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To cite this article: Edyta Roszko (2021) Controlled Religious Plurality: Possibilities for Covenantal Pluralism in Vietnam, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 19:3, 89-103, DOI: [10.1080/15570274.2021.1954421](https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2021.1954421)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2021.1954421>



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Published online: 31 Aug 2021.



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CONTROLLED RELIGIOUS PLURALITY: POSSIBILITIES FOR COVENANTAL PLURALISM IN VIETNAM

By Edyta Roszko 

According to Ronald Inglehart et al. (2004), 81 percent of Vietnamese do not believe in God and for that reason Vietnam constitutes an “anomaly” among Southeast Asian countries which “contain almost no atheists.” In 2019 the General Statistics Office of Vietnam published similar findings which stated that more than 86 percent of Vietnamese people are classified as non-religious. The same demographic survey found that six percent of Vietnamese identify as Catholic, around four percent as Buddhist, and around one percent as Protestant, Muslim, Hindu, Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo respectively.¹ Indeed, when asked *what their religion is* the majority of Vietnamese people usually answer that they do not follow any religion, and most of them have indicated “none” under the rubric “religion” on their identity card.

These statements might come as a surprise, especially when one takes into consideration of thousands of Buddhist pagodas and spirit temples spread out across the country, or the fact that most Vietnamese engage in all sorts of ritual practices, such as ancestor worship at their home altar, or at the Buddhist pagoda. The reason for this “self-declared atheism” is not because the Vietnamese people are not religious or the

Communist Part-State prefers the “no religion” declaration, but because they make a distinction between “religion” (*tôn giáo*) and “religious beliefs” (*tín ngưỡng*) based on membership in a

Abstract: Historically, Vietnamese approaches to religion are highly inclusive, with flexibly overlapping religious traditions and ritual practices built on a substratum of ancestor worship. As Vietnam was colonized and became independent, religion became politicized, institutionalized, and separated from the “secular” state, which sought to bring religious practices in line with new state orthodoxies. With a new understanding of “religion” predicated on the Christian model, Vietnam adopted a model of state-religion-society relations that emphasizes not only rights but also obligations, active cooperation between state and religion, and respect for all religions which are declared equal before the law, largely in response to international demands to incorporate the universal model of religious freedom. Yet, the Vietnamese state still perceives religion as a competing source of authority. Consequently, some religions are not considered for official recognition and their followers, such as highland ethnic minorities, are treated as sub-citizens by their own state. Occasionally, their conversion is misread by the rest of society as the rejection of Vietnamese culture. The failure to consider ethnic minorities as modern subjects and state citizens on a par with the Kinh (Vietnamese) majority prevents Vietnam from achieving full-fledged covenantal pluralism.

Keywords: plurality of religion, Vietnam, pluralism, heterodox superstition, minority, national heritage

bounded religious organization predicated on central, scriptural doctrine. If these 86 percent were asked further about their attitudes to religion, they might use the term *tín ngưỡng* (religious beliefs) to describe their personal and intimate relationship with ancestors and spirits in contrast to “religion” understood as an “institutionalized doctrine” that requires more or less exclusive membership to a religious organization. For that reason, demographic statistics are more representative for Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam—which are treated as separate religious denominations—rather than for those religions which overlap with each other and only require some form of—casual or intensive—participation, such as ancestor worship, Buddhism, or Mother Goddess worship (Đạo Mẫu).

Historically, in Vietnam the diverse religious traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism as well as ancestor and spirit worship practices co-existed and overlapped in private, family, and public ritual. Occasionally, this approach allowed the imperial court and its subjects to incorporate local elements, including non-Việt deities and spirit cults, which were free of Confucian restrictions—into its rulling model (see Li Tana 1998, 101–116). While Confucianism functioned as an imperial state ideology that emphasized moral cultivation and self-improvement, it was not the same as a “state religion” because the concept of “religion” as a bounded category and of state as equivalent to nation did not exist in pre-colonial Vietnam—a point to which I return later. When Vietnam became an independent nation in 1945 and unified with the South in 1975, none of the religious traditions constituted a dominant or state religion.

Most of the time, neither ancestor worship nor spirit worship practices formulate a unified authority that impose standardized religious knowledge and ritual liturgy in the way as exists in scriptural Abrahamic traditions or in the form of ethno-nationalist ideology. A Vietnamese person might make offerings to the Mother Goddess in a local temple, chant sutras in a Buddhist pagoda in the neighborhood, worship

ancestors at the home altar, and burn incense for those who died unexpectedly in an accident and do not have descendants to worship them—even on one day. Occasionally, the same person might even visit a Catholic church to pray to the Holy Mary without experiencing any internal conflict or the need to declare a group membership to any of these religious denominations. Also, declared membership to the Protestant Church, Falun Gong Buddhism, or to the recently emergent millenarian cult of Hồ Chí Minh might hardly guarantee a unified religious interpretation, since the quest for wealth, desire for healing, or even asserting the nation’s sovereignty in this (*Yang*) and the other (*Yin*) worlds are among innumerable religious understandings Vietnamese people have (Hoang Van Chung 2016, 249; for China see Kipnis 2001). Rather than an exclusive devotion that comes with the understanding of religion as belief or faith in a single commanding deity, Vietnamese forms of religiosity tend to be highly pragmatic and transactional, offering multiple orientations towards sources of authority in order to address this-worldly desires.

As I already indicated, many people in Vietnam move between venerating different deities who are linked to various creeds or traditions but are not seen as belonging to separate, incompatible, and incommensurable ontologies as David Palmer (2021) argues in the case of Chinese religion. For that reason, in this article, I refer to Vietnamese forms of religiosity as “polytheistic” rather than “poly-ontological.” In Vietnam, deities and spirits do not have a coherent existence as they move between ancestor, ghost, hero, and Buddhist domains within one ontology or cosmology (see Kwon 2008). For example, through self-cultivation the previously fierce Goddess Thiên Ya Na might become a compassionate Buddhist bodhisattva (Roszko 2020). The Whale Spirit—the old indigenous deity adopted by Việt people who from the fifteenth century onward gradually permeated Vietnam’s southern realm—becomes a servant of Buddhist Guan Yin and occasionally might be included in the ancestor lineage of fishermen who found the beached mammal on

the coast. In new millenarian formulation, Hò Chí Minh becomes a Buddha in the Daoist Pantheon within one common ontology. In Caodai (Cao Đài) ontology there is no distinction between Jehovah and the Jade Emperor because they are different manifestation of the same (Hoskins 2014). Spiritual travels and metamorphosis of deities in Vietnam are endless and that flexibility in religious beliefs and practices was precisely what confused Western missionaries in colonial times. Even those who were relatively sympathetic could not make any sense of the “anarchic jungle of wild elements that defied comprehension” as they viewed Vietnamese religion (Hoskins 2014, 303). Caodai religion with its worship of Judaicist, Christian, Islamic, and popular saints—which are seen as ontologically belonging to the same pantheon—was a response to the critique by French missionaries who claimed that in contrast to Chinese religion Vietnamese religion does not have any logic (Hoskins 2014, 303–304). Vietnamese intellectuals created Caodai and showed “how Jesus and Jehovah could be integrated into the tolerant traditions of Asian sages” within one cosmology (Hoskins 2014, 302).

Does this flexible way of engaging with various religious traditions constitute covenantal pluralism—“a robust, relational, and non-relativistic paradigm for living together, peacefully and productively, in the context of our deepest differences” (Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover 2020, 2)? Not exactly, because polytheistic religions and covenantal pluralism are two different things. In Vietnamese polytheistic religions, it is not the differences between beliefs and values that matter but the different manifestations of gods in religious practices within common cosmology. In that sense, a potential local conflict in a village over the rights to a particular deity or god does not necessarily index theological differences but rather, who has the legitimate right to perform rituals in public space. Should that be men or women, fishers of farmers, Vietnamese or ethnic minority people, locals or outsiders, villagers, clergy, or state officials? Covenantal pluralism, however,

advocates a different kind of flexibility from polytheistic religion, namely one that enables all of those—who might flexibly engage in diverse religious practices without experiencing any ontological conflict and those whose religions are mutually exclusive as exemplified, for example, by the Christian idea of a “Jealous God”—to live together in the same society. It is a kind of inclusiveness that is based on legal ground rules and practices to deal with the reality of deep diversity of irreconcilable religious differences and religions that make exclusive truth claims. Such inclusiveness calls for covenantal pluralism as “a culture of engagement characterized by relationships of mutual respect and protection” to manage the diametrically opposed religious worldviews (Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover 2020, 2; Seiple 2018). As I will show, religious divisions are not foreign to Vietnam and—as religions in Vietnam are embedded in global processes—there is a need for a greater mutual understanding and religious literacy.

In this article, I unpack the plurality of Vietnamese religions and the idea of religious pluralism to consider the possibility for covenantal pluralism in Vietnam. I start from the discussion on the pre-colonial imperial court and its effort to control religion. Focusing on the connection between Neo-Confucian “heterodoxy” and Marxist-Leninist ideology that defined religion as unscientific and superstitious I then sketch the process of shaping the category of religion in Vietnam and the ongoing process of polarization and purification across different religious traditions. In the subsequent part, I discuss a legal frame regulating religion in Vietnam and its consequences for religious practices and minorities. In the Conclusion, I address the implication of the state approach to religion for the project of covenantal pluralism in Vietnam.

The Genealogy of “Religion” in Vietnam

In Neo-Confucian Vietnam, overlapping vernacular traditions or in orthodox, scriptural forms were often non-deistic. Religion was “diffused” throughout the different strata of

society and controlled by the imperial court which represented a cosmic order and acted as a mediator between “this” and “other” worlds (Do 2003; Taylor 2007; for China see Duara 1988). Neo-Confucianism constituted a highly ritualized imperial state ideology that did not clearly distinguish between a religious and secular sphere. It was the Emperor who had the authority to decide which religious sites and ritual practices were legitimate. From the fifteenth century Lê dynasty (1428–1789) to the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1883), the Ministry of Rites certified and standardized cults of divinities, appointed tutelary spirits to all villages and prevented “heterodoxy” (*dị đạo*)—religious beliefs and practices not congruent with the state-approved orthodox version of neo-Confucianism (Do 2003; Taylor 2007, 31–32; Pham Quynh Phuong 2009). The Ministry of Rites also controlled registers for Buddhist and Daoist priesthood, making sure that none of the religious movements became a political force challenging the central authority (Trần Thị Liên 2013, 247). With that in mind, we could say that the category of religion based on “conceptual dichotomies between the religious domain and this-worldly, secular domains of political and economic practice” (Salemink 2018, 124) emerged in Asia only through European imperialism and the formation of nation-states.

In imperial East Asia—including Vietnam and China—“religion” as a separate category often did not exist in “the lexicon of a particular culture prior to its encounter with European colonialism, but ‘suddenly’ enter[ed] into their idiom as if it were their own” (Mandair 2009, XIV). The project of modernization that colonial power triggered across the world “provided new forms of language,” which consequently led not only to transformation but also formation of local categories of religion, the secular and also atheism (Van der Veer and Lehmann 1999, 4; Salemink 2018; Turner and Salemink 2015; Roszko 2020). As a result, “religion” appeared in vernacular languages in response to the “imposition of a certain concept of translation” (Mandair 2009, XIV). Indeed, in Vietnam, the category of religion—*tôn giáo*—was introduced

into Vietnamese from Japanese via Chinese, and reconfigured the understanding of vernacular religious practices—now also referred to through modern, Sino-Vietnamese terms such as *tín ngưỡng* (religious beliefs) and *mê tín dị đoan* (literally “false beliefs and heteropraxy,” but usually translated as superstition). Like superstition, *mê tín dị đoan* had the connotation of “false religion” (much like heresy and paganism in Christianity), but was in the 20th century set up in opposition to science or “scientific atheism.” As Vietnam was colonized by the French, it encountered Catholicism as a highly organized and effectual institutional religion. The revolutionary path to becoming an independent nation portrayed some religions as foreign and others as feudal and backward, and hence an obstacle to modernity and independence. Vernacular religions thus became politicized, counterposed to “science” and separated from the “secular” state, which sought to bring them in compliance with new understandings of “proper” religion.

In the *Đổi Mới* era of socio-economic reforms launched in 1986, the Vietnamese state gradually departed from the Marxist-Leninist interpretation of religion as “unscientific” and “irrational” while still attempting to draw a line between those informal, vernacular religious practices that were assigned as having a “national character” (known as *tín ngưỡng*) and those considered backward and harmful superstition (*mê tín dị đoan*) against the backdrop of the project of building a “progressive nation” (Taylor 2007; Roszko 2012). This led the state to reformulate meanings connected with diverse religious traditions in line with the new category of religion and to design new measures for controlling and validating such practices. Such attempts to control and validate those religious practices that are in line with state objectives and to condemn those which bear a “superstitious and heterodox” character could be seen as a continuation of the practices of the pre-colonial and colonial imperial court. Today, the Ministry of Rites has been replaced with the Religious Affairs Committee (*Ban Tôn giáo*) which plays a similar role as the Ministry of Rites in overseeing

registered religious organizations (Trần Thị Liên 2013, 247) and in preventing the development of any “social evils,” “outdated practices,” and “heterodox superstitions.”

The modern practice of communist-led Vietnam to grant certificates to heroes, divinities, and temples that bear the hallmark of historical and national importance could be traced back to the practices of the Ministry of Rites in the imperial state. Like the imperial court today, the current communist state of Vietnam seeks to increase its legitimacy through the careful selection and canonization of those historic figures who epitomize moral and patriotic values and fit into the nation-state ideology. Through these controlling measures religious practices are only permitted to enter the secular public space under the banner of “culture” or “heritage” and according with the modern state’s definition of religion (*tôn giáo*) and more individualistic notion of belief (*tín ngưỡng*). In this sense, the Vietnamese Party-state constructs and controls the space of secularity to make sure that religious discourses and practices do not provide any challenge to the state’s legitimacy and moral authority (Roszko 2020, 204; Salemink 2015a; Salemink 2015b), the point to which I will return in the next sections.

Plurality of Religions in Vietnam and Polytheistic Dynamics

Except for Christianity and Islam, many religious practices in Vietnam have a non-exclusionary character since in contrast to monotheistic religions they are not based on the notion of a “Jealous God” commanding exclusive devotion. Given the plurality of gods, deities, and spirits, they much more easily overlap with other religious practices and everyday concerns. Drawing on works of Leopold Cadière (1955–1957) and Maurice Durand (1959), Salemink (2008) pointed towards “interconnection and mutual influence between major religious traditions in Vietnam, through a wide variety of rituals and in overlapping cosmologies and pantheons associated with Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism . . . , built on a substratum of ancestor worship . . . and spirit worship”

(Salemink 2008, 272). For that reason, Vietnam’s “religiotope”—to use Bryan Turner’s (2006, 213) paraphrase of Arjun Appadurai (1996)—is polytheistic rather than exclusionary in terms of religion and ritualistic practices.

Over the last two decades, the flourishing religious diversity in Vietnam has attracted many foreign and overseas Vietnamese scholars who study the richness and liveliness of religious life in Vietnam either by focusing on particular religious practices or by looking at different overlapping religious traditions and ritual practices (e.g. Taylor 2004; Taylor 2007; Pham Quynh Phuong 2009; Endres 2011; Soucy 2012; Roszko 2020). This diversity is also celebrated by local scholars in Vietnam who argue that the country’s omnipresent religious pluralism reflects “Vietnamese people’s tolerance towards various religious systems [that] has created a natural symbiosis and coexistence of various faiths” (Nguyen Thi Minh Ngoc 2020, 134; Trần Quốc Vượng 1992). Indeed, in contrast to notorious cases of ethno-religious violence in polarized societies of Myanmar, India, or Sri Lanka (DeVotta 2020) to mention just a few, it could be argued that present-day Vietnam is relatively free of the communal religious strife that is discernable in other parts of Asia.

It does not mean, however, that Vietnam is free of tensions when it comes to religion. The U.S. State Department’s *Vietnam 2019 International Religious Freedom Report* recorded the harassment of religious leaders, particularly those representing groups without official state recognition or certificates of registration. Specifically, there are reports on tensions and disputes over land and resources—with a link to religion—between Protestant ethnic minorities in the Highlands and the state authorities and between Catholics and the authorities (U.S. State Department 2019; Trần Thị Liên 2013; Salemink 2015b). The most severe confrontations took place between 2008 and 2010 when Vietnam experienced massive demonstrations of Catholics who demanded the return of landed property of the Catholic Church (Trần Thị Liên 2013, 245). The issue of property is not limited to Protestants and Catholics but

concerns other groups, including Buddhists, Cao Đài, and Hòa Hảo followers, who made similar demands on the state (Trần Thị Liên 2013, 245). In their desire to be recognized and registered as “religion” and thus to enjoy “religious freedom,” loosely organized religious groups such as Đạo Mẫu (Mother Goddess Worship), the Way of Jade Buddha Hồ Chí Minh or the Way of Hà Môn, spirit possession-related practices, to mention just a few, continue to struggle with a “superstition” stigma and with suspicion of malpractice, swindle, and misappropriation of funds (Salemink 2020; Hoang Van Chung 2016; Hoang Van Chung 2017).

This raises the question of what does Vietnam’s model of state-religion-society-relations tell us about religious pluralism and the possibility for its more robust version, namely covenantal pluralism? There is a consensus among scholars of religion that in comparison to the U.S or Europe, Asian countries developed much stronger religious “pluralism” in the sense of broad cultural acceptance of those holding multiple and/or overlapping cosmologies (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and VanAntwerpen 2011). Indeed, the polytheistic religious cosmology that is common in Vietnam (and throughout much of Asia) does not demand exclusive devotion or membership. In that sense, the practitioners of polytheistic traditions accept and engage diverse religious traditions, without necessarily subscribing to the religious tenets of other traditions. Moreover, the religious minorities within Vietnam who hold more religiously exclusivist theological views do not translate that into any political exclusivism. Such acceptance of religious diversity is written into Vietnam’s Constitution, which declares that the choice to follow a religion or *not* follow a religion is one of the fundamental rights of Vietnamese people. The Constitution makes clear that having or not having religion puts equal responsibilities and duties on all citizens when it comes to

exercising religious freedom (Trần Thị Lien 2013; Hoang Van Chung 2017; Bui Ngoc Son 2019). In that sense, the state defines itself as secular and there is no religion which could claim to be a state religion, thereby asserting a privileged position. In practice, however, some religions are considered more worthy of officially entering public space while others are not, a point I will return to later. There is official acceptance of religious diversity, and as such a kind of acceptance of “pluralism,” but it is still strictly state-controlled, state-monitored, state-managed.

At this point, it is essential to note that the encounters with modern Western ideas separated religion from the secular and have transformed

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how the category of religion in Vietnam has been understood, practiced, regulated, and institutionalized. This is an important point because the discussion of covenantal pluralism in Vietnam cannot take Western ideas about “faith,” “religion” or “religious pluralism” for granted. Historically, the idea of “pluralism” inclusive of “world religions”

emerged in the twentieth century when the European initial division of the world into four broad religious traditions—Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and a collection of polytheistic religions—was expanded to include Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, and Sikhism (Masuzawa 2005). While the concept of multiple “world religions” implies tolerance, certain condescending assumptions and oversimplifications were often baked into such conceptualizations (see Segal 2007, 147; see also Masuzawa 2005). In her masterpiece, Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) shows that the creation of a system of “world religions” was a matter of a more precise differentiation between various religious traditions that paradoxically reinforced the presumed superiority of modern and progressive Europe vis-à-vis a supposedly non-

modern, ahistorical, and spiritual East. Therefore, the religious plurality in terms of parallel “world religions” highlighted hierarchy and differences rather than similarities between religious systems, thereby emphasizing the universality and transcendence of Christianity. From this perspective, the Vietnamese words *tôn giáo* (religion) and *tín ngưỡng* (religious beliefs) reflect the process of reformulation and transformation of a traditional system of the three creeds (*tam giáo*)—Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism—into “world religions” and “religious beliefs” (for China and India see Van der Veer 2011, 273). According to that division, Vietnam has five world religions: Buddhism, Daoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam; two indigenous religions: Caodaism and Hoahaoism; and a wide array of religious beliefs, such as ancestor worship, spirit worship, and spirit possession, which in the past operated under a Confucian umbrella seen as a ritualized-but-secular form of social control but today operate under the banner of national religions.

The institutionalization of religion in Vietnam has been itself an exclusionary process in which religion assumes a highly organized form (Soucy 2007; Salemink 2015a; Roszko 2020; for China see Ashiwa and Wank 2009). As Salemink (2020, 138) shows, any official state recognition of religious practices “*qua* religion would have the consequence of following the model of world religions and hence unifying these extremely diverse practices by creating one singular liturgy and a centralized hierarchical clergy, thereby creating uniformity in a literal sense.” Indeed, Article 16 of the 2004 *Ordinance on Belief and Religion* lists requirements for registration of religious organizations that included among other things “having religious tenets, principles, and rites which are not contrary to the nation’s fine traditions, customs, and interests; having a charter or statute being closely associated with the nation and not contrary to legal provisions; and having registered religious activities” (Bui Ngoc Son 2019, 151). Additionally, Article 17 stipulates that any divisions, separations, mergers, amalgamations, or syncretization of religious

organizations had to be approved by state authorities (Bui Ngoc Son 2019, 151). Therefore, the state’s adoption of the logic of world religions fundamentally transforms religious diversity in Vietnam by drawing and sharpening distinctions between previously co-existing and overlapping religious traditions. It turns a polytheistic religious field into a form of religious plurality that does not accurately reflect the on-the-ground dynamics of flexible and intersecting religious praxes. In that sense, in its critique of simplistic division of the world into five religions and in its philosophy of being “inclusive of the exclusive,” covenantal pluralism is simultaneously product of and response to the global process by which Asian societies shift from an inclusive religious diversity to a plurality of religions that are mutually exclusive (Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover 2020, 10).

Purification of Religion

Lines of polarization have become visible between different religious and ritual practices which until recently were declared by local scholars to co-exist in a “religious harmony” without any religion claiming superiority (Nguyen Thi Minh Ngoc 2020). In the last decade, some religious traditions in Vietnam sought to modernize and rationalize their practices by demarcating and sharpening distinctions and rejecting those elements that do not conform to emergent notions of religious orthodoxy and orthopraxy (Roszko 2020). A good example of such religious purification provides an overseas version of Vietnamese Zen Buddhism which—developed by the Vietnamese monk in exile Thích (venerable) Nhật Hạnh—emphasizes self-cultivation while dismissing alien, non-Buddhist elements, thereby creating new orthodoxies and orthopraxies in Vietnam (Roszko 2020, 120; Chapman 2007). Similarly, the Buddhist Bamboo Grove Zen sect (Trúc Lâm Thiên Tông) embraces the purification trend that dismisses non-Buddhist elements. Tracing its roots to an old and short-lived Zen school established by the Vietnamese king Trần Nhân Tông (1278–1293) in the thirteenth century, Trúc Lâm Thiên Tông was “resurrected” in the

late 1960s in South Vietnam by Thích Thanh Từ who emphasized meditation and greater spirituality in his attempt to cleanse Vietnamese Buddhism of alien, non-Buddhist elements and to create new orthodoxies and orthopraxies (Roszko 2020, 120; Soucy 2007).

The *Đổi Mới* economic reform program and the normalization of diplomatic relations with the United States in 1995 contributed significantly to the emergence of new religious groups and practices but also increased interactions between overseas Vietnamese and Vietnamese in Vietnam. This transformed officially recognized religions such as Buddhism or Caodaism (see Soucy 2007; Hoskins 2015) but also religious traditions such as spirit possession that were not recognized by the state as religion but became regarded as cultural heritage (Salemink 2015a; Salemink 2016; see also Fjelstad and Nguyen Thi Hien 2006; Endres 2011).

Elsewhere (Roszko 2020) I have shown that the purification trend has not been limited to urban centers—which might seem to be more receptive of overseas influence—but could also be observed in rural settings where religious modernizers seek to disembed religion from local community traditions. They seek a radical break from localized religious traditions in rural communities by calling them “superstitions,” thereby resorting to official state rhetoric. Buddhist monks in those settings propagate ascetic forms of self-cultivation, promoting a modern vision of Buddhism cleansed of non-Buddhist elements and rejecting local vernacular practices as falling outside their religious duty of ritual care (Roszko 2020). Hoang Van Chung (2016) noted a similar process of purification but interwoven with new expressions of religious nationalism in new millenarian movements that reject foreign influences. Such new movements, like the Way of Jade Buddha Hồ Chí Minh, becomes increasingly dismissive of “foreign” elements. At the same time, they seek to emulate the organizational structure of the Catholic Church and advance the agenda of “one religion for the Vietnamese” (Hoang Van Chung 2016, 254). Fearing that such purified religious organizations could inspire irredentism or independent social movements, the Vietnamese

state is reluctant to register them, thereby making their practice illegitimate.

In contrast with the diversified societies of the United States, Canada, or Europe—where individuals would follow their private preferences and join religious congregations—Vietnam’s emerging religious plurality should not be understood in terms of private faith. Whether transnational missionary movements or new millenarian religions with novel religious articulations of nationalism, they tend to be highly localized and ritualistic and less unified in terms of their theological content than those found in Western liberal democracies. They are socially embedded through collective rituals, narratives, and personal or community healing that come before personal faith, as Richard Madsen (2011, 252) also shows for China. If practiced out of sight of the authorities, they create alternative public spaces that sometimes complement and sometimes contradict the state (Taylor 2007; Salemink 2015a; Hoang Van Chung 2016; for China see Madsen 2011). China’s 2014 installation of an oil rig within Vietnam’s 200 miles zone is a good example of what such engagement in the public sphere looks like. The incident spurred anti-China protests across Vietnam’s major cities and led a 67-year-old Buddhist lay nun to self-immolate, but it also triggered new religious movements that identified with a widely held view that Vietnam’s Party-State is weak in its dealing with China and that the nation needs urgent help. These religious movements preach that only heavenly intervention by the father of the Vietnamese nation, Hồ Chí Minh, could secure Vietnam’s sovereignty at sea (Hoang Van Chung 2016; Hühnelmeier 2019).

Recent research shows that depending on the particular context in which they develop, new religious movements can generate serious social and political conflicts but they can also provide resources for reconciliation and healing, as Madsen’s (2011) example of Taiwan demonstrates. In Taiwan, socially engaged Buddhism made a positive contribution to a healing process in Taiwan’s democratizing society by stressing acceptance of all people, and it motivated its followers to “build a better world

through sustained, gradual effort” (Madsen 2011, 267). Analogically, in Vietnam, the state recognizes the positive role of religion in society, and allows—sometimes even encourages—Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam to contribute to building a better society. Yet, these religions have to navigate the space in which the state projects itself as the sole arbiter to define what religion’s relation with society should be. For example, the state might empty religion of its religious content by appropriating it as a representation of “culture” and “heritage” on behalf of the nation—as exemplified by UNESCO’s recent recognition of the Mother Goddess worship as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Salemink 2016). However, when modernized and rationalized world religions can only enter public space in secular disguise there is a risk that they become increasingly dismissive of both the state and of local religious practices.

The Legal Framework of Religion in Vietnam

Vietnam’s model of state-religion-society relations resembles those in Indonesia, Singapore, or Taiwan, which are based on “respect all, positive cooperation, and principled distance” model (Stepan 2011, 135). In that sense, Vietnam’s historical approach to religion comes close to “covenantal pluralism”—a “holistic vision of citizenship” that “calls for *both* a constitutional order characterized by equal rights and responsibilities *and* a culture of engagement characterized by relationship of mutual respect and protection” (Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover 2020, 2). The question arises, however, what the limitations and obstacles in implementing a full-fledged covenantal pluralism are in Vietnam? In contrast to Buddhism, Christianity—both Catholicism and Protestantism—is often surrounded by the aura of suspicion that they are manipulated by powerful foreign forces that want to undermine Vietnam’s sovereignty (Taylor 2007, 43). Christianity is also seen as incompatible with Vietnam’s pluralistic traditions as it forbids ancestor worship, which underpins Vietnam’s social order. Although some Buddhist movements have recently been

dismissive of non-Buddhist elements, any attempt to purify Catholicism or Protestantism of local cultural elements is treated with suspicion and mistrust from both the state authorities and society (Taylor 2007, 47). Similarly, any form of religious renewal on the part of Vietnam’s ethnic minorities—mostly located in strategic borderland areas—is seen as a threat to the integrity of the nation and state. Therefore, we need to ask further: is Vietnam’s government ready to expand the space of religious pluralism by integrating ethnic minorities and new religious movements without defining what these should be? Is Vietnamese society ready to include the same minority beliefs and religious movements into its public ritual space without qualifying them as compatible or incompatible with Vietnamese tradition?

Before we try to answer these questions let us consider the legal framework for religion in Vietnam. Although it might seem that I repeat the chronology of the previous section with a parallel narrative, I believe that without unpacking the genealogy of the category of religion and religious pluralism first we would risk essentializing the legal framework of religion in Vietnam through the prism of historically “shallow temporalities” of the modern globalized world (Hann 2017, 226). Therefore, keeping in mind that neither religion nor religious pluralism are historically stable categories, in this section I will focus on how in practice the Party-State regulates religion.

Already back in the days of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1945–1976)—mostly (incorrectly) referred to as North Vietnam—its Constitutions of 1946 and 1959 recognized freedom of belief and religion, and to follow or *not* to follow religion as a fundamental right of its citizens (Trần Thị Liên 2013, 232). However, Decree No. 234-SL of 1955 also indexed a firm control over religion initiated in the North, which after the unification in 1976 was expanded to southern Vietnam (Roszko 2020, 64–65). The following words delineate the limits of religion:

The law will punish anyone who takes advantage of religion in order to undermine peace, unity, independence and

democracy; advocates war or destruction of national unity; prevents believers from fulfilling their duties as citizens; encroaches upon the freedom of belief and the freedom of thought of other people; or carries out illegal activities. (Decree 234-SL, in Trần Thị Liên 2013, 232)

In line with the Communist Party's Marxist-Leninist ideology that proclaimed that religion naturally disappears when humankind enters the period of communism and high modernity, religious organizations were banned from interfering with public education and with state affairs (Hoang Van Chung 2016, 40). In her historical analysis of the Vietnamese policies towards religion, Claire Trần Thị Liên (2013, 232) argues that the broad scope of this provision allowed the authorities to suspend religious practices, confiscate religious property, and arrest religious leaders. In northern Vietnam, during the land reform (1953–1955) and the period of war mobilization (1960–1975), religious practices were prohibited, temples and pagodas were turned into secular spaces, and Catholic and Buddhist clergy were forced to adopt secular lives (Roszko 2020, 62). After the unification of Vietnam in 1975, during the time of collectivization and state distribution (1975–1986), this policy was imposed on the South—albeit in a more lenient form—until 1986, when the state began to relax its enforcement of anti-superstition laws. Paradoxically, even at the time of the most severe anti-religious campaigns, there were measures and decrees on preservation of village temples, temples and pagodas going back to 1945, when Hồ Chí Minh issued a decree on the protection of cultural heritage in the context of land reform (Endres 2000; Roszko 2020). However, as I explained elsewhere, these decrees indicate that the Party-State's concern was not the preservation of religious buildings but the conversion of religious spaces into (secularized) “cultural” or “national heritage” (Roszko 2020).

Since the Đổi Mới reforms, Vietnam has gradually withdrawn from its socialist modernity project that saw religion as an obstacle to progress. To join the global economy Vietnam

had to convince the international community that “it was on its way to become a modern State with a rule of law, including freedom in the religious field” (Trần Thị Liên 2013, 233). Yet, the collapse of the Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe made the Vietnamese Communist Party fearful of Vietnamese religious forces after seeing the role that the Catholic Church played in the fall of Communism (Trần Thị Liên 2013, 235). Consequently, in 1992 the state sought to delimit religious freedom by adding the provision to the Constitution that no one has the right to take advantage of religion to violate state laws and policies. In theory, the revised version of the Constitution offered better legal protection for individuals, stating clearly that everyone, regardless of religion, is equal before the law (Trần Thị Liên 2013, 236), but in practice some religions of highland ethnic minorities were (and are) still not considered worthy of official recognition, and its followers are effectively treated as incompetent religious subjects and hence as sub-citizens by the state (U.S. State Department 2019).

In 2006 Vietnam was removed from the U.S. State Department's list of “countries of particular concern” about violations of religious freedom (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom 2017). However, the paternalistic treatment of ethnic minorities in Vietnam made many highlanders skeptical towards the Communist Party-State that perceives their culture as backward and lagging behind that of the Kinh (ethnic Việt) majority (Ngô 2016, 6). At the same time, ethnic minorities might feel pressure to achieve the same level of modernity as the Kinh and the mass conversion of Hmong and Central Highlander minorities to Protestantism can be interpreted as an effort to be recognized as citizens in their own right (Ngô 2016).

To answer my questions about the readiness of Vietnam's state and society to expand the space of religious pluralism, it becomes apparent that—in order for covenantal pluralism to flourish in Vietnam—the Vietnamese state needs to include highland ethnic minorities into the benefits of modernity (Salemink 2015b; Ngô

2016). Rather than perceiving their Christian conversions as an act of resistance or even betrayal, the state and the rest of the society could read it as desire for modernity by those economically dispossessed and marginalized at the time when Vietnam embraces a global, neoliberalizing market. As Salemink (2015b, 404) shows, “Highlanders’ embrace of an alternative, Christian ecumene can be interpreted as a localizing move—against the towering presence of an oppressive national state predicated on another ethnic group, the Kinh—and simultaneously as a transnationalizing move, in the sense of by-passing the state to insert themselves into a global community of faithful: a ‘Christian *ummah*’, as it were.”

While the Vietnamese Party-State perceived religion as a competing source of authority and is particularly suspicious of “foreign” religions, it also acknowledged religion’s positive contribution to society and sought to appropriate religious virtues and morals for nation-building after 1998 (Roszko 2012). According to Trần Thị Liên (2013, 236) the concept of “officially recognized religion” appeared in the state discourse only in 1995. By this time, 31 religious organizations affiliated with eleven recognized religions, including world religions, were awarded official status (Trần Thị Liên 2013, 236). They were placed under the supervision of the Government Committee of Religious Affairs which has the state’s mandate to approve religious activities, as well as of the Fatherland Front—a mass organization in Vietnam that is aligned with the Communist Party—which supervised the activities of the recognized organizations. The 2004 *Ordinance Regarding Religious Beliefs and Religious Organizations* further specified the legal framework of religious practices and for the first time allowed religious organizations to carry out charitable work in the field of healthcare and education (Trương Thìn 1999, 121; Trần Thị Liên 2013, 237).

Ultimately, the 2004 *Ordinance Regarding Religious Beliefs and Religious Organizations* was replaced by the 2016 *Law on Beliefs and Religion* which moved towards the universal model of religious freedom even though the substance of

how the Vietnamese state regulates religion remained intact (Bui Ngoc Son 2019: 155).² It is worth pointing out that the 2004 *Ordinance* followed the Western usage—according to which “religious beliefs” are mainly considered a personal matter. Consequently, when referring to “religious freedom” the term “religious beliefs” rather than “religion” is used. With that in mind, the law put a new emphasis on the state’s commitment “to recognize the right to religious freedom as a right that a person possesses by virtue of being a human being, rather than a right that a citizen is granted as a subject of the state” (Bui Ngoc Son 2019 164). Another important change was that the 2016 *Law on Beliefs and Religion* shifted the regulatory process from an approval system to a less demanding notification system, allowing religious activities to move forward without explicit governmental approval (Nguyen Thi Phuong 2020, 286). In addition, the law granted religious freedom to foreigners legally residing in Vietnam and the status of “legal entities” to religious organizations, thereby allowing them to enter into civil transactions according to civil law (Bui Ngoc Son 2019, 156). At the same time, the state did not risk being challenged by religious organizations. In January 2018, the Vietnamese government enforced Article 6 of the 2016 *Law on Belief and Religion* that stipulated that while every citizen has the right to religious freedom and individual expression of religious worship, religious activities can be prohibited to preserve social order, safety, and public health and life of individuals and society. It was precisely the 2016 Law that was invoked to restrict religious activities during the spread of COVID-19.

Vietnam gained international applause for containing COVID-19 (at least until May 2021), although critical voices point out that its success was built on the same surveillance mechanism as those used to facilitate and protect the one-party rule.³ A mix of legal and institutional factors enabled the state and religious leaders to effectively impose the suspension of religious activities for public health. The Vietnamese Government

Committee for Religious Affairs took the lead in guiding all religious organizations to ensure that they follow the new directives tightly (Nguyen Thi Phuong 2020, 288). The Government Committee issued several official dispatches that required the leaders of religious organizations not to organize mass activities, religious conferences, festivals; cancel all religious activities, not to send their delegates to foreign countries or receive them in the country until the pandemic would be avoided or suppressed. The state-controlled media praised the response of the religious organizations that allegedly supported the state's measures to control the pandemic by holding online liturgical services and raising donations to help the state to fight against the virus.⁴ In sum, Vietnam's model of state-religion-society relations expands the space of religious pluralism and religious freedom but, at the same time, introduces legal measures that allow it to limit those rights at any time. While the existence of legal measures was essential for a timely suspension of religious activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an urgent need for a greater transparency on the state's side when the law is applied to religious minorities which are not granted official recognition.

Conclusion

Since the *Đổi Mới* reforms and the nationwide relaxation of religious oversight, Vietnam has taken pride in its historically grounded approach to religion, which is highly inclusive, with flexibly overlapping religions, traditions, and ritual practices built on a substratum of ancestor worship. Today, this flexibility that characterized Vietnamese religion is praised for its role in keeping the communal religious strife and religious divisions—experienced in other parts of Asia—at bay. Yet, as Vietnam transformed into an independent nation-state this long-term flexibility has been incorporated into the nation-building process, indexing *who* and *what* represent “authentic” Vietnamese culture.

Let me return to my question of what the main limitation is in implementing a fully developed and non-coercive covenantal

pluralism in Vietnam. Alfred Stepan (2011) argued that there is a great variation of state-religion-society relations that exist in modern democracies. In contrast to the U.S separatist model between religion and state (Stepan 2011, 118–119), Vietnam developed a coercive model that emphasizes not only rights but also obligations, as well as active cooperation between state and religion on the basis of the equality of all religions before the law. Rather than leaving the positive management of religious/worldview diversity to the goodwill of its citizens, Vietnam's Constitution gives the right to religious organizations to call for protection of the state but also imposes an obligation to respect religious differences and to cooperate in building a modern society.

Yet, the coercive model of “managed” diversity in Vietnam is historically conditioned by the Party-State. It takes into consideration potential religious threats to the ideology of “great solidarity” —a mixture of Vietnamese patriotism and Communist ideology that goes back to Hồ Chí Minh's strategy to unify all forces in Vietnam to overturn colonialism and carry out a Communist revolution (Bui Ngoc Son 2019, 161). From this perspective, any religious organization that contests the Party-State's political order or legitimacy is considered a threat to social peace and, in some instances, to the territorial integrity of Vietnam. While responding to the international demands to incorporate the universal model of religious freedom, the Vietnamese state qualified the religious freedom proclaimed in the Constitution. The result is that in spite of the state-religion-society model based on the principle of respect, positive cooperation between the state and citizens, and state neutrality towards religion, Vietnamese ethnic minorities still find themselves to be “strangers” in their own country (Taylor 2007, 42). The rejection of ancestor worship or local spirits might be wrongly translated by government officials and the society as an attack on Vietnamese culture whereas any religious movement claiming a monopoly for the “authentic” Vietnamese religion (e.g. millenarian

movements) might, in turn, raise the suspicion of malpractice and misappropriation of funds or, even worse, of the attempt to overthrow Communist Party rule.

This brings me back to the idea of covenantal pluralism in Vietnam in order to identify and promote ethical, cultural, and structural conditions within which all kinds of people—polytheists, religious minorities, and non-religious people—could be next-door neighbors, peacefully and constructively, even though they will never stop disagreeing with each other on some fundamental religious issues. As laid out by Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover (2020, 2), “the philosophy of covenantal pluralism reaches beyond banal

appeals for peaceful coexistence and instead points to a robust, relational, and non-relativistic paradigm for living together, peacefully and productively, in the context of our deepest differences.” This however would require going beyond or even against—what Keith Taylor (1998, 971) labeled as—a “pan-Vietnamese village morphology” that produced the Vietnamese hierarchy, which puts Vietnamese religious traditions at the top of the citizenship ladder and ethnic minorities at the bottom. For covenantal pluralism to mature and flourish in Vietnam, both the state and society need to acknowledge that there are different, equally valid, ways of being and acting Vietnamese. ❖

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Acknowledgments

This article is part of this journal's Covenantal Pluralism Series, a project generously supported via a grant to the Institute for Global Engagement from the Templeton Religion Trust.

Notes

1. See *General Statistics Office of Vietnam* (2019). “Completed Results of the 2019 Viet Nam Population and Housing Census” (PDF). Statistical Publishing House (Vietnam). ISBN 978-604-75-1532-5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnam#CITEREFGeneral_Statistics_Office_of_Vietnam-2019. Access June 6, 2021.
2. See the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion, <http://vbpl.vn/TW/Pages/vbpgen-toanvan.aspx?ItemID=11093>. Accessed on April 6, 2021.
3. See “Vietnam’s Coronavirus Success is Built on Repression; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/12/vietnam-coronavirus-pandemic-success-repression/>. Accessed on April 5, 2021.
4. See “Các tổ chức tôn giáo phát huy vai trò, trách nhiệm trong công tác phòng chống dịch bệnh COVID-19” [Religious organizations promote their role and responsibilities in the prevention of disease COVID-19] <https://binhphuoc.gov.vn/vi/snv/ton-giao/cac-to-chuc-ton-giao-phat-huy-vai-tro-trach-nhiem-trong-cong-tac-phong-chong-dich-benh-covid-19-238.html>. Accessed April 6, 2021.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2021.1954421>