilaterally the piaster May 1953. The formation of a United Front (*Đại Đoàn Kết*) in September 1953 unified 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 reflecting colonialism



and Communism (Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ 1989, 62; Dommen 2001, 217–218; Miller 2004, 452–454; 2013, 49–51; Guillemot 2012, 534–541). Their political platform also merged Đại Việt and religious ideals. In its January 1954 Program of Action, the Front criticized Vietnam's downfall:

the failure of individualism advocated by the French Revolution and the political movements which followed over the nineteenth century. The democracy deriving from individualism has 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 material and moral conditions of human beings (*ibid.*, 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, the Central and Southern Vietnam” (SHAT 1954d, 2). Therefore, the involvement of Catholics in politics was not a mechanic 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 to it or neutral. They were no less Catholics 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 many Buddhist positions in the struggle between Vietnamese Communists and Nationalists. The State of

Vietnam had sponsored the travel of Vietnamese monks to the 1950 World Buddhist Federation in Ceylan in the hope that Buddhist internationalism could turn into an anti-Communist force (Ngô 2015, 282–284). 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 regards 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, however, considered that Buddhism involved an everyday engagement in social, economic and political issues.<sup>3</sup> In Hanoi, the Buddhist Association in the North expanded its publications and war relief initiatives (Mai Thọ Truyền 1959, 807), echoing the Vietnamese Catholic Action's work during the war (Keith 2012a, 155–162). These cultural activities and social outreach already manifested a strong attachment to the nationalist cause and support to 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 away from the diocese of Phát Diệm (Đoàn Đọc Thư và Xuân Huy 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 Admiration] 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 National

troops occupation duties and Hồ Chí Minh tried to negotiate Vietnam's independence with the French. There was much uncertainty: 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. It was not clear either whether diplomatic negotiations between France and Vietnam would result in a peaceful independence, 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.

The periodical stressed the importance of literacy, the teaching patriotism using poems, often quoting Plato and even Chiang Kai-Chek (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 loose 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 to 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 organizations, or from the Sùng Nghiêm 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 days celebration and of “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” (ibid.). 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 be representative of 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 either officially opposed or supported Communism.<sup>4</sup> 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 analyzed the relationship between Buddha and men (Thích Tâm Châu 1964). 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 19th 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 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, 1954–1959**

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. At the end of the war, Ngô Đình Diệm rose from the title 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 a 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. Its 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 (Tibor Mende 1957, 927; Sidel 2009, 18; Miller 2013, 146–147), such as the idea of “an indivisible Republic” (art. 1), or the reciprocal bond between the State and its citizen (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 secularism did not figure as a priority, as it was in the American First Amendment or the French Constitution, where the separation of Church and State was enshrined. 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.

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 the Church (Grant 1958, 444, 455–456).<sup>6</sup> 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 to the final draft, it is striking that 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 related to “the spiritual basis of each civilization and the faith in the Almighty [*dấng tối cao*],” “the transcendent value of human beings” and the “construction of a democracy respecting the Person” (CBVNCH 1956c). Personalism obviously figured as 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 call it differently according to their faith. Another representative argued that any mention of the religion, either in the words of “the Lord ” [*Thượng đế*] or “the Almighty” [*Dấng tối cao*] should be avoided, as this right was recognized in article 17, and that this “debate would eventually create division among religions” (ibid.). 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” (ibid.). 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 for 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.

In a manual printed in 1955, *Cuộc cách mạng Nhân Vị* [A 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 to 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 to 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 were part of Vietnamese nationalism. An editorial of *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 at the opposite 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 between 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 co-existence of religions had roots deep into the past. A book entitled *Làn sóng tôn giáo trên đất Việt* [Religious

practice in Vietnam] published in 1959, analyzed the origins and practice of Confucianism, Buddhism, Catholicism, Caodaism as well as 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, 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 to travel to the Mecca (13). It was precisely because Communism threatened all 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 Thuần, Hoài Thịnh, 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 that 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 Định 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 Pugalavada of the 3rd century B.C. 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 4th century B.C.. 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 Định 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. An article in *Gió Nam* [The Wind of the South], the magazine of the National Revolutionary Civil Servant

League, emphasized in 1956 the idea that Personalism, although originating from France, could find its most fertile ground in Asia. Vũ Mộng Hàn explained in 1956 that Buddha and Confucius, who each tried to solve the material and spiritual conditions of human beings, could in fact have brought the first Personalist Revolutions in History (Vũ Mộng Hàn 1956, 4–5). Whether the Confucianist Vũ Mộng Hàn or the Catholic Trần Thái Định 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 the Republic 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. The religious took an important place among associations, private educational institutions and social activities. For instance, out of the eighteen associations created or changing statutes in 1957, five regrouped youth, students and alumni, four were cultural associations, three were sport clubs and three women's associations, while four were religious (CBVNCH 1957). In comparison to the tight censorship, the violent mobs or judicial prosecution restraining journalism (Fall 1958, 254), there was little restriction to religious activities. With the exception of Cao Dai or Hoa Hao militants who contested Saigon's authority, as well as religious practices of the Central Highlands' ethnic minorities which were deemed backward, many other spiritual faiths developed exponentially.

Christians reached a total of 1.3 millions believers in 1962 according to Fides, a proportion 10% of the population only second to the Philippines in Asia (ICI 1963b). The number of adult baptism alone, excluding children christening, 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 (ibid.). Buddhist membership also soared. Between 1959 and

1963, the number of monks registered at the General Buddhist Association increased by 40%, and the number of lay Buddhists by 60%. Catholics built churches, schools, proselytized in the central highlands, while Buddhists organized preachers corps, trained thousands of youth and offered free health care every day at the Xã Lợi Pagoda by 1962 (Ford 2017, 155–156; Gomane 1963, 56; Naïdenoff 1963a, 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 Vàng or the Thích Ca Phật Đài, a gigantic statute of a meditating Buddha overseeing the hills of Vũng Tàu (Naïdenoff 1963b, 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 (Werner 1981, 54–55; Quinn-Judge 2013), their religious practice continued and even expanded. Cao Đài branches of the westernmost provinces of the Mekong delta continued their activities and even gained thanks to the weakening of the Tây Ninh branch (Tòa Thánh Tiền Giang – Minh Kiến Đài, 1957). Even the most rebellious Cao Đài of Tây Ninh signed an agreement with Saigon in 1956, guaranteeing their freedom of proselytizing and gathering believers, provided that they abandoned political activities. (Werner 1981, 54). Blagov, 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” (Blagov 2001, 108–109). The Cao Dai Trần Văn Quế 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 Quế, Vũ Ngô Xán 1961). Thus, the Cao Đài did not disappear in the Republic. While most of their activities have remained under close scrutiny, and that 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 faith, published extensively under the Republic (Nhà văn khố 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 1920's (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 19th century to promote the unity of humanity and of all religious faiths. Since the 1930's depression, the Baha'i started to oppose materialism. Horace Holley, a man who rose at the highest levels of Baha'i elected Assemblies, wrote *The World Economy of Bahá'u'lláh*, underscoring an impasse, which 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. (BW4 1932, 352)

The 1930's crisis was an 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). It 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 and 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 in 1932 (BW5 1934). Fascism in the following years, 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 continent, the presence of Baha’i in East and Southeast Asia was almost inexistent prior to WWII. Yet Shoghi Effendi, the descendent of the Prophet, had substantial hopes 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” (BW12 1953a).

It was less because of containing Communism than in attempting to achieve a worldwide crusade, that Baha’i missionaries went to the Republic of Vietnam (BW12 1953b). After a four months 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 Diệm 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). Diệm even received Fozdar in November 1955 and introduced him to his family (JPFC/SB 1957). One reason for this warm welcome came from the parallels between the Baha’i faith and Personalism.

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 in Vietnam faith took off seamlessly. Jamshed Fozdar created the first Local Spiritual Assembly in Saigon in 1955, travelled 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 1960's with the creation of private schools (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 (BW13 1956a). The first Southeast Asian meeting was supposed to take place in Djakarta in 1957 and not in Saigon (ibid.). 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 (BW13 1955) and approved their marriage certificate in January 1956, even though there were only twenty six believers at the time (BW13 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, 1959–1963**

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 of the States restrictions on religious activities? Or was the Personalist Revolution doomed for 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 their 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. As early as 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 since the authorization they had received in 1955 only covered Southern Vietnam (UNARMS 1958). The case reproduced a 1962 letter from the Minister of Interior stating that their 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 them 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).

The transnational network connecting religious groups to their coreligionists overseas might have reinforced the religious groups’ impressions they could rely on the support of their co-religionists if they criticized 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 a several monks (Nha tuyên úy phật giáo 1969, 16). The World Buddhist congress was the first place where Vietnamese Buddhists voiced their grievances against the State (Ford 2017, 162). Even the Baha'i seemed more connected to their World Center in Israel, than to Saigon itself. Yet transnational influence alone cannot explain the emergence of different religious self-consciousness within Vietnam. It was the Republic's formal encouragement of spiritualism that strengthened a religious consciousness which increasingly channelled popular discontent.

Indeed, 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 entail. For the State, it meant religious freedom with minimal interference. For religious groups on the other hand, it meant equality about religious faiths. The lack of positive actions to promote equality raised concerns over a 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 between believers and atheists, it encouraged an internal division of the society along religious lines. Therefore, the main reason for which religious groups increasingly opposed the State was not just its restrictions. It was also because it 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 the incompatibility between 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] brings important insights on this process.

The publication 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 tỏ ra mình là Phật tử" [Show that you are a Buddhist] (LH 1956, 30–36). Accordingly, 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 of prejudice in the professional life was inappropriate. No one should ever be shy of claiming its belonging to the Buddhist faith, the article declared.

It also defined with precision the politics of inclusion and exclusion involved in Buddhist membership. The article criticized those who expressed interest into Buddhism, yet who 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” (*bắt 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 a Buddhist would not only show disdain to his 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 if 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: to implement the teachings of Buddha. Doing so requires and demands everyone to present 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 fellow faithfuls 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.

Such consciousness would only become suspicious to the State once it openly criticized the assumption of the Personalist Revolution, that every spirituality would actively oppose Communism. The resumption of Communist insurgency in the Southern Vietnamese countryside in 1959 did not push neither the Sangha nor the laity to mobilize the Buddhist faith. Ironically, it was the Chinese Communist repression of the Buddhist uprising Tibet in March 1959 which 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 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: Buddhists should not invest all their energy in opposing Communism. In so doing, the Superior also clarified one point: Buddhists should not join the religious alliance against Communism which Personalist scholars had imagined.

*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 which 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 (LH1959c) 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 1952 (LH1959d), decided that the sangha in Central Vietnam would take a more prominent role. *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 on the entire territory south of the 17th parallel (LH1959e). Thus, significant changes happened in 1959. Buddhists had stepped up in the process of unifying the faithful, it gave a greater voice to the sangha in Central Vietnam and it had openly declared it would not mobilize Buddhists against Communism.

As the government imposed increasing limitations to religious meetings starting in 1959, the Buddhist criticism soon identified the government as a threat to their movement. In is in this context of governmental repression that Buddhist monks increasingly represented their faith not just as a a religious group with a political consciousness, but as a platform for political change. In the editorial of the January 1960 edition, the first one 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, 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 of its direction and its leadership. Vietnamese Buddhism is in this second situation. (LH 1960a)

Accordingly, Buddhism was enjoying a wide support, whereas a declining regime was becoming increasingly unpopular and used authoritarian rule to govern Vietnam. Later in 1960, *Liên Hoa* identified precisely who seemed to loose control by imposing its rule with brutal force. Starting in 1960, the main obstacle to the Buddhist movement which *Liên Hoa* identified was the State. In May, the periodical reassured its readers that it was following up on the petition sent to protest against the State's restriction to hold the Vesak celebrations in the central province of Quảng Ngãi (LH 1960b). An editorial published openly calling upon the government to

guarantee the Constitution's liberties, came out in August 1961, precisely when Catholicism was widely celebrated in Vietnam as one of its church became a minor basilica.<sup>7</sup> These events were ominous signs that 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 value and that "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 would not just imply freedom from State oppression and restrictions, but it also entailed freedom from other religion's overwhelming 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 the impression that the Catholic Church would end up winning out over other faiths.

This led the sangha to wonder what could be the full reach of Buddhist activism. Since the State would not fulfill its responsibilities, how could Buddhism influence political change? Expecting Buddhist government officials to assert more firmly their Buddhist lineage was highly unlikely. An article in *Liên Hoa* regretted that certain members of the government in Vietnam did not present themselves as Buddhists and align their political visions and programs with Buddhist ideals, as it 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 1961e). Therefore, the Republic provided important conditions for the emergence of a Buddhist political consciousness which by the early 1960's 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 inter-religious dialogue in 1953, the Personalist Revolution had inspired theologians to underscore commonalities among religious faiths. An important after-effect of this debate was to wonder if similarities would justify a synthesis of all religious faith. If religious faiths shared so much in common, it was perhaps because one particular form of spirituality was more ancient, all-encompassing or superior, some theologians believed.

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, *Buddhist Philosophy*, were censored but what remained still conveyed ideas opposed to Personalism (Bhikkhu Quảng Liên 1958). It 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 or 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 where the first manifestations of materialism, logical thinking or dualism had already emerged (120). Thus, because of its antiquity and all-encompassing capacity, 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 1930’s 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 has no prejudices and refuses 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 (ibid. 807–808).

Mai Thọ Truyền acknowledged the diversity of religious beliefs and practices in Vietnam. Yet Buddhism had impregnated 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 1950's, 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 did not only depend on proselytizing it in Vietnamese, or creating a National Church and establishing a Vietnamese hierarchy. It also had to merge with 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 nothing has 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-religionist 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. They organized for the first time in Saigon the World Religion Day on January 21 1962, where seven religious representatives, including Mai Thọ Truyền, came to discuss the "fundamental oneness of religion" (JPFC/PI/1 1962b), a debate which was repeated the following year (JPFC/PI/1 1963). Thus, the growing conflict between the State and religious groups did not only lie in occasional tensions, but also 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 1963a, 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 from the State to co-opt, 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 non-interference 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 the Vietnam society to engage in the struggle against colonial rule, or in the fight against Communism, brought several scholars to explore a possible religious alliance, further religious acculturation and even, religious supremacy. Politically, the article showed how and when a religious membership does not refer 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 faithfuls remained uninvolved in politics, and were no less Catholics or Buddhists for doing so. But the First Indochina War provoked the emergence of a Catholic political consciousness which 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 opposing 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 politics of inclusion and exclusion. It also involves a significant reconsideration of how the faith informs daily forms of political and social action for the priesthood or the laity.

Third, the importance of spirituality and religion in postcolonial Vietnam points to a new periodization of the Cold War. While most analysis of the ideological struggle in the postcolonial world focuses 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 1960's Southern Vietnamese intellectuals in this debate (Gadkar-Wilcox 2014, 388). Yet it is striking to see that most of the religious or political movements which would grow in Vietnam in the 1950's emerged in the wake of the 1930's economic crisis. The Personalist Revolution found its origins in that decade. So did the Đại Việt party, the Buddhist Revival and even the Baha'i new 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 to the 1930's, 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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1. Ngô Đình Diệm was nominated as a Prime Minister in June 1954 and became President of a newly created Republic of Vietnam on October 26, 1955 (Chapman 2006; Miller 2013, 140). Political parties such as the *Đài Việt* and the *VNQDD* were secular, and small religious groups like the *Cao Đài* and the *Hòa Hảo* had to abandon their political and military autonomy as Ngô Đình Diệm would not authorize any competing authority.
2. As 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 as a reaction of the Vietnamese against war escalation. For a recent historiographical analysis, see Miller (2015, 1906–1907). None however, explain why so many Buddhists – and not just a few infiltrated agents – considered they were victims of discrimination.
3. This contrast with analysis claiming that Buddhism was either supportive (Fall 1960, 164) or neutral to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as most studies only note the creation of the General Buddhist Association of Vietnam in 1951 (Nguyen Anh Tuan 1967, 28; Gheddo 1970, 172; Dommen 2001, 162; DeVido 2007, 281; Miller 2015, 1914).
4. The Viet Minh arrested *Tuệ Quang* and *Tuệ Chiếu* who had joined in creating the first Inter Religious front (*Đoàn Độc Thụ và Xuân Huy* 1973, 62), and sentenced *Thích Tâm Châu* to death in absentia (Schechter 1967, 163).
5. Most researchers on the Republic have dismissed the spiritual dimension of Personalism. Donnell qualifies the Vietnamese writings on Personalism as “abstruse” (1961, 59). Recent studies have focused on Personalist economic 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 *Ngo Dinh Nhu* in France and the role of French missionaries in social movements (Miller 2004, 448; 2013, 44–46; Wehrle 2011,17; Keith 2012a,195–197) references to the Personalist spiritual dimensions often boil down to Diệm’s exaltation Confucianism (Catton 2002, 43; Miller 2009, 378–381) or *Madame Nhu*’s 1959 Family Law forbidding polygamy, divorce and arranged marriages.
6. The 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).
7. The Catholic site of *La Vang* was recognized by the episcopacy as a site of national pilgrimage, and when the Vatican designated that this Church would become a minor basilica.