

## **Book Review**

### ***White book: Religion and Policies Regarding Religion in Vietnam***

In 2007, the Government Committee for Religious Affairs had co-operated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Press Department to officially publish a white book (both in Vietnamese and English) named: *Religion and Policies Regarding Religion in Vietnam*.

Nguyễn Thế Doanh, the Head of Standing board of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, in the press meeting to announce the white book, emphasized the current position of Vietnam in the world after 20 years of Renovation. It is time for officers who are working in relation with religion to, via this book, inform vast audiences about the policies of the State of Vietnam regarding belief and religion in recent years.

The mini-sized book consists of 87 pages with 3 chapters:

#### **Chapter 1: Beliefs and Religions in Vietnam**

The chapter introduces history of formation and main activities of the six major religions in Vietnam. These religions are operating legally and officially recognized by the Vietnamese Socialist Republic: Buddhism, Protestantism, Islam, Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo Buddhism. Despite of the fact that these religions have different history of formation, they share a common point in having deeply engaged with the process of construction and renovation of the country from the past until the present.

Besides six said above religions, the chapter also mentions other religions in Vietnam, such as Tịnh Độ Cư sĩ Phật hội (the Pure Land Buddhist Home-Practice Association), Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Bahai'i, as well as some other Protestant sects. All these religion and beliefs constitute a Vietnamese multi-ethnic, multi-religion picture.

#### **Chapter 2: Policies of the State of Vietnam Regarding Beliefs and Religions**

This chapter introduces a series of documents on the task of religious management by the State of Vietnam from its birth. All the documents reflects President Hồ Chí Minh's human thoughts that had been shown in the first Constitution of the Democratic

Republic of Vietnam approved by the National Assembly of Vietnam on November 9<sup>th</sup> 1946 as well as the Decree No. 234/SL signed on June 14<sup>th</sup> 1955. In 1958, Hồ Chí Minh in his response to questions by constituents in Hanoi had reaffirmed the position of communists toward religions: “In other socialist countries, people have full freedom of religion. It is the same in Vietnam. It is also true in Vietnam” (p. 43-44). State officers who have been working in the field of religious management for many years have built a set of legal documents to best facilitate all religions’ free activities in Vietnam.

National and international public do highly appreciate results of the implementation of the state’s policies regarding beliefs and religions. After nearly 20 years of renovation, Vietnam has officially recognized legal status of 16 religious organizations emanating from six major religions. In September 2006, religious organizations such as Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Tịnh Độ Cư Sĩ, the Missionary Christian Church were granted certificates for operational registration of religious activities and will soon be recognized as organizations according to regulations of the law (p. 65).

### **Chapter 3: International Relations of Religious Organizations**

There are two main categories of religions in Vietnam: those came from oversea and those were formed inside the country. As soon as foreign religions came into Vietnam, there appeared international relations in side each religious organizations. Foreign religions came with missionaries who can be foreigners or Vietnamese living abroad. Thus the question is how to deal with this international relation? That is why we have this chapter.

The chapter introduces Vietnam viewpoints on international relations found in legal documents as follow:

Article 3 in the *Order No. 234/SL* issued on June 14<sup>th</sup> 1955 read: “Foreigners who are members of religious orders and who receive permission from the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam may preach, just like Vietnamese members of religious orders; they must abide by the laws of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, just like other foreigners”; or article 6 of the *Ordinance on Belief and Religion* affirms the consistent policy of the State of Vietnam: “Relations between the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and other States and international organizations regarding matters related to religion must be based on the principles of: Respect for each other’s independence and sovereignty; non-interference in each other’s internal affairs; equality; mutual benefit; conformity with each other’s laws; and conformity with international law and practice.” (p. 76-77)

Basing on these rules, the State of Vietnam has created favorable conditions for religions in Vietnam to build good relations with international religious organizations such as: Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo Buddhism, ect. This also reaffirms that at present, every religion is operating normally in accordance with the laws of Vietnam.

The book also offers 1 appendix which reveals most up-to-date data on religious dignitaries, followers and worship establishments of religions such as Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism, Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo Buddhism, Tịnh Độ Cư Sĩ, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa. The data are taken from 2001 to 2005.

In general, the white book on religion and policies regarding religion in Vietnam shows a panorama of religious picture in the country from its birth until present and results in religious works in past years. Via this very useful book, audiences will more understand the consistent attitude of the State of Vietnam as it affirms on and guarantees the people's right to freedom to follow or not to follow any religion.

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