



Being engaged in the World (nhập thế) and the secular state in 20th century Vietnam. Approaching two notions through Hòa Hảo Buddhism history

Pascal Bourdeaux¹

Accepted: 8 June 2022 / Published online: 30 June 2022
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2022

Abstract

Hòa Hảo Buddhism belongs to that traditional lay and frugal buddhism encouraging practicing at home (*tu tại gia*) while being engaged with the world (*nhập thế*). It appeared in Southern Vietnam at the end of the 1930's. Obviously, colonial contest and economic depression have played the part of a powerful catalyst in the spread by a young charismatic and reformist character of this millenarianism. Then, during three decades of postcolonial and cold wars (1945–1975), this New Religious movement hardly expressed its Buddhist ethic of social statements in order to lend moral support and material protection to the local peasantry. Eventually, at the end of the war, this autonomous Buddhist community finally tried to morph again into a legal religion at a time when the Vietnamese Communist Party had to urgently impose a new sovereign socialist republic (1976). In other words, the new regime had to reunify the Nation and build a new secular state. In the southern part of the country, the replacement of a former liberal regime (Republic of Vietnam) by a socialist republic (called formerly a Democratic Republic in Northern Vietnam) completely changed the nature of the State-Church relations. Therefore, many religious groups' agencies suffered a drastic blow as these groups were subordinated to the Patriotic Front and its mass organizations. Nevertheless, in 1991, the reorientation of the religious policy officially reaffirmed the religions' social utility. Since then, new debates emerged to define the nature of the social actions of religious groups and then to delineate the legal sphere of their activities in this secular state. This essay intends to question how the two notions of being engaged with the world (*nhập thế*) and that of the secular state (*nhà nước trung lập thế tục*) interacted during these last decades. To tackle this pivotal issue, we focused on the specific implementation of Hòa Hảo social activism, from 1940's until now, to underline how this activism evolved under different political regimes and how a new culture of social service has been promoted since the Hòa Hảo official church was recognized in 1999 and achieved years later. It questions more generally how religious groups can negotiate

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

with the state for the emergence of a civil society or, at least, for the acceptance of their own tribute to the prosperity of the Nation.

Keywords Secular · Socialism · Social activism · Plurality · Vietnam · Hòa Hào Buddhism

Secularism and ‘the secular’ in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

In October 2018, the Vietnamese government in tandem with the national Buddhist sangha of Vietnam welcomed the 16th United Nations Vesak Day celebrations in May 2019. Simultaneously, a grand international symposium was convened to discuss the “Buddhist approach to global leadership and shared responsibilities for sustainable societies”. Through this action, the host country was expressing its peculiar attention to Buddhist social activism in modern societies, Vietnam included. Recognized as a holiday by the UN General Assembly for the first time in December 1999, Vesak Day is one of the most sacred Buddhist holidays and, to some extent, the main ecumenical Buddhist celebration worldwide. Also hosted in Vietnam in 2008 and 2014, those celebrations are considered by the Vietnamese government as an opportunity to showcase the evolution of local Buddhism – characterized long-time by war-era images of self-immolating monks – to a global Buddhist community of compassion and collective involvement. The celebrations are also considered a welcome opportunity to acknowledge the expansion of the local Buddhist community, the stronger visibility of Buddhist culture within the national one, and more broadly the vitality of religious life in contemporary Vietnam.

Above all, the Vesak Day celebrations revealed two of the main aspects of the Vietnamese state’s current policy towards religion: its commitment to implement the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion; and the on-going dialogue between the state, religious agents and the academic world to reach simultaneously an agreement on the boundaries of the “religious field” (Bourdieu, 1971) and the secular nature of the State (*nhà nước trung lập thế tục*).

Before going back deeper in time, let’s start with reminiscing how the religious policy and its legal framework have evolved in reunified Vietnam, since the proclamation of the Socialist Republic in July 1976. We usually distinguish three successive stages. During the early years of the new regime, security issues and the call for the broadest possible national union and solidarity (*đại đoàn kết*)¹ were prioritized. Decree 297 signed by Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng in November 1977 outlined the new policy in very broad terms, as did the new Constitution approved in 1980, which affirmed the country’s commitments to religious freedom, only within the limits of the principles of Socialism and under the guidance of the Communist Party. The reality however was a strict privatization of belief, an obligation to join the official public celebrations of the socialist state, a rejection of superstitions, and a subordina-

¹ Note that in addition to this slogan, another one, “đoàn kết tôn giáo, đoàn kết lương giáo”, detailed the call for a global religious solidarity between Catholics on the one hand and the other religions on the other hand.

tion of the religious communities to the state through institutions already affiliated with it.

Afterwards, departing from the path of triumphant socialism, the second stage was marked by a more pragmatic and realistic policy concerning religion from 1986 onwards. The so-called renovation policy (*đổi mới*) indirectly affected the status of religions in Vietnamese society and the nature of their relationships with the socialist state at a time when the policy of strict secularism in formerly socialist bloc countries was challenged worldwide by widespread religious revivals (Michel, 1997, 1999). With its Resolution 24, in 1990, the Vietnamese Communist Party admitted the historic nature, social utility, and vital, although limited, plurality of religions in the country by asserting that, for a significant part of the population, religion is a moral necessity that has existed for a long time, will continue to exist for a long time, and follows the same path as the nation and socialism (Mais, 1986; Marr, 1987; Đỗ, 2005). Decree 91 of March 21st 1991 abandoned the secularist views on the decline of religion as a prerequisite to social progress. The party-state defined its own approval template by trying to manage the rapid revival of religious life in the public sphere. During these years, debates around Hồ Chí Minh's thought on religion (Đỗ, 1998) and national identity (*bản sắc dân tộc*) began to redefine loyalty towards the party-state, less as the vanguard of the revolution than as the incarnation of the nation. Intense debates around religious pluralism, the typology of cults and new religious movements, de-territorialization and de-secularization were part of this broader process.

Eventually, on 15 November 2004, the Ordinance on Religions and Beliefs changed the state's policy on the registration of religious organizations. Twelve years later, this ordinance was replaced by the first Law on Belief and Religion (*Luật tín ngưỡng tôn giáo 02/2016/QH14; 18/11/2016*). Responding to the country's post-1990 religious vitality, these legal texts went in effect January the 1st, 2018. They clarified the application process for registration and legalization of religious organizations, along with the ways in which the citizens ought to exercise their religion or ask for their religious affiliation to be changed.² In Madeley et al.'s words (2003), citizens were "marked" in state-defined categories of religious belonging. One condition for the integration of Vietnam into the international community was that its religious policy has to respect international agreements on human rights and freedoms. Since then, the state's ongoing challenge has been to implement policies at each level of its administration to promote cooperation from all parts of society.

Along with the evolution of state policies, international "epistemic knowledge regimes" (Burchardt 2015: 3) have transformed the intellectual and scholarly environment structuring the classification of religious phenomena in Vietnam. During the 1990s, political and academic debates regarding religious issues contributed to form a clearer and more consensual definition of "religions", "beliefs" and "spiritualities", while debates at the turn of the 21st century had more to do with the pluralization of the religious field, the political secularization process, and the secular nature of the

² Since the birth of the Socialist Republic in 1976, Vietnamese identity cards indicate both ethnicity and religious affiliation. Many practitioners prefer not to mention any religious affiliation, making unclear general religious statistics (see appendix).

state. As a result, religion is no longer a topic only concerning lawyers, policy makers and civil servants, it went back to being a social fact, observable in all different aspects of social life, and as such, a focus of scholarly interest within social sciences and humanities at large.

Relatively vague and heterogeneous until the 1990s, the lexicon of secularity started to be refined by Vietnamese official academics that began engaging the paradigm of secularization about three decades after its first enunciations in western scholarship. Taking its roots from within orthodox Marxist and Soviet paradigms, a new vocabulary began to emerge during the 2000s that explored more complex notions of secularism, secularization and secularity. Going back to the legacy of French colonialism in terms of “laicity” also became a way to trace the history of this notion and its adaptation to Vietnamese realities from 20th century modernist intellectuals to current scholars. Jean Baubérot’s historical and sociological interpretations of “laïcité” in France, in the Francophone world and abroad, particularly influenced some of these scholars and lead them to compare different definitions of secularity and laicity (Baubérot, 2004 et 2011). In spite of this, the vernacular terminology is still imprecise, sometimes polysemous, and strictly confined to the academic domain, especially when translating the French word “laïcité”. Being viewed as too conceptual or theoretical, these translations are not yet fully understood by the emerging civil society nor used to analyze or discuss carefully the evolution of the religious policy. Vietnamese scholars and policy makers are increasingly adapting external categories and concepts (translations or neologisms) to analyze secularization locally. But they still have to explain them to a larger audience. Evolving from ideological “secularism” to strictly descriptive definitions of “secularization”, the issue is now being considered primarily as a legal debate and screened through the lens of the rule of law.

This situation of theoretical multiplicity is more intelligible when one recalls that the classical paradigms of secularization have been re-questioned and criticized in recent years by western scholars with the aim of globalizing and contextualizing them. As a consequence, one can observe simultaneous dynamics: the first is a general trend emerging from the international sphere of social scientists to go “beyond the West”; the second is the agency non-western scholars that had to readapt concepts within their languages and local contexts, sometimes under pressure from the State, to shape their own stable regimes of secularity. Early independent post-colonial states chose for themselves from the 1950 and 1960 s on. However, in the case of Vietnam, the cycle of wars and divisions of the nation into two politically opposed states postponed the process for at least two reasons: first was the context of humanitarian emergency until the mid-1980s; and second, was the authoritarian reunification under socialism in relation to the need to strengthen national stability first and foremost. The political and intellectual context then began to fundamentally change in the 1990s; becoming more receptive to pluralistic conceptions of social sciences produced outside socialist countries. With this in mind, academics tried to define Vietnamese secularity based on their own historical, cultural and political background. They had to adapt national norms to religious contexts, especially in Southern Vietnam. In essence, they had to take into consideration the asymmetry of religious plurality between regions, the legacy of former religious status before reunification and the collective memory of

these previous experiences. In addition, they had to pay attention to the specificities of religious life and social action, particularly in the Buddhist sphere.

One recent extension: secularity and religious plurality

Subsequent to this theoretical debate, an empirical approach is necessary to explore other definitions of secularity, some that would be more contextual than the canonical ones provided by macro-sociology or political sciences. The secular question has evolved in Vietnam, first from an ideological model to a more flexible process of negotiation, then again to more meaningful attempts to set secularity in a cultural context. Among varied consequences, the pluralization of the religious field has led on one hand to a proliferation of religious actors on one hand, and on the other hand, to the perceived need among state agents of specific bilateral relations' determination with each recognized religious organization in order to accommodate their social demands. The Resolution 24's leitmotiv (to follow) is still in effect: "the same path as the nation and socialism". Yet this path is now trailed by noticeably more religious organizations than three decades ago.

Following a comparable model as Mainland China's one, only five religions were officially recognized in Vietnam until the late 1990s: Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, and Caodaism³. Concerning the latter religion, its division in different branches facilitated the recognition procedure by first including pro-communist or neutralist organizations. Such was not the case however, with the last recognized religion, Hòa Hảo Buddhism. Strongly unified geographically (western part of the Mekong delta) and religiously (devotion to his charismatic founder), this religion was then the latest registered in 1999. These six religions were supervised by the Government Committee for Religious Affairs and handled through patriotic organizations affiliated with the Fatherland Front (*Mặt trận tổ quốc Việt Nam*) that formalized religion-state relations. The designation of these official religious organizations (*giáo hội*, literally: church) prompted many criticisms for their lack of autonomy and representativity that inevitably caused rivalries inside the communities as to who would preserve historical legitimacy and religious authenticity⁴.

During the 2000s, debate intensified on institutionalizing new religious organizations, both Western (especially Evangelical Protestantism) and Asian (from sectarian movements to Buddhist groups), that challenged the registration system of religious organizations. Because of several religious conflicts (possibly combined with ethnic and economic conflicts) in different parts of the country, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom decided to downgrade Vietnam from its

³ Caodaism (*Đạo đạo tam kỳ phổ độ*, Great Faith for the third Universal Redemption) appeared in Southern Vietnam in 1926. It emerged from the Sino-Vietnamese sectarian tradition and established an original Holy See, numerous temples, and a hierarchical church-type organization. Some of their leaders were involved in politics before 1975. Most followers are still now based in the southern part of the country and overseas, and have been since the 1980's (Jammes 2011, Hoskins 2015).

⁴ For a further discussion on functionalist interpretation of religions in China, see Yang Fenggang's model in three religious markets (red, black, gray), its critics (Vermander, 2010) and its relevance in Vietnam (Hoang, 2017).

Watch List to a “Country of Particular Concern” in 2005 and 2006. It then recommended the State Department to implement economic sanctions the very moment Vietnam was negotiating its admission to the World Trade Organization. According to the White Book on Religions diffused by the Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs on December 2006, the state had recognized two more religions (in reality two distinctive “buddhisized” communities, or denominations, from Southern Vietnam) and registered ten new religious organizations: three branches of “mainstream” Buddhism, two Muslim organizations, and five Evangelical churches (Government Committee for Religious Affairs 2006).

Following this period of tensions, the Committee for Religious Affairs continued to scrutinize the application for registration in accordance with the implementation of the Law on Belief and Religion. Lastly, according to the latest official inventory published by the government committee for religious affairs on December 2020, there are currently 43 religious organizations (5 of them still on probation) belonging to 16 recognized and registered religions⁵. These officially recognized religions may, for the purposes of this article, be divided into three groups: World Religions, Indigenous Religions, Asian and non-Asian New Religious Movements:

- Buddhist church of Vietnam (*Giáo hội Phật giáo Việt Nam*).
- Catholic church of Vietnam (*Giáo hội Công giáo Việt Nam*).
- Protestant denominations and organizations (*Hệ phái Tin lành*, 11 + 1: we added here the Seventh-day Adventist church - *Cơ đốc phục lâm Việt Nam* - although considered as one single religion).
- Islamic organizations (*Tổ chức Hồi giáo*, 7).
- Hindu organizations (*Tổ chức Bà-la-môn giáo*, 2).
- Cao Đài branches (10 *Hệ phái Cao Đài*, 1 *Pháp môn tu hành*).
- Hòa Hảo Buddhist Church (*Giáo hội Phật Giáo Hòa Hảo*).
- Four Debts of Gratitude Religion (*Phật hội Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa*).
- Dutiful and loyal Buddhist of Tà Lơn (*Phật giáo Hiếu nghĩa Tà Lơn*).
- Pure Land Buddhist Home Association (*Giáo hội Tịnh độ Cư sỹ Phật hội Việt Nam*).
- Strange Perfume from Precious Mountains (*Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương*).
- Minh Sư Faith organization (*Giáo hội Phật đường Nam tông Minh Sư đạo*).
- Minh Lý Faith organization (*Hội đồng Minh Lý đạo Tam Tông Miếu*).
- Baha’i faith of Vietnam organization (*Công đồng Tôn giáo Baha’i Việt Nam*).
- Mormon church or The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (*Giáo hội các Thánh hữu Ngày sau của Chúa Giê-su Ki-tô Việt Nam*).

As of now, Vietnam officially presents itself as a multi-religious country where most of the population shares traditional beliefs, both spiritual (local deities) and secular (patriotic cults). Around 24 million people (nearly 1/4 of the population in 2016,

⁵ List of registered religious organizations allowed to practice from December 2020 [<http://btgcp.gov.vn/tin-hoat-dong-cua-ban-ton-giao-chinh-phu/danh-muc-cac-to-chuc-ton-giao-to-chuc-duoc-cap-chung-nhan-dang-ky-hoat-dong-ton-giao-postX4wdJ9p9.html>]. In comparison, a publication listed 12 religions and 33 registered religious organizations in 2014 (Đỗ, 2014, pp. 482–488).

unexpectedly much less according to the last national census in 2020) are affiliated with a religious organization. In spite of ambiguous official statistics (see appendix), the global trend - and our daily life observations - demonstrate a rapid evolution if one compares governmental speeches on religious pluralism over a period of 20 years. Some scholars have analyzed this trend as a revival of religious life as disclosed by the expansion of a religious market. The intensification of transnational mobility is an evident fact, as is an individual and a collective interest for spiritual practices countrywide.

Yet how can these regional differentiations be explained? Most recent registered organizations are indeed embedded in Southern culture and founded by spiritual masters (religious or laymen) trying to reinterpret strict Buddhist doctrine combined with the three teachings (Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism or *Tam giáo*) to find some kind of shared moral values. Whereas since the 1990s, the Northern part of the country underwent an unknown proliferation of New Religious Movements even so none of which having been so far officially registered (Hoang, 2017).

These phenomena are the direct products of national reunification and the renewal of religious policy. Yet it would be too mechanistic to think, especially in the case of a socialist country, that more religion means less state control, and that more religious fervor lead to lessened individual religious indifference. The secular State tolerates religious visibility in the public sphere on the strict condition of pre-declaring all meetings and activities. Moreover, compromises are not only the simple consequences of balances of power. Vietnam's religious diversification has compelled state authorities to improve their understanding of the religious reality (in French "fait religieux", Azria & Hervieu-Léger 2010), the definition of religion in a global context and the best way to manage public religions (Casanova, 1994). Local debates are not focused on desecularization anymore but rather on how the "religious-secular divide" has evolved.

Discussions around this "religious-secular divide", especially when one focuses on former socialist countries, also have to take into account Marxism and Marxism-Leninism both as theoretical references and as practices. In that respect, Klaus Buchenau has observed different European "socialist secularities" and defined them as the struggle of Leninism against Orthodoxy, as well as consequences of "individual historical constellations between religion, society and nationalism" (Buchenau 278). Any comparative typology (and precise chronology) of these "socialist secularities" has yet to be written as for Asian socialist countries, which would clearly underline similarities in the implementation of the orthodox model and differences in adjusting it. Vietnam in particular faced a dilemma: following in the steps of the Soviet Union, or looking at the Chinese model in order to better adapt its religious policy. This was true from the 1950s (Democratic Republic of Vietnam, or Northern Vietnam) until 1989 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam). Simultaneously, Vietnam also had to transform its Communist Party from an anticolonial, antifederal and revolutionary movement that led the country through the war into a bureaucratic apparatus capable of creating and preserving peace and stability that is accepted as the incarnation of the whole nation, including various religious groups.

Following these considerations, one then can interpret the last three decades of changes in Vietnam as follows: from an authoritarian secularism post-war, the

bureaucratic system (orthodox Party-State) became more dialogical and pragmatic by accepting the dual dynamic of the secularization process (detachment or reinvestment of religious activities in private life and society) and by trying to manage a regime of secularity still in process. Ultimately, this article intends to move beyond the question of socialist secularities and functionalist analyses to explore a more pluralistic conception of secularity that would be valid over time. With such a viewpoint, the succession of different postcolonial political regimes between 1945 and 1975 need to be reviewed, each with their distinct religious policies, to analyze changes during the reunification process and currently. Temporality accordance and discordance is consequently a first aspect. Second, is the scale of analysis positioned at the community level. The local specificities of religion life, collective memory, relations to central state also require our consideration to define, at a lower scale, what “religious-secular divide” means and how this division is accepted. Third, is the doctrinal definition of social activism according to each religion or denomination especially when we try to define Buddhist Compassion and Ethic in the context of lay practices and lay organizations. This is the case of Hòa Hảo Buddhism, one among other recently institutionalized local Buddhist organizations.

A necessary return: Buddhism’s denominations in Southern Vietnam

The study of Hòa Hảo Buddhism seems a particularly suitable method to provide a contextualized definition of the religious-secular divide. From an institutional perspective, this religion seems like a peculiar way of practicing Buddhism, as it is an Amidist form that exhorts practicing at home (*tu tại gia*) while being active in the world (*nhập thế*). Let’s define first the nature of this engagement in the world, in order to illustrate how collective activities and support for nation-building were prompted by religious reasons under different political regimes from the 1940s until today.

Hòa Hảo Buddhist community is the product of the Mekong Delta’s unique cultural and social context. In fact, Southern Vietnam shows some particularities in terms of religious diversity, especially within Buddhism (Trần, 2000). Before the Vietnamese Southward expansion (*Nam tiến*) which started during the 17th century, this land was historically inhabited by Khmer people who built monasteries (*wat*), communities, villages, in essence, a Buddhized society ruled by theravada principles (Ohashi Hisatoshi and Mikami Naomitsu 2008). The Vietnamese colonization cleared new lands and founded military outposts before the mandarins were sent to moralize (*giáo hóa*) the pioneers settled in this new Vietnamese frontier. Essentially, they had the mission to spread Confucian values in order to integrate these new territories into the apparatus of the Confucian monarchy and society. Traditionally, this policy often levied an anti-Buddhist campaign to discredit monks or highlight popular superstitious beliefs, doubled with anti-Christian diatribes and persecution edicts to fight foreign missionary actions (Ramsay, 2008). But still, the population typically expressed respect towards Buddhism, found solace in it, and developed a range of popular practices notably from Pure Land, Theravada and tantric Buddhism.

The colonial context and its republican *mission civilisatrice* (Morlat, 2003; Daughton, 2006) facilitated the spread of new ideologies and generated passionate debates over missions and anticlericalism, universal or national religions, principles of freedom of thought and conscience. This was particularly true in the colony of Cochinchina, compared to the protectorates of Tonkin and Annam where the imperial officials of the ministry of Rites preserved their part of traditional power. The local elite, both modernist bourgeois or traditionalist Confucians, expressed diverse views concerning beliefs, rituals and religions, especially towards Christianity and its evangelization but also concerning Buddhism and its so-called revival.

During the first third of the 20th century, a strong renovation movement (*chấn hưng phật giáo*) emerged, particularly in the Southern part of the country to reinforce doctrinal knowledge, vernacularize scriptures, nationalize the Sangha, spread the dharma, readapt rituals as a mundane engagement. This Buddhist reformism followed directly the dual trend of Theravada Buddhism in Cambodia or Thailand (Hansen, 2007, Mackenzie 2007) and Mahayana Buddhism in China (Welch, 1968). As different scholars have showed already (Thích Thiện Hoa, 1973; De Vido, 2008; Nguyễn, 2012; Miller, 2015), the promotion of modernist if not revolutionary Buddhism for the human realm (*Renjian fojiao*) by the monk Tai Xu (Pittman, 2001) influenced Vietnamese monks and several lay Buddhist associations that adopted the same strategy to adapt Buddhist precepts in daily life (*nhân gian phật giáo*). Later on, others Buddhists promoted the more precise ideal of founding a “Pure Land in the human realm”, *renjian jingtu* in Chinese (Heine & Prebish, 2003) and, by analogy, *tịnh độ tại trần thế* in Vietnamese.

Colonial rule sustained the institutionalization of monastic and lay Buddhism. The mobility of Western and Asian religious leaders from other religions encouraged Buddhists, both monks and lay devotees, to federate spiritual lineages on schools (teachings and practices) but also parochial communities under the “Religion” or “Church” models. Close to lay associations which received during the 1930’s a legal status similar to cultural associations, new Buddhist communities and congregations emerged with the hope of being quickly institutionalized, and eventually unified in a Buddhist national Church. Contrary to other Southeast Asian Buddhists countries, this national organization couldn’t receive any political patronage. Officially this paramount goal came to pass in 1951 when the Vietnamese General Association of Buddhism (*Tổng hội phật giáo Việt Nam*) was established. Unfortunately, its activities were postponed and the association finally proved to be ineffective due to the wars. Meanwhile, some Buddhist leaders promoted different forms of engaged Buddhism (*phật giáo dân thân*) during the war, neutralist as for the famous Zen master Thích Nhất Hạnh, or patriotic and compatible with Socialism as for Thích Chiếu (Nguyễn, 2009) and others members of the national salvation Buddhist church (*phật giáo cứu quốc*)⁶.

As Southern Buddhist congregations emerged and multiplied, some decided to follow the secular trend, such as *Học phật hội* (Association for the Study of Buddhism)

⁶ This former unification process only concerned the Buddhists living under the 17th parallel. Following the reunification, the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha was lately unified in 1981 under the name of Buddhist Church of Vietnam (*Giáo hội phật giáo Việt Nam*).

founded by a new lay Buddhist elite with the support of monks, or *Tịnh độ cư sĩ Phật học hội* and their lay devotees. Others worked at the erection of Buddhist institutes for teachings and meditation; others still tried to promote both millenarian Buddhist tradition and social Justice (*Bửu sơn kỳ hương*, *Tứ ân hiệu nghĩa*). Other followed more fundamentalist (*phật giáo nguyên thủy*, Vietnamese Theravada Buddhism) or quietist paths (*Phật giáo khất sĩ*, Mendicant Order) similar to modernist Lao or Thai forest monks. This renovation movement showed different religious productions of modernity (Hervieu-Léger, 1996), under the Weberian definition of rationalization and disenchantment as well as in terms of a gradation in radical doctrinal innovations or cosmological reinterpretations (Fundamentalism, Syncretism, Utopianism). As a consequence, each group interacted with the global society and intervened in its own way in the process of Nation building.

Among all these different initiatives, development and social activities had more success than others in terms of attractiveness. Hòa Hảo Buddhism arose in the western part of the Mekong Delta on 18th day of the 5th month of the *Kỷ Mão* lunar year (July 4, 1939). On that day, in a village named Hòa Hảo (*Supreme Harmony*), Huỳnh Phú Sổ, a 21-year-old man from a middle-class farming family publicly predicted terrible disasters. He then reinterpreted the basic tenets of the White Lotus tradition and messianic Buddhism (Cult of Maitreya) in a way that would provide redemption and show a path towards salvation (long-awaited Assembly of the Dragon Flower). This event was the culmination of an initiatory route that had started with a long period of undefined illness. Huỳnh Phú Sổ left his native village to travel to the region of Seven Mountains (*Thất sơn*) in search of hermits famous for their healing methods and spiritual knowledge. He was initiated into these powers and returned. Thus, a new religious movement started to arise.

The eloquence of Pontiff Huỳnh (*Đức Huỳnh Giáo Chủ*) served him well in his endeavor to spread his Charisma and Moral exemplarity. His writings were compiled into several booklets freely accessible to the population. He reshaped local millenarian beliefs from the mid-19th century, in particular those of the *Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương*, and placed himself within a messianic lineage to define a doctrinal body of Buddhist nature. The birth of Caodaism few years before and its own interpretation of Dragon Flower Assembly (*Hội Long Hoa*) further explain the incredible spread of millenarian ideas at this time.

In March 1940, the French colonial authorities put the young prophet under house arrest. Then the Japanese army placed him three years under their protection in Saigon. During this period, Huỳnh Phú Sổ wrote new religious texts, which no longer referred to metaphysics or millenarian conceptions but to Pure Land precepts and practice. Conversely, he had moved on to the rational prescription of belief for his followers and the secular organization of the Hòa Hảo community. It was also while in Saigon, that he was brought into politics and started to mutate its original mystic rebellion into a more elaborate social justice movement. Mid-1945, Huỳnh Phú Sổ first tried to create, in vain, an Independence movement (*Việt Nam Độc Lập Vận Động Hội*) then a large lay Buddhist alliance (*Việt Nam Phật Giáo Liên Hiệp Hội*). He eventually started to institutionalize the Hòa Hảo Buddhist community through a strict lay organization without clergy, monks or pagodas. He proclaimed and published the “Rules for practicing the good and for the behavior of the believer” (*Cách*

tu hiền và sự ăn ở của một người bốn đạo) which every adept had to respect and follow under the guidance of lay devotees.

One year later, the Age of Revolution (August 1945) encouraged Huỳnh Phú Sổ to support the rise of a Social Democratic Party (*Đảng dân chủ xã hội Việt Nam*). By doing so, he tried to prove the harmonious compatibility of patriotic engagement, democratic values and Buddhist precepts. But Huỳnh Phú Sổ's "disappearance" (*mất tích*) on 18 April 1947, sealed an irredeemable political rivalry between Hòa Hảo believers and Communist followers. One month later, rumors of his death started to circulate simultaneously as different justifications of his absence (*vắng mặt*). During the following decades of war, especially during the 1960s, his father then his sister embodied the religious authority, becoming guardians of the sanctuary (*tổ đình*) and of the doctrine. An autonomous religious activity offered a sense of community and mutual aid during this exceptional situation of insurgency. But these local committees depended on military leaders supported by the French army and the Vietnamese administrators in charge of the anti-communist counterinsurgency.

However, their domination by military power factions weakened religious authority for years. After a non-communist state was founded in Southern Vietnam, the first President of the Republic of Vietnam, Ngô Đình Diệm (1955–1963†), went to war against the Hòa Hảo military leaders who did not recognize the legitimacy of the new state. All of Hòa Hảo's civil organizations were dismantled. Adepts were no longer free to publicly and collectively express their faith. However in 1964, a new religious policy clarified religion-state relations; more specifically, for the very first time, Hòa Hảo Buddhism was recognized by an independent Vietnamese state as a religion with a legal status. A church-type organization was founded and operated in total autonomy, free from military pressures or political compromises. The Central Management Committee of the Hòa Hảo Buddhist Church (*Ban trị sự trung ương giáo hội Phật Giáo Hòa Hảo*) ensured the conformity of individual practice, the diffusion and exegesis of the doctrine, the teachings of worship by lay specialists, the impact of social and charitable activities, and the management of community property. It was unexpectedly during the second Republic of Vietnam, paradoxically in the course of the Vietnamese American war, between 1964 and 1975, that the Hòa Hảo enjoyed the most stable legal situation of religious freedom.

April 1975 provoked a new violent break. Due to the national reunification process, the nascent Hòa Hảo Church and its para-religious organizations were once again disbanded. All the leaders and dignitaries who were considered to be active supporters of the "Puppet Regime" were sent to reeducation camps or attempted to flee the country. Individual Hòa Hảo practice was tolerated, but without any explicit reference to the Pontiff (*Giáo chủ*) Huỳnh Phú Sổ whose written texts were forbidden while the celebration of his unexplained death was banned. Giving visibility to collective rituals and social actions was also forbidden. This situation remained until may 1999 but negotiations didn't put an end to tensions between the Party-State and the Hòa Hảo (Bourdeaux, 2010). As was the case with others similar attempts, this compromise provoked divisions inside the community: some leaders and followers questioned the legitimacy of this "state-run Hòa Hảo Buddhism" (*Phật giáo hòa hảo quốc doanh*) by claiming their affiliation to the legitimate branch or "Authentic

Hòa Hảo Buddhism” (*Phật giáo hòa hảo thuần túy*) that strove for complete internal autonomy and rebuilding of its historical Church.

Hòa Hảo Buddhism in the World: doctrine, social activism and its legacy

As soon as religious movements try to survive or expand by transforming into stable organizations, these new religions confront the internal dilemmas of institutionalization (O’Dea, 1961) while at the same time challenging central states, whatever their nature, as well as societies’ power structures. In ancient times, sectarian groups were traditionally labeled by Vietnamese confucianists as non-orthodox (*tà đạo*) and rejected indifferently. Among these, what one can call folk Buddhist religions were certainly the more visible resurgent phenomenon. Step by step, during colonial times and thereafter, better analysis of texts, rituals and practices allowed redefining these non-conformist and non-clerical groups in accordance with their own soteriology, liturgy and rituals. This is what used to be called in the Chinese context, the Salvationist groups and their two main branches, the millenarian sects and the redemptive societies. Both are characterized by a specific combination of elements such as charismatic leadership, master-disciple relations, worship of a pantheon of deities, spirit-medium, inspired scripture, healing knowledge, devotion, etc. (Overmeyer 1976; Duara 2003). Marginalized by the state, these groups have always been deeply integrated into the peasant societies, especially when they were promoting a set of Salvationist discourses, self-cultivation techniques and the call for a collective mobilization into social life.

Hòa Hảo Buddhism is an appropriate example to demonstrate all these different dynamics through its short and specific historical enculturation. Of course, resistance against colonialism, cold War and eventually the national reunification under the One-party state influenced the common perception of Hòa Hảo activism during these last decades, reduced essentially to military factionalism and politicization. In spite of this context of extreme violence and psychological warfare, this new religion tried nevertheless to find a way to put Buddhist compassion and ethics into effective practice, to being engaged with the world.

After having reinterpreted and challenged the millenarian White Lotus tradition and the cult of Maitreya, Huỳnh Phú Sổ wanted to unify practices of Mahayana Buddhism in conformity with the Amidist doctrine, which venerates Sakyamuni and the main bodhisattvas. Pietistic followers would be able to obtain redemption and be reborn beside Amitabha on the “Pure Land of the West”. Following Hòa Hảo’s teachings, worship and prayers were simplified, contemplative activities reduced to emphasize altruistic and humanitarian actions to obtain merits. The aforementioned spread of the Three teachings into peasant society, offer an explanation as to the persistence of the Daoist ideal of non-interference in the face of natural laws and of spontaneity in every intention (*xuất thế vô vi*), as well as the Confucian ethic of human harmony, moral self-reflection and commitment in the world (*nhập thế*). But Hòa Hảo exegetes (such as Vương Kim, Thanh Sĩ, Nguyễn Văn Hào) insisted on the Buddhahood of their Master and the Buddhist nature of his actions. Many Buddhist

traditions distinguish between what is supramundane (*lokottara, siêu thế*) or beyond the phenomenological world and gives access to supramundane consciousness and liberation, and what is in the world (*loka, thế*), in other words what is the visible and sensitive world underpinned by a complex cosmology divided into hells and peaceful worlds where humankind suffer reincarnations.

As a sociological consequence, Buddhists have to decide whether to leave the world for a unique religious life (*xuất thế*) or to live in the world -return to or stay in the world- by making their religious precepts and spirituality compatible with their social and cultural environment (*nhập thế*). Hòa Hảo adepts have to respect ancestor commemoration, but in simplified ways, and practice Buddhism without disrupting their daily private and public activities. Huỳnh Phú Sổ clearly expressed this principle when he wrote in the “Rules for practicing the good” that his followers “totally belong to this kind of Buddhism practiced at home by Upasaka” (*Toàn thể trong đạo chúng ta thuộc hạng tại gia cư sĩ*). As a consequence, people who practice their religion at home have to earn their living with dignity and pledge to reject professions that do harm to human persons.

Another famous Hòa Hảo precept is that life (*đời*) without practicing Religion (*đạo*) is dishonest and ignorant (“Đời không đạo đời vô liêm sĩ”); at the same time one can doubt the necessity to teach a religion if it is disconnected with existence (“Đạo không đời đạo biết dạy ai”). Succinctly, efficient morality is more important than metaphysics, real Buddhism means putting into practice teachings in daily life. We find this conception in the formula *Học Phật tu nhân*, which combines the “study of Buddhism” with “cultivating virtue”. Pontiff Huỳnh thus promulgated a method of self-improvement which ensures the follower a practice of good as a social and religious being simultaneously. The goal of the study of Buddhism is to procure merits through a humanitarian and upright social commitment, but also to attain the necessary conditions for enlightenment, understood as sudden enlightenment. Furthermore, Hòa Hảo followers make every effort to honor in everyday life the two values of Piety (*hiếu*) and Righteousness (*ngĩa*). Their attitude thus consists in conserving in society an honest individual conduct (*xử thế*) and assuming their obligations within the family as well as within the community. This is expressed in their respect for the Four Debts of Gratitude (*Tứ ân*): debt to parents and ancestors (*ân tổ tiên cha mẹ*), to the country (*ân đất nước*), to the Three Jewels (*ân tam bảo*), namely Buddha, Dharmā and Sangha, and to the compatriots and humanity (*ân đồng bào và nhân loại*).

How these simple precepts were put into practice evolved of course depending on historical circumstances. Under the colonial regime and during the war, these precepts often translated into a form of patriotic humanitarianism. Then during peacetime, the socialist regime tried to maintain its monopoly on social progress and national reunification. Beyond a univocal ideological analysis of political involvement, we have to distinguish the religious meaning of Hòa Hảo’s social activism in the former situation of anti-colonialism, during Cold War, in the context of reunification and, nowadays, under a post-revolutionary socialist regime.

From the birth of Hòa Hảo Buddhism (1939), the pioneer spirit maintained in this new frontier autarkical behaviors within new villages founded just before or during colonial period. Urbanization was only in its early stages and provincial administration was still lax at the end of the colonial regime. During the Second World War, the

Vichy regime on the one hand and the Japanese occupation on the other promoted differently Vietnamese nationalism and modern religious identities. It was then that Huỳnh Phú Sổ definitively transformed the former millenarian movement into a frugal form of lay Buddhism suited to peasantry and local subaltern culture.

The anti-colonial uprising of August 1945 led to a war for independence that compelled the Hòa Hảo adepts to protect their emerging religion. But first the context of guerilla warfare followed by the shift from a War of decolonization to a Cold War theatre radicalized patriotic positions and transformed religious commitment. The disappearance of Huỳnh Phú Sổ and subsequent conflicts between military factions and religious leaders could have caused the definitive demise of the religious movement. It didn't happen thanks to the spiritual connexion of Hòa Hảo adepts towards pontiff Huỳnh and geographical cohesion. Practically, local communities tried to keep neutrality or to separate religious practice from patriotic actions. Moreover, the Vietnamese civil Administration was too weak at this time to provide locally efficient public services and security outside towns. A part of religious philanthropy was controlled or diverted by lords of war that consequently tended to become dubious, insincere or oriented against non-believers. For the common people, social actions were done in the first place to cope with uncertainty by using familialism and mutual assistance at the same time as expressing respect to the Buddhist teachings. The emerging Hòa Hảo Church tried nonetheless to coordinate collective actions during the 1950's. Even when the first independent states started to shape⁷, all these activities continued to be discredited as factionalism or anti-state mobilization. It must be said that the situation stayed unclear until the Ordinance on associations was promulgated in 1950. And even then, this ordinance didn't make clear differences between lay associations and religious ones.

Under the presidency of Ngô Đình Diệm, a new state was created south of the 17th parallel, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). To this new President, State building implied imposing a cohesive and united national policy, especially towards regionalist movements and religious forces. The Constitution, in its articles 16 and 18, preserved freedom of association and of religious beliefs. Hòa Hảo's adepts could practice at home but any Hòa Hảo Buddhist church could legally be founded. In addition, the regime turned increasingly conservative in terms of morals. Following the Buddhist crisis and the change of government (1963), religion-state relations evolved for the better and a more liberal religious policy was finally implemented by the RVN. Hòa Hảo Buddhism was formally recognized in 1964. The religion had a charter, an official church-like organization with elected representatives for the different branches of both religious and profane activities. It was finally allowed to legally develop more diverse social activities when a new decade of War unfortunately started again.

Succinctly, philanthropy and social activism could be divided into two successive periods, each sharing warfare and emergency situations. During the Indochina War,

⁷ To sum up the Vietnamese States' legal constitutions: The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (september 1945) on one side; on the other side, the gradual emancipation of autonomous Republic of Cochinchina (1946) into south-Vietnam provisional Government (1947), then Associated State of Vietnam (1948), State of Vietnam (1949) really independent and sovereign from the end of 1953. In 1956, this State was replaced by the Republic of Vietnam (1956–1975). Finally, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam reunified the country in 1976, one year after the end of the war.

social activities were not the objects of much interest from state agents or media because of the conflict's politicization and the militarization of factions who were able to impose their power on small but rich fiefdoms in return for the establishment of a "Hòa Hảo Peace"⁸. The distinctive religious organization headed by the founder's family preserved the purity of the spiritual authority and religious legitimacy. From its Sanctuary, the Hòa Hảo informal religious organization strove to publish texts, maintain sacred places and local committees, organized festivals and pilgrimages, and support humanitarian activities in the broadest possible field. Opportunistic local leaders also took advantage of the situation to compensate for the weakness of the welfare state. From 1948, to meet the needs of the refugees, charity committees (*hội phước thiện*) were created in many hamlets. A "Hòa Hảo Red Cross" even tried to coordinate these initiatives before the national Red Cross organization supervised humanitarian relief. Nonetheless, religious mutual relief worked at the local level without misappropriation of donations. Hòa Hảo committees also supplied medicine, offered cures free of charge based on traditional techniques, and created a small network of medical centers and maternity wards. Dozens of schools were built in villages, and poor families earned scholarships for their children. But in 1955, when the central government became stronger, it engaged in the "War of the Sects" in Saigon and the countryside. This military campaign did not aim to discriminate against religious minorities but to destroy illegal military and civil apparatus and settle provincial administration where the former state failed.

During the following decade, spontaneous mutual assistance persisted at the local level. Then, with its official recognition in 1964, the Hòa Hảo Church legally reinvested the secular world and the public space in all the provinces of the Republic of Vietnam⁹. A Central committee for social action (*ban xã hội trung ương giáo hội PGHH*) took charge of social economy (*kinh tế dân sinh*) and provided support to vulnerable people and injured peasants (*chấn tế*). It also supervised youth and cultural affairs. In addition, the Hòa Hảo Church created a veterans Association, managed military cemeteries and memorials, and took care of injured people and arranged funerals for poor families. Women's Associations were mostly responsible for these philanthropic actions (*đoàn công tác xã hội, đoàn phụ nữ từ thiện*). It also supported popular education by founding childcare centers, primary and secondary schools, and giving scholarships to worthy children. Furthermore, a Hòa Hảo University was also established in 1970 in Long Xuyên. This institution specialized in Agriculture and worked with the Hòa Hảo Committee for rural development (*ban phát triển nông thôn*) to promote new technical knowledge on agricultural hydraulics and cooperative organization. It also encouraged small public works (roads, bridges, small canals), house building for indigent people, and to help fighting against floods (*ủy ban cứu trợ nạn lụt*). Finally, the Church provided medical aid. Traditional and western Medicines were administered free of charge in maternity wards and clinics.

⁸ For more details, see Chap. 7 (Guerre et paix Hòa Hảo) of the forthcoming book (1st semester 2022): Pascal Bourdeaux, *Bouddhisme Hòa Hảo, d'un royaume l'autre. Religion et révolution au Sud Viêt Nam (1935–1955)*, Paris, Les Indes Savantes).

⁹ For further details, see the official review of the Hòa Hảo Buddhist Church, *Đuốc từ bi* (The torch of compassion) published from 1965 onwards.

One mobile medical team (*đoàn y tế lưu động*) crossed the countryside by car or by boat and the Hòa Hảo hospital could host 150 people in Long Xuyên as of 1970.

In April 1975, Hòa Hảo's religious life once again faced severe upheaval when all its organizations were dismantled, and all religious properties collectivized. Any social activity henceforth had to be supervised by a Communist Mass Organization. The Hòa Hảo Church, its assets, and its "holy land" (*thánh địa*) were disbanded. While communist authorities tried to reduce the Hòa Hảo cult to a local practice, overseas Hòa Hảo's communities were structured within the Vietnamese diasporas, especially in North America. Nationally, a strict control of religious activities was more than effective until the end of the 1990s; trans-nationally, the religion itself flourished and pursued social actions in order to financially support the community in Vietnam through private channels.

Eventually, the recognition of Hòa Hảo Buddhism was confirmed in May 1999, precisely the year of the 60th birth anniversary of the Religion. A first Congress of 160 delegates was held in the native village of the founder Huỳnh Phú Sổ. An initial probationary mandate set the five-year program to reconstruct the church. Doctrine, representation, philanthropy and social actions (*từ thiện xã hội*) were discussed while others political issues or memory work remained taboo. If some leaders agreed to negotiate and support step by step reconciliation with the government, others clearly called for the integral reclamation of the ancient order (properties, social activities, legacy of patriotic actions, etc.). That year, the first legal pilgrimage to the sanctuary delighted adepts but worried state officials. Indeed, this celebration attracted over three days several hundred thousand people, even perhaps as many as one million. From this day on, Hòa Hảo Religion became highly visible again. It became evident during the dramatic flood of the Mekong delta one year after, in 2000: the local authorities and their state organizations could not restrict the strength of the Hòa Hảo mobilization in terms of labor, finances, and donations inside the country and abroad. Overseas aid was not reduced to individual relief anymore but directly addressed to the church.

However, in order to be institutionalized once and for all, Hòa Hảo Buddhism had to obtain approbation of its charter, rules and regulations. A few years later, the first central management committee of the Hòa Hảo Church (*Ban trị sự trung ương giáo hội Phật giáo Hòa Hảo*) was finally established in spite of conflicts, judicial proceedings, and the irreversible division of the community. Nevertheless, this institution is currently allowed to disseminate its religious teachings and expand social activities. More precisely, the Central committee of the Hòa Hảo Church is composed of one Secretariat and 5 Committees: diffusion of religious teachings; social affairs and charity; community life, logistics, finances. According to the Internal Instructions (7.11.2014), the Committee for charitable and social actions (*ban từ thiện xã hội trung ương*) helps indigent people, provides mutual assistance for the followers in their private life, supports any activity useful for the society and the social economy. It operates in coordination with others in accordance with the charter reviewed every five years.

From 2005 onwards, the Church has developed a large range of philanthropic activities in cooperation with the central state. Relevant examples include the building of "houses of the heart" (*nhà mái ấm tình thương*), scholarships for poor children,

issuing of food and traditional medicine in front of hospitals, free ambulance transportation, collective support on work, and money for small public infrastructures and sharing agricultural equipment. Recent years have seen more activities in relation with environmental issues (climate change, pollution). The official review of the committee for religious affairs (*Công tác tôn giáo*, Religious Affairs) or the review of the Hòa Hảo Church (*Hương sen*, the lotus flavor) both provide statistics and positive comments on the financial and material contributions of the Hòa Hảo community to national prosperity¹⁰, or, in other words, to a new culture of social service. For the community, this is a way to expect enlarging self-governance and autonomy, while it is a way for the state to reintegrate the religious community into the nation. If no one can ignore tensions between the Vietnamese government and international institutions on human rights, or the balance of power between the secular state and this religion, one has also to admit that observing current negotiations on social actions helps us to better understand Hòa Hảo Buddhism as a belief system but also as a social movement.

Conclusions: historicizing secularity and new religions at once?

The approval of the Law on Belief and Religion in 2016 and its subsequent implementation from 2018 onwards demonstrates a new legal and conceptual framework for religion-state relations in Vietnam. This law formalizes the evolution of the Vietnamese policy towards religion that had been pursued in the context of socialist edification and national reunification in the post-war period. From State perspective, we see how the imposed monolithic secularist post-war policy has gradually evolved in accordance with the improvement of the rule of law and the economic take off. What Vietnamese scholars call the “renovation” of the religious policy (*đổi mới chính sách tôn giáo*) can be now labeled as different thresholds of socialist secularities perceived as an evolution of religious policy applied by a Party-State changing into a Secular State, so as a will to enrich theoretical debate.

If we then analyze secularity on a longer time frame, other issues emanate in terms of state-building, state genealogy and legitimacy. Prior to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (from 1976) and simultaneously with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1945–1976), other postcolonial states emerged in Southern Vietnam. All of them underwent alternative experiences regarding pluralism and public religions. If we refer to Baubérot’s typology of the secular, especially the six different ideal type variations of *laïcité* he formulated these last few years, one can try to define the secular model of each consecutive or overlapping period of contemporary Vietnam. These multiple secularities were not only opposed models during the cold War, they were also successive, synchronic and interactive experiences of the secular¹¹. We thus

¹⁰ See also the official websites of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (<http://btgcp.gov.vn>) and the Hòa Hảo Buddhist Church (<http://phatgiaohoa.hao.org.vn>).

¹¹ Pascal Bourdeaux, 2022 (forthcoming), “States, Religions and Modernities for one Nation: historicizing a converging secularization in 20th Century Vietnam” in: Pascal Bourdeaux, Eddy Dufourmond, André Laliberté, Rémy Madinier (eds.): *Asia and the Secular; Francophone perspectives in a global age*, Boston/Berlin, De Gruyter.

understand the explicit and implicit intellectual legacies of negotiations currently applied to define what the secular is and how one secular regime can be efficiently contextualized, implemented and accepted.

Consequently, historicizing the secular can clearly show how to further the argument of a multipolar vision of the concept. If Vietnamese legal experts, political scientists, sociologists are directly concerned with the paradigm of secularization, this is less the case for historians. Moreover, religious history is still dependent on political history and methodological nationalism (Dumitru 2014, Sutherland 2016). Scholars still face difficulties to write historical essays on Vietnamese States or Religions separately, as if the shadow of the Communist Party and its history had to determine each time any thought about States and Religions. Generally speaking, colonial and postcolonial Vietnamese religious historiography would take advantage of entangled and conceptual history approaches to look back at the colonial legacy and postcolonial background of intellectual history. Especially in the case of Vietnam where ideas of Revolution, Nation-State, “*laïcité*”, deeply affected modernist and revolutionary leaders, and still encourage nowadays academic debates of major social scientists.

Historicization is as relevant at the State level as at the lower scale of religious communities, even more when new religions are still proceeding their legal and social acceptance by the State and civil society. Hòa Hảo Buddhism clearly expresses particularities in terms of belief, territoriality, segmented history, lack of missionary work, intermundane engagement. This article recounts it as a case study for two main reasons. The first one was to highlight the religious plurality, especially the Buddhist diversity of the southern region and the succession of political regimes from colonial time until now. Comparing these experiences sheds light on the complex interactions between a New Religious Movement and a central state, regardless of its political nature. The second reason was to illustrate how the meaning of being engaged in the world can change according to social context. Hòa Hảo Buddhism appeared at the eve of three decades of war. From its birth, it had to adapt social activism to insurgency and emergency; it also had to prove how Buddhist values and patriotic commitment were congruent even in the context of Cold war. After the country’s reunification, this non-recognized religion supported the privatization of worship, then, from the 2000s onwards, the state started to authorize limited activities by charities and local assistance from religious groups.

To conclude, historicizing social actions is a way to further show how the state intends to define, as a matter of priority, its own “regime of secularity”. Social actions are tolerated as long as they are supportive of and not substitutive to the nation-state reinforcement. It defines furthermore the deep nature of each religion. In the case of Hòa Hảo Buddhism, one can clearly observe how this religious group reconnects with the core of its original social doctrine. At the same time as still having to accept disconnection with part of its collective memory and history, both secular and religious.

Appendix

Appendix: Comparison of official statistics published by the Government Committee for Religious Affairs in 1998 and 2016 (Nguyễn Minh Quang, 2001, pp. 141; <http://btgcp.gov.vn>). Results of the National census in 2019 (General Statistics Office: <https://www.gso.gov.vn/du-lieu-va-so-lieu-thong-ke/2020/11/ket-qua-toan-bo-tong-dieu-tra-dan-so-va-nha-o-nam-2019/>)

Religions	1998	2016	2019
Buddhism	7,62 million	12 million	4.606.543
Catholicism	5,02 million	6.7 million	5.866.169
Protestantism	412.000	1.5 million	960.558
Islam	93.000	800.000	70.394
Caodaim	1,14 million	2.5 million	556.234
Hoa Hao Buddhism	1,30 million	1,3 million	983.079
Pure land Buddhist Home Association	-	1.5 million	2.306
Four debts of Gratitude Religion	-	71.000	30.416
Hinduism	-	57.000	64.547
Strange Perfume from Precious Mountains Religion	-	15.000	2.975
Minh Sur Faith	-	1.000	260
Minh Lý Faith	-	1.100	193
Dutiful and loyal Buddhist of Ta Lon	-	6.500	401
Baha'i faith of Vietnam organization	-	7.000	2.153
Vietnamese Mormon church	-	1.000	4.281
Seventh day Adventist church	-	-	11.830
Total	15,6 millions	24 millions	13.162.339

Funding This study was not funded.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

References

- Azria, R., & Hervieu-Léger, D. (2010). *Dictionnaire des faits religieux*. Paris: PUF
- Baubérot, J. (2004). *La laïcité (1905–2005), entre raison et passion*. Paris: Seuil
- Baubérot, J., & Milot, M. (2011). *Laïcités sans frontières*. Paris: Seuil
- Berger, P. (1967). *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. Garden City: Anchor Books Editions
- Bourdeaux, P. (2022 forthcoming). States, Religions and Modernities for one Nation: historicizing a converging secularization in 20th Century Vietnam. In P. Bourdeaux et al. (eds.) *Asia and the Secular, Francophone perspectives in a global age*. Boston/Berlin: De Gruyter

- Bourdeaux, P. (2022, forthcoming). *Bouddhisme Hòa Hảo'un royaume l'autre. Religion et révolution au Sud Viêt Nam (1935–1955)*. Paris: Les Indes Savantes
- Bourdeaux, P. (2015). Regards sur l'autonomisation religieuse dans le processus d'indépendance du Viêt Nam au milieu du vingtième siècle. *French Politics Culture & Society*, 33(2), 11–32
- Bourdeaux, P. (2010). Réflexions sur l'institutionnalisation du bouddhisme Hòa Hảo. Remise en perspective historique de la reconnaissance de 1999. *Social Compass*, 57(3), 372–385
- Bourdieu, P. (1971). Genèse et structure du champ religieux. *Revue française de sociologie*, 12(2), 295–334
- Bubandt, N., & Van Beek, M. (2012). *Varieties of Secularism in Asia, Anthropological explorations of religion, politics and the spiritual*. London: Routledge
- Buchenau, K. (2015). Socialist secularities: the diversity of a universalist model. In M. Burchardt, M. Wohlrab-Sahr, & M. Middell (Eds.), *Multiple secularities beyond the West: Religion and Modernity in the Global Age* (pp. 261–283). Boston/Berlin: De Gruyter
- Burchardt, M., Wohlrab-Sahr, M., & Middell, M. (2015). *Multiple Secularities beyond the West: Religion and Modernity in the Global Age*. Boston/Berlin: De Gruyter
- Caratini, M., & Grandjean, P. (1939). *Le Statut des missions en Indochine*. Hanoi: IDEO
- Casanova, J. (1994). *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Daughton, P. (2006). *An Empire Divided, Religion, Republicanism, and the Making of French Colonialism, 1880–1914*. New York: Oxford University Press
- De Vido, E. (2008). Buddhism for This World: The Buddhist Revival in Vietnam, 1920–51 and its Legacy. In Ph. & Taylor (Eds.), *Modernity and Re-enchantment: Religion in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam* (pp. 250–296). Lanham: MD Lexington Books
- Đỗ, Q. H. (2014). *Chính sách tôn giáo và nhà nước pháp quyền [Religious Policy and the Rule of Law]*. Hanoi: Nxb ĐHQGHN
- Đỗ, Q. H. (2005). Từ sự đổi mới nhận thức đến sự đổi mới về chính sách tôn giáo [From the Renovation of knowledge to the Renovation of Religious Policy]. *Công Tác Tôn Giáo [Religious Affairs]*, 1, 10–14
- Đỗ, Q. H. (1998). Vấn đề tôn giáo tín ngưỡng trong tư tưởng Hồ Chí Minh [Religion and belief under the scope of Hồ Chí Minh's thought]. *Đặng Nghiêm Vạn (ed.), Những vấn đề lý luận và thực tiễn tôn giáo ở Việt Nam [Religion in Vietnam, theoretic and practical aspects]* (pp. 113–149). Hà Nội: NxbKHXH
- Duara, P. (2003). *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Mandchoukuo and the East Asian Modern*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield
- Eisenstadt, S. (1999). *Fundamentalism, Sectarianism and Revolution, the Jacobin dimension of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Giáo hội Phật Giáo Hòa Hảo. (1966). *Sám giảng thi văn - toàn bộ của Huỳnh Phú Sổ. [Biography and Teaching of Prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ]*. Saigon, Central Committee for the Diffusion of Hoa Hao Buddhism
- Goossaert, V., & Palmer, D. (2011). *The Religious Question in Modern China*. Chicago: Chicago University Press
- Gorski, P. (2000). Historicizing the Secularization Debate: Church, State and Society in late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, ca. 1300 to 1700. *American Sociological Review*, 65, 138–167
- Government Committee for Religious Affairs (2006). *Religion and Policies regarding Religion in Vietnam*, Selector at <http://www.mofa.gov.vn/vi/>, accessed 25/10/2009
- Hansen, A. (2007). *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in colonial Cambodia, 1860–1930*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press
- Heine, S., & Prebish, C. (2003). *Buddhism in the Modern World: Adaptations of an Ancient Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Hervieu-Léger, D. (1996). Les productions religieuses de la modernité: les phénomènes du croire dans les sociétés modernes. In B. Caulier (Ed.), *Religion, sécularisation, modernité. Les expériences francophones en Amérique du Nord*. Montréal: Presses de l'Université Laval
- Hisatoshi, O., & Naomitsu, M. (2008). *Khmer people in Southern Vietnam, their society and culture*. Tokyo: Keio University Press
- Hoang, V. C. (2017). *New Religions and State's response to Religious diversification in Contemporary Vietnam, tensions from the reinvention of the sacred*. Berlin: Springer
- Hoskins, J. (2015). *The Divine Eye and the Diaspora: Vietnamese Syncretism Becomes Transpacific Cao daism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press
- Hue-Tâm, H. T. (1983). *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Viêt Nam*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

- Jammes, J. (2011). L'État vietnamien face à la religion Cao Đài, procédures punitives et réponses des fidèles du Saint-Siège de Tây Ninh. In A. Brotons, et al. (Eds.), *État, religion, répression dans l'histoire de l'Asie orientale (XIIIe-XXIe siècles)* (pp. 263–310). Paris: Karthala
- Jiwei, C. (1994). *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution, from Uopianism to Hedonism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Kosseleck, R. (2016). *Le futur passé, contribution à la sémantique des temps historiques*. Paris: Editions EHESS
- Krech, V., & Steinicke, M. (2011). *Dynamics in the history of religions between Asia and Europe, encounters, notions and comparative perspectives*. Leiden: Brill
- Laliberté, A. (2009). Les religions d'Asie de l'Est mondialisées: le rôle des États. *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, 19(1), 19–39
- Laliberté, A. (2004). *The Politics of Buddhist Organisations in Taiwan, 1989–2003: Safeguard the Faith, Build a Pure Land, Help the Poor*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge Curzon
- Madeley, J. (2003). *Religion and Politics*. London: Routledge
- Maïs, J. (1986). 1975–1985, dix ans de relations entre l'Église et l'État au Vietnam. *Échanges France-Asie*, 5, 86
- Marr, D. (1987). Church and State in Vietnam. *Indochina Issues*, 74, 1–4
- Michel, P. (1997). *Religion et démocratie, nouveaux enjeux, nouvelles approches*. Paris: Albin Michel
- Michel, P. (1999). Religion, nation et pluralisme, une réflexion fin de siècle. *Critique internationale*, 2(3), 79–97
- Miller, E. (2015). Religious Revival and the Politics of Nation Building: Reinterpreting the 1963 'Buddhist crisis' in South Vietnam. *Modern Asian Studies*, 49(6), 1903–1962
- Morlat, P. (2003). *La question religieuse dans l'empire colonial français*. Paris: Les Indes Savantes
- Muehlenbeck, P. (2012). *Religion and the Cold War: A Global Perspective*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press
- Ngo, T., & Quijada, J. (2015). *Atheist Secularism and its discontents. A comparative study of Religion and Communism in Eurasia*. London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Nguyễn, H. D. (2014). *Tiếp tục đời mới chính sách về tôn giáo ở Việt Nam hiện nay. Những vấn đề lý luận cơ bản [Continuity in the Renovation of the Religious Policy in current Vietnam, the basic theoretical Issues]*. Hanoi: Nxb Văn hóa Thông tin và Viện Văn Hóa
- Nguyễn, L. T. N. (1991). *Phật Giáo Hòa Hảo trong dòng lịch sử dân tộc [Hòa Hảo Buddhism in the course of National history]*. Santa Fe: Ed. Đuốc Từ Bi
- Nguyễn, M. Q. (2001). *Religions au Việt Nam, Entretien*. Hanoi: Nxb Thế Giới
- Nguyễn, Q. T. (2009). *Thiện Chiếu, Nhà cải cách Phật Giáo [Thiên Chiếu, a Reformist Buddhist]*. Hồ Chí Minh City: Nxb Văn Học
- Nguyễn, Q. T. (2012). *Đặc điểm và vai trò của Phật giáo Việt nam thế kỷ 20 [Specificities and the part of Buddhism in 20th century Vietnam]*. Hanoi: Nxb Từ Điển Bách Khoa
- Nguyễn, T. A. (1998). The Vietnamese Confucian Literati and the Problem of Nation-Building in the Early Twentieth Century. In M. S. Oh, & H. J. Kim (Eds.), *Religion, Ethnicity and Modernity in Southeast Asia*. Seoul: National University Press
- Nguyễn, V. H. (1968). *Nhân thức Phật Giáo Hòa Hảo [Conceive Hoa Hao Buddhism]*. Long Xuyên: Hương Sen xuất bản
- O'Dea, T. (1961). Five dilemmas in the institutionalisation of religion. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1, 30–39
- Overmyer, D. (1976). *Folk Buddhist Religion, dissenting Sects in the Late Traditional China*. Harvard: Harvard University Press
- Pittman, D. (2001). *Towards a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu's Reforms*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press
- Queen, C., & King, S. (1996). *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. New York: State University of New York Press
- Ramsay, J. (2008). *Mandarins and Martyrs: The Church and the Nguyen Dynasty in Early Nineteenth-Century Vietnam*. Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Ritzinger, J. (2017). *Anarchy in the Pure Land, Reinventing the Cult of Maitreya in Modern Chinese Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- peranta, D. (2014). Qu'est-ce que le nationalisme méthodologique? Essai de typologie. *Raisons politiques*, 54, 9–22
- Sutherland, C. (2016). A post-modern mandala? Moving beyond methodological nationalism. *Huma-Netten*, 37, 88–106

- Taylor, C. (2007). *A Secular Age*. Harvard: Harvard University Press
- Thanh, S., & Vương, K. (1954). *Đề hiểu Phật Giáo Hòa Hào [Understand Hòa Hào Buddhism]*. Saigon: Nxb Long Hoa
- Thích Thiện Hoa. (1973). *50 năm chấn hưng Phật giáo [Fifty years of renovation of Buddhism]*. Saigon: Viện Hóa Đạo
- Trần, H. L. (2000). *Đạo Phật trong cộng đồng người Việt ở Nam Bộ Việt Nam từ thế kỷ XVII đến 1975 [Buddhism and the Southern Vietnamese Community from 17th century until 1975]*. Hồ Chí Minh City: Nxb KHXH
- Trần, V. C., & Bùi, T. H. (2017). *Phật Giáo Hòa Hào, một tôn giáo cận nhân tình trong lòng dân tộc [Hoa Hao Buddhism, a humanist Religion at the heart of the Nation]*. Hồ Chí Minh City: Nxb TpHCM
- Vermander, B. (2010). *L'Empire sans milieu. Essai sur la « sortie de la religion » en Chine*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer
- Vương, K. (1952). *Tận thế và Hội Long Hoa [End of the World and the Congress of the Dragon flower]*. Saigon: Nxb Long Hoa
- Welch, H. (1968). *The Buddhist Revival in China*. Harvard: Harvard University Press
- Xue, Y. (2005). *Buddhism, War and Nationalism, Chinese Monks in the struggle against Japanese agressions, 1931–1945*. New York: Routledge
- Yang, F. (2006). The red, black and gray markets of Religion in China. *Sociological Quarterly*, 47, 93–122

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Authors and Affiliations

Pascal Bourdeaux¹

✉ Pascal Bourdeaux
pascal.bourdeaux@ephe.psl.eu

¹ Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris, France