

THE BUDDHIST CRISIS IN THE SUMMER OF 1963 IN SOUTH VIETNAM SEEN FROM A CULTURAL- RELIGIOUS ASPECT

Nguyễn Quang Hùng^(*)

***Abstract:** Vietnam is a country with many religions and beliefs, but the Vietnamese traditional spirituality is a combination of the three religions of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism (Three religions co-exist). However, none of them holds exclusive status. Since Catholicism was introduced in Vietnam in the early 16th century, the spiritual life of the Vietnamese has a change. The disturbance is not due to conflict of faith, but due to the impact of culture and religion. Seen from the cultural-religious aspects, the Buddhist crisis in the summer of 1963 in South Vietnam is a clear demonstration to the above comment. Two questions were cleared up in this paper is that why Buddhist leaders could mobilize thousands of non-Catholic against the Ngo Dinh Diem's regime and what the cultural and religious factors play a role in the crisis?*

I. Introduction

Although there are many religions and beliefs in Vietnam, there can be no doubt that Vietnam is a Buddhist country. Buddhism became widespread in this country from China and India in the first centuries of the Christian era. The Vietnamese are well known for their religious tolerance. There has been no religious war in Vietnamese history. However, the syncretism of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism is the basis of the Vietnamese traditional spirituality.

The Christian mission was carried out in Vietnam since the 16th century. There are now over seven million Christians (over six millions Catholics and one million

^{*} Ass. Prof. Dr. Hanoi National University, Vietnam.

Protestants), or about 9% of the Vietnamese population. According to the Geneva Agreement 1954, Vietnam was divided into the Communist North and pro-Western South Vietnam. A Christian, Ngo Dinh Diem, was the first President of the Republic of Vietnam.

On May 6, in the summer of 1963, Bishop Ngo Dinh Thuc, older brother of the Christian president, came back to Hue after he offered a Mass in the church of Lavang (Quang Tri province) which is located about 40 km from Hue. He was angry when he saw the flying of a lot of Buddhist flags on his way back home, even in public places. Despite the fact that the Vesak (Buddha's Birthday) was coming in only two days, the bishop had criticized Ho Dac Khuong, the governor of Hue about the event. The governor of Hue informed the Presidential Office in Saigon about the situation and immediately received a presidential message to prohibit the flying of Buddhist flags. The flying of Buddhist flags was allowed only inside pagodas and temples. This prohibition led to an uprising and the struggle of the Buddhists against discrimination because people saw the flying of the Vatican flags every where.

At the Vesak, the monk Thich Tri Quang in pagoda Tu Dam in Hue, had complained about the prohibition of the government as well as discrimination between Buddhists and Christians in South Vietnam. On the evening of the same day, thousand people stood outside the Broadcasting radio of Hue and demanded they publicize the complaint of monk Thich Tri Quang. Ngo Ganh, the director of the radio of Hue, and a Christian, had refused the request of the Buddhists. Local authorities even sent in tanks to establish order. Suddenly inside a crowd there were two explosions and as a consequence, eight people were killed. The Buddhist crisis began.

During the next weeks there were several protests of Buddhists in cities, especially in Saigon and the Central coast. The monks Thich Tri Quang in Hue and Thich Tam Chau in Saigon were key leaders of Buddhist protest movements. The Buddhist crisis became extremely serious when the monk Thich Quang Duc immolated himself at June 11th, 1963 in Saigon to protest the authorities. Follow him six other monks and nuns also immolated themselves. There were weekly the Buddhist protests, especially in Hue, Da Nang and Saigon. The authorities, on other hand, did not compromise with the Buddhists and carried out violence to establish

the order. As consequences there were several blood conflicts between Buddhists and paramilitary police forces.¹

The Buddhist crisis of the summer of 1963 in South Vietnam came at a time when the Ngo clan had little support of the United States regime as it had in previous years. There was no doubt that the Buddhist crisis was one of the reasons for the collapse of the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem by a coup at November 1st, 1963. President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu were killed. The First Republic of Vietnam had come to an end.

The American commentators see only the political character of the event. According to the opinion of Richard Nixon, not religious discrimination, but political reasons caused the Buddhist crisis. He said “the issue of religious repression was a complete fabrication. Diem appointed his top officials without regard to their faith (...) He permitted Buddhists to exempt themselves from mandatory military service on religious grounds, while Catholics and others were required to serve. No Buddhist was ever arrested for practicing his religion, and not a single piece of credible evidence had ever been produced to show that Diem repressed Buddhists on the basis of religion. Politics, not religion, was on the mind of those behind the crisis”.²

There was undoubtedly about an involvement of pro-Communist National Liberation Front (NLF) in the crisis.³ There were some facts on participation of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the event to reach the aims to pressure the Ngo clan. It was true that the Ngo clan had an ambivalent relationship to Buddhist leaders. Ngo Dinh Can had contact with the monk Thich Tri Quang to solve untruth between Buddhists and the authorities, meanwhile Bishop Ngo Dinh Thuc had no respect for the Buddhists. On the one hand, the Ngo clan would like to mobilize all forces in South Vietnam for the struggle against NLF. But on the other hand, they trusted only in Christians because of their anti-communism.

¹ Some authors have other speculations about the event and consider that CIA and Vietcong had played a very important role for the Buddhist crisis.

² Richard Nixon. *No More Vietnam*, New York, 1985, p. 65.

³ It was clear about an involvement of the National Liberation Front (NLF) in Buddhist crisis. But which role NLF could play is still an open question. See: Trung tâm lưu trữ Quốc gia II, TP Hồ Chí Minh, Hà s- SC.04-HS. 8466 (National Archive Center No. 2, Ho Chi Minh City), document SC.04-HS.8466.

Some Vietnamese authors emphasise the cultural-religious tolerance of Vietnamese and had focused only on the political characters. The role of NLF in the event is thus exaggerated.⁴

But the cultural-religious aspects of the event could not be denied. The Buddhist crisis could not be without a problematical relationship between Buddhist and Christian communities in South Vietnam at that time. Why was it that the Buddhist leaders could mobilize thousands of non-Christians to protest against the Ngo clan? What role did cultural-religious factors to play in the event? There are the questions we should make clear now.

II. Historical Background. Buddhism and Catholicism in Vietnam before 1954

Buddhism was widespread in Vietnam two millenniums ago while the country was under a Chinese occupation. From the beginning this religion could be syncretic with indigenous beliefs as well as with Confucianism and Taoism. That is why this religion was accepted without hindrance by Vietnamese. Although there are now about eleven millions Buddhists, but it could to say that most Vietnamese are under influences of Buddhism. Buddhism became a state religion of *Dai Viet* (The Great Viet) under the Ly and the Tran dynasties in the 11-14th centuries. After triumphal victories in the struggle against Mongol invaders, the king Tran Nhan Tong (1258-1308) left his throne in 1293 and entered monkhood in a mountain of Yen Tu. He became a founder of a Vietnamese Zen Buddhism which is so called as Zen Buddhism of the *Truc Lam Yen Tu*.

Although since the 15th century under the Le (1428-1789) and the Nguyen dynasties (1802-1945) the role of a state religion was displaced by Confucianism, but Buddhist influences among the population remained strong. In each village there is a Buddhist pagoda and a communal house (*đình*) where people carry out worship of the village's tutelary genie (*thành hoàng*). Those religious activities play a role to solidify all villagers into a community. Each village has a pagoda and a communal house for its own inhabitants. Its organizational administration was concerned with both cultural-religious and social-political aspects and it transformed a Vietnamese

⁴ See: Le Cung, *Phong trào đấu tranh của Phật giáo miền Nam chống Mỹ Diem* (Buddhist Struggle Movements against American and Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam), Publishing house of Social Sciences, Hanoi, 1999.

traditional village into a so called bunker. The traditional village in Vietnam is relatively independent even from central state administration so that there are a famous saying “*Phép vua thua lệ làng*” (the king's rule of behaviour comes after the village's customs). Those characters of the villages in Red River delta are very clear while the villages in Central coast and South Vietnam are more open. There was a Buddhist revival in the first half of the 20th century. In the last two decades we see evidence of a new revival of the religious life in Vietnam, including Buddhist worship. State sponsors building and renovation of some Buddhist temples.

Vietnamese Buddhism is syncretic with Confucianism and Taoism and indigenous faiths that we see in both China and Korea. This character is especially clear for the Mahayana Buddhism in North Vietnam. In Buddhist temples there is worship not only of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, but also some indigenous deities such as Tran Hung Dao (?-1300), Quang Trung (1753-1792), etc. who are absolutely no concerned to Buddhist doctrines. In last decades there is the worship even of Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969) in many pagodas.⁵

The Christian mission in Vietnam began after the 16th century when Vietnam had fallen in a social-political as well as a cultural-spiritual crisis. Alexandre de Rhodes (1591-1660), a Jesuit at that time, claimed that he had no difficulty to convert even some Buddhist monks. Some of those monks had helped him to write documents and texts in Chinese and the *Nom*. However, Alexandre de Rhodes was not the only one who had a dream to transform Vietnam into a Christian country.⁶ Since 1660 the Christian mission was carried out mainly by the Mission Etrangères de Paris (MEP) and Spanish Dominicans. There were about 320,000 Catholics, 119 Vietnamese priests and 15 European missionaries (among them 3 bishops) in Vietnam in the year of 1800.⁷ When Vietnam became a French colony in the 19th century, Bishop Puginier saw this as an opportunity to convert a majority of the Vietnamese population within twenty years. Although the dream of those

⁵ The comment of Homer Hulbert (1863-1949) on cultural-spiritual life of the Korean 'the all-around Korean will be a Confucian when in society, a Buddhist when he philosophizes and a spirit worshiper when he is trouble' is relatively suitable for that by Vietnamese.

⁶ See: Alexandre de Rhodes, *Hành trình và truyền giáo* (Long Trip and Mission), Vietnamese translation from French origin by Hong Nhue, Ho Chi Minh city, 1994, p. 73.

⁷ Phan Phat Huon, *Viet Nam giao su* (History of religions in Vietnam), Dong Chua cuu the, vol. I, Saigon, 1958, p. 189.

missionaries was forever only a dream, it is true that Christianity became widespread in the 17th-18th century and even despite harsh Christian persecutions under the Nguyen dynasty in the 19th century.

But from the beginning, Catholicism met a challenge to carry out mission in a Confucian world. A so-called “ritual question” (*vấn đề nghi lễ*) existed for a long time between Christian and non-Christians because of several differences between Christian and non-Christian in their philosophical and religious world outlooks. From a cultural-religious point of view, Christianity and Buddhism in Vietnam should be analyzed in context of the relationship between Christian and non-Christian communities.⁸ There was undoubtedly that the Buddhist monks, as well as Confucianists and Taoists were not pleased with the Christian mission. On the one hand, the Christian Church before the Second Vatican Council had an intolerant option toward non-Christian religions and beliefs. Alexandre de Rhodes was not one who had called Buddhism as well as all other indigenous religions and beliefs as heterodoxy religions. On the other hand, the Christian mission since the end of the 18th century was concerned with colonialism. Because of the Christian persecution under the Nguyen dynasty the French troops decided to invade Vietnam on August 31st, 1858. That was why until the end of the 19th century, Buddhists and especially Confucianists wanted to liquidate Christianity at any price. The cultural-religious characters of the movements *Bình tây sát tả* (to kill both Frenchmen and Christians)

⁸ That remained relative independent from each other, as displayed in the following table:

Traditional non-Christians	Christians
Under influences of traditional East Asian Confucian culture	Under influences of Christian-European culture
Loyal to emperor (<i>trung quan</i>) above all	Loyal to emperor, but Christ comes first
Patriarchy: male conducted ancestor veneration and property inheritance	Gender equality: Woman is emancipated; monogamy.
Parents-children: piety with ancestor veneration	Parents – children: piety but without ancestor veneration ⁸
Cultural-religious life: polytheism, not devout to any religion	Cultural-religious life: monotheism, devout
Religiously inclusive and tolerant	Religiously exclusive
Religious activities: private, without church organization	Religious activities: collective, with church organization
Relationship with God: a relative distance	Relationship with God: an absolute distance
Hierarchy: by age and social position	Hierarchy: by church position

at the end of the 19th century with leadership of Confucianists could not be underestimated.

But the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism in Vietnam had changed in the colonial period. Colonial authorities and Christian Church had a closed co-operation in the struggle against the national movements, especially since nationalism was under the influence of communist ideas in 1930. French colonial authorities in Indochina did not carry out the separation law between church and state as it was in France since 1905. After the Russian revolution in 1917, both the Christian Church and colonial authorities saw communism in Vietnam as a common enemy. Before the establishment of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1930, Rev. J.M. Thich wrote about danger of communism. “The prime antidote to Communism in Vietnam, however, was to be the rapid expansion of the Catholic Church - after all, had not history demonstrated that in times of trouble, 'only one nation, the Christian nation, only one official, the Pope, only one organization, the world-wide Catholic Church, was able to maintain discipline and stand firm forever’”.⁹

Despite a closed relationship between colonialism and the Christian mission, each of the colonial authorities and the Christian Church had their special goals and interests. In many cases the French Admirals and governors were, for instance, not pleased with the increased properties of the Christian Church in Indochina. On the other hand, the Christian Church was not always satisfied with the colonial secular state education system in Indochina.

However, Buddhism became a challenge for the Christian mission. It was well known that the Christian mission in South Vietnam was not as successful as it was in North Vietnam. Different from their relatives in the North, where the Mahayana Buddhism is predominant, the South Vietnamese are under influences of Theravada Buddhism. Although the number of missionaries in South Vietnam in pre-colonial period was often more than in North Vietnam and the Christian persecution under the Nguyen dynasty in South Vietnam was not as serious as it was in North Vietnam, but until beginning of the 20th century among total one million Christians in whole

⁹ J.M Thich, *Van de cong san* (The Question of Communism), Quy Nhon, 1927, p. 29-30. Cited in David Marr, *Vietnamese tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, University of California, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1981, p. 85.

Vietnam there were not more than one hundred thousand Christians in South Vietnam. Meanwhile both new religions and sects in the Mekong delta, the Cao Dai, a syncretic sect between Buddhism, Christianity and indigenous belief as well as the Hoa Hao, a Buddhist sect, could mobilize millions of believers only a decade after their foundation.

The discontentment between Buddhism and Christianity was not only in their mission, but also in the theoretical discussion concerned with their philosophical and theological issues. In 1930s, there was a discussion between the two famous Buddhist and Christian journals: the *Vien Am* (Upalaksa), and the *Vi Chua* (For God). The *Vi Chua* criticized the Buddhist world outlook because Buddha was not Creator. "Even Buddha was not interested on the Creation issue (...) The Buddhists base only on the things what they are. But the Buddhists are no interested in the question why things are so and not some other way (...) the Buddhist concept of incarnation is absurd and unpractical (...) as the same irony when man talks about the laws in a country without a lawmaker!"¹⁰

Differing from Buddhists, according to the Christian theologians "an [Buddhist] incarnation theory has a mistake that it knows only the men, animals and all things in our world, but denied their Creator".¹¹ In contrast to the Buddhist, the Christian theologians confirm that "God is the origin of all things in our universe".¹² From the point of view of Christian theologians, Buddhism is not even a religion because of its 'atheism'.

The *Vien Am*, in other hand, responded to critique of the Christian theologians. The Buddhists had denied the existence of immortal souls and consider that man is always a unity of body and mind. The soul could not exist without a body.¹³ A person cannot be without either his body or soul. Contrary to Christian doctrines, the Buddhist theologians believe in Nirvana as a release from sufferings, and denied the existence of paradises. They emphasize a radical difference between Buddhist Nirvana and Christian heaven.¹⁴

¹⁰ The *Vi Chua*, May 6th, 1938.

¹¹ The *Vi Chua*, June 11th, 1937.

¹² The *Vi Chua*, March 5th, 1937.

¹³ The *Vien Am*, No. 4, March, 1934.

¹⁴ The *Vien Am*, No. 12, July 1934.

Concerning the issue of creation, in contrast to Christians, the Buddhist theologians confirm there is no need for the existence of a Supreme Creator of all things. The monk Thich Don Hau criticized all conceptions which recognise the Creator. “Some people believe in existence of an immortal Almighty Supreme Being as origin of all things. Who prays to this Supreme Being, could be in a supernatural unsurpassable world and live forever in happiness, who prays not for this Supreme Being could be punished in a miserable destitute and very unhappy situation. What is a sacred Supreme Being if he needs always the praying of believers?”¹⁵

Those discussions between Buddhists and Christians are unavoidable because of a religious-theological dissention between two those religions. As a monotheist religion, the difference between Christianity and Vietnamese traditional religions is more radical than division among East Asian religions. According to Max Weber, Buddhism and Catholicism have not only their different world outlooks, but also belong to two types of religion. Both Buddhism and Catholicism escape from the world, but Buddhism is mystical meanwhile Catholicism is an ascetic religion.¹⁶

Also, from a purely cultural-religious point of view, there was a gulf between Buddhism and Christianity in Vietnam before 1954. While Christianity is monotheistic and religiously exclusive with non-Christian religions and beliefs, especially before the Second Vatican Council; Buddhism, however, based on its religious tolerance, religiously inclusive could be syncretic with other religions and beliefs, such as Confucianism and Taoism, but could not be assimilated by other religions. There is no doubt that the Christian mission became a challenge to Buddhism. Before 1954, in general there was a cultural-religious discontentment, but no violent conflict between the Buddhist and Christian communities in Vietnam.

III. The religious favouritism under Ngo Dinh Diem's regime - a reason for Buddhist crisis

¹⁵ Vien Am, No. 27, August, 1937.

¹⁶ Max Weber says on four following types of religion.

Inner-worldly (adjust to world)	Ascetic - Protestantism
	Mystic - Taoism
Other worldly (escape from the world)	Ascetic - Catholicism
	Mystic - Buddhism

At first sight it is not easy to identify religious favouritism under the Ngo Dinh Diem regime.¹⁷ According to its Constitution of 1956, worship of all religion and beliefs were free and equal. By Article 17, "Every citizen had the right to freedom of belief, religious practice and teaching, provided that the exercise of these rights shall not be contrary to morality".¹⁸ It emphasized the combination between religions and beliefs as a spiritual basis of the regime.

During the First Republic of Vietnam from 1954 to 1963 there was no Christian party in South Vietnam such as the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in Federal Republic of Germany. We see no changes in the position of the Christian Church in South Vietnam between two the Constitution of 1956 and that of 1967, also after Ngo Dinh Diem's death. The non-Christians were majority in the National Assembly before 1963 and after this time. There were many important non-Christian army generals, such as Duong Van Minh, Tran Van Don, Ton That Dinh, etc.

That was why some authors had denied as so called religious discrimination in favour of the Christian church in political life under Ngo Dinh Diem's regime in South Vietnam.¹⁹

But it was only at first sight. It might not be so in practice. In reality, there was a radical difference between the formal institutional legislative statements and real executive powers under the First Republic of Vietnam in Saigon. The Ngo clan was devout anti-communist Christian. "The Ngo family had been Catholic for generations, converting in the seventeenth century. They paid a heavy price for their faith under emperors Minh Mang and Tu Duc, who encouraged the persecution of Catholics. Around 1880, when Kha was studying for government service in Malaya [Penang-author], Buddhist monks led an anti-Catholic riot that nearly wiped out the Ngo family. More than a hundred Ngo - including Kha's parents, sisters, and brothers - were burned alive. Such oppression only intensified Kha's devotion to the Catholic Church, a sentiment he passed on to his six sons and three daughters".²⁰

¹⁷ September 1957 Ngo Dinh Diem had visited South Korea and was welcomed by bishop Paul Marie Ki-nam in Seoul during his visit.

¹⁸ The Constitution of Republic of Vietnam, Saigon, 1956, p. 26.

¹⁹ Le Monde, December 29th, 1959, p. 1; See also: Eglise Varante (a Catholic Journal in Belgium), No. 3-4, May-August, 1963, p. 309.

²⁰ Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam. Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race and US. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2004, p. 28.

Ngo Dinh Diem stood out for his piety. At fifteen, he entered a monastery and considered becoming a priest. But he dropped the notion maybe because the discipline was for him very rigorous. That is why it is no surprise that “Diem was also a religious mystic and almost ascetic in his tastes and habits. He seriously believed that ‘divine intervention’ had prevented him from being overthrown by four coups and assassination attempt, and in his last days he even told intimates that he had seen vision of the Virgin Mary”.²¹

It was clear that Ngo Dinh Diem could not come to power without the support of Cardinal Francis Spellman who had a nickname ‘the American Pope’ at that time and had considered Vietnam War as a Christian Holy War. “Cardinal Spellman, to whom Diem was introduced by his brother [bishop Ngo Dinh Thuc-author], was probably the first American to entertain the idea of a Vietnamese government headed by the Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem”.²² The Ngo clan had believed only in anti-communism of Christians, especially those from the North and was not pleased about an ambivalent point of view of Buddhist Church in South Vietnam on communism. Ngo Dinh Nhu and his wife, Mrs. Tran Le Xuan, popularly known as Madame Nhu, had a pro-western education and underestimated the role of Buddhism in social development. According to their opinion, Buddhism was a primitive and superstitious religion which was not suitable for a modern industrial country.

It is a pity that Ngo Dinh Nhu and Madame Nhu’s one-sided view toward Buddhism became partly supported by the American and Christian mass media. Some persons thought that Buddhist passivity could be helpful to communism: “It was its treatment of Buddhism that the American media made its greatest contribution to ensuring that no South Vietnamese other than the militantly Catholic Diem would receive U.S. support (...) Mistrust of Buddhism as to passive to serve America's cold war purposes was expressed elsewhere in the media, nowhere more

Ngo Dinh Khoi, oldest brother in Ngo family, and his son were assassinated by the Viet Minh with the leading of Ho Chi Minh some weeks after August Revolution in 1945. That was why Ngo Dinh Diem had denied join into Ho Chi Minh's cabinet.

²¹ Schechter Jerrold, *The new face of Buddha, Buddhism and political power in Southeast Asia*, Coward-McCann, Inc. New York, 1967, p. 187. In 1955, when Ba Cut, a leader of paramilitary forces of Hoa Hao Buddhism, was captured, Ngo Dinh Diem gave him an opportunity to live if he converted to be a believer of Christian. He was executed when he refused this demand.

²² Buttinger Joseph, *The Smaller Dragon. Vietnam: A Political History*, Preager Publishers, New York/Washington, 1969, p. 385.

explicitly than in *National Review*, in which the columnist Frank Meyer defended international anticommunism as a 'holy war' (...) The American Catholic press devoted several articles in the mid-1950s to Buddhism, usually with the objective of demonstrating its vast inferiority to Christianity. *Our Sunday Visitor* presented the instructional tale of "Yoshi Tekisui of the Obaku branch of Zen Buddhism", who in 1954 became "the first Buddhist priest from Japan to embrace Christianity".²³

This favoritism could be seen in Ngo Dinh Diem's cabinet. The first cabinet of the Ngo Dinh Diem was established on July 7th, 1954, also only two weeks before the Geneva agreement was signed which had divided Vietnam into North and South. Eleven of the seventeen of its members were refugees from the North: "The Diem's cabinet was not worse than its predecessors [the pre-French cabinet of Bao Dai during First Indochina war 1946-1954], but little better. Some observers remarked the predominance of the Ngo and Tran families in the cabinet and called it a 'family affairs'; others pointed to the unique fact that the government had no South Vietnamese members, despite the fact that it must depend more and more upon southern support for any sort of popular basis".²⁴

Although the Christians were only a minority in this cabinet, they occupied the key positions: Ngo Dinh Diem was prime minister and Ngo Dinh Luyen, his brother, minister for the government. Some other its members were not Christian, but his relatives (Tran Van Chuong minister for Prime minister Residence; Tran Van Do, Foreign minister and some others). The situation was not much changed in his following cabinets. The key its positions were occupied by members of the Ngo clan. It was clear that the Americans stood behind Ngo Dinh Diem, but it was undoubted that the Ngo Dinh Diem regime could not exist without the support of refugees from North Vietnam, among them a majority are the Christians.²⁵

²³ Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam. Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race and US. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2004, p. 190-191.

²⁴ Fall, B. Bernard, *Vietnam witness, 1953-1966*, Frederick A Preager Publisher, New York, 1967, p. 60.

²⁵ There were about 860,000 refugees from North Vietnam after the Geneva agreement, among them 550,000 Christians and 809 priests, also 72% the priests and 40% the Christians in North Vietnam at that time had escaped from the communist regime in North Vietnam. Only two among eight bishops had decided to stay with their Christian believers in the North.

The Catholicity of the Ngo Dinh Diem's regime became very clear throughout the eight years of its existence. Ngo Dinh Nhu became the political adviser, the second most important person in the regime, only after the president. Ngo Dinh Luyen became an ambassador at large in Europe. Many members of the Ngo clan, including Bishop Ngo Dinh Thuc and Ngo Dinh Can, held no key roles in the regime although Ngo Dinh Thuc, Ngo Dinh Can and Madame Nhu had no formally important positions in the government administration. They were not even members of the National Assembly (Ngo Dinh Can was only a so called 'adviser in Central Vietnam', Ngo Dinh Thuc had no position because he was a bishop, Madame Nhu was only the leader of the Women's organization). Madame Nhu did not stand outside of political affairs. She established a para-military women's organization (*Phu nu lien doi*) to support the regime. The special secret police forces of Ngo Dinh Nhu consisted of Christians alone.

Different from the political apparatus in North Vietnam, there were some political parties in South Vietnam. The ruling *Dang Can Lao Nhan vi* (Personalist Labour Party) was not officially Christian, but in fact consisted mostly of Christians. Personalism was considered not only as the Can Lao party's ideology, but also as a state ideology. There was also public resentment over laws to enforce Christian morality which were seen to be out of step with Vietnamese traditions, such as the family law which did not allow any divorce.²⁶ There is no doubt that, as reported at the time: "Religious favoritism has, however, been a clear component of government administration. This has been particularly noticeable in Central Vietnam, where Catholic influence within the Administration is especially active (...) But there was religious favoritism: the 370,500 acres of land held by the Catholic Church were not transferred or even surveyed (...) There have been numerous other instances of government assistance to the Church, including the repair of churches and, on at least one occasion, assistance to missionary efforts among the highlands people. While some of the Vietnamese Catholic bishops attempt to avoid a close identification with the regime, this has not been the general attitude".²⁷

²⁶ Peter Hansen. *The Virgin heads South: Northern Catholic Refugees in South Vietnam, 1954-1964*, A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Melbourne College of Divinity, Kew Victoria 3101, p. 274.

²⁷ Robert Scigliano. *South Vietnam. Nation under Stress*, Boston, 1964, p. 54-55.

The Catholics had a lot of privileges to carry out their occupation not only in administrative affairs, but also in the army. To be a member of the Can Lao Party became a compelling condition for all commissioned officers to seek promotion for themselves. The authorities established a chaplaincy office for the Catholic soldiers to promote worship in army. There was in each division a church for Christian prayers. Chaplain-priests were promoted to the rank of captain and received a salary. Despite the difference between Catholic and Buddhist worship, the fact that the chaplain's office was used for Christians alone could provoke intolerance amongst the non-Christian officers and soldiers. In 1954 there was only one Catholic army general. But some years later there were many Christian army generals, among them some incapable generals such as Huynh Van Cao.

Also, it is no exaggeration to say there was a discrimination against Buddhists under Ngo Dinh Diem's regime in South Vietnam. The following defence of a Dutch priest could be arguable: "We had already extensively discussed the privileges position of Catholics in Vietnam (...) these privileges were not as such a discrimination against the Buddhists. The reason why the Catholics had more chance to rise in society was mainly due to their chance of being educated".²⁸

This Christian favoritism of Ngo Dinh Diem's regime received partly the support of American opinion at least until the end of 1950s. Even the complaint of Lawton J. Collins, the first American ambassador in South Vietnam, about the gulf between refugees from the North after the Geneva Agreement in 1954 and native population was not responded by most American politician and advisers. "Yet general J. Lawton Collins argued that the Catholic refugees never assimilated with the native southern population and were viewed by the Buddhist majority as intruders favored by Diem's 'Catholic government'".²⁹

That is why the prohibition on the flying of Buddhist flags in Hue became an impulse to Buddhist protests against the Ngo Dinh Diem's regime. Even before this event in March 1963 a state committee was established to celebrate an Episcopal

²⁸ Harry Haas. *The Church in Vietnam*. In: Quigley E. Thomas, *American Catholics and Vietnam*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand rapids, Michigan, 1968, p. 90.

²⁹ Gregory A. Olson. *Mansfield and Vietnam, a Study in Rhetorical Adaptation*, Michigan, 1995, p. 161. Because of discontentment with Ngo Dinh Diem, Collins had to leave Vietnam at the end of 1955. Only in 1963, Senator Mansfield found negative aspects of Ngo Dinh Diem's dictatorship.

anniversary for Bishop Ngo Dinh Thuc. Truong Vinh Le, President of National Assembly, was appointed to be the director of the committee. The Christmas was recognized as a state festival; meanwhile, this opportunity for Vesak was abolished since 1960. "The Buddhists' fight was not directed against the Catholic Church but against a government in which Catholics happened to take part".³⁰

It is true that the Buddhist struggle was directed to abolish ordinance No. 10 in 1951. According to this ordinance the Christian Church, unlike the Buddhist Church, enjoyed special rights to acquire and own property. The Ngo clan continued French colonial policy of legally defining Christianity as a 'religion' while other religious organizations, including the Buddhist Church were designated members of an 'association'. Until monks began self-immolating in the streets of Saigon, the *dramatis personae* with whom Americans interacted in South Vietnam were Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu. On 11 June 1963, the Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc knelt on Phan Dinh Phung Boulevard, permitted himself to be doused with gasoline, and lit a match. He had alerted members of the international press before he self immolated, and pictures of his burning body spread across the world wire services. Worldwide opinion was shocked with the event. A series of Buddhist torch suicides came in rapid succession, the horrific images captured on mass media in the United States and around the world.³¹

Ngo Dinh Diem's favoritism maybe was not because he was a Christian, but because he was a Christian, anti-communist president. "Whatever discrimination there is against the Buddhists, and whatever favors the Catholics can expect under this regime, neither the one nor the other is done in the name of religion or for religious purposes. These acts of discrimination and favoritism are politically inspired".³²

³⁰ Patrick O'Connor. *Letter to the Editor*, The New York Times, July 25th, 1963. Cited from: Schecter Jerrold, *The new face of Buddha, Buddhism and political power in Southeast Asia*, Coward-McCann, Inc. New York, 1967, p. 185.

³¹ Jacobs Seth. *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam. Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race and US. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2004, p. 268-269.

³² Joseph Buttinger to Fairbanks, 26 September 1963, Buttinger Papers. Cited in: Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam. Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race and US. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2004, p. 271.

The hard violence means of the authorities to solve conflict had no support from public opinion around the world. The United States regime of John Kennedy was under pressure of American opinion and step by step supported opposition forces of the Ngo clan. Even the Holy See could not longer to stand behind the regime, and had shared with the Buddhist positions. Pope John XXIII's Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* opened the door even with atheists and the communist block. The Christian Church was in a reform process during the Second Vatican Council, which had an open view of dialogue towards other religions and beliefs. Pope Paul VI continued this course of the Holy See.

IV. Conclusion

In any case, cultural-religious aspects always stood behind the relation between Christian and Buddhist communities. Alone, long-term cultural-religious contradictions could not cause the blood conflict between them as it was before 1954. The relationship between two those communities could be tense if it accompanies by the social-political factors. The Buddhist crisis in the summer of 1963 in South Vietnam might not have been if the Ngo clan had carried out a reasonable policy toward religions in general, and Buddhism in particular. Despite the fact that Vietnamese are well known for religious tolerance and there is no religious war in the thousand years of Vietnamese history, from a cultural-religious point of view the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity in Vietnam is not always fluent./.

Reference:

1. Joseph Buttinger. *The Smaller Dragon. Vietnam: A Political History*, Preager Publishers, New York/Washington, 1969.
2. Joseph Buttinger to Fairbanks, 26 September 1963, Buttinger Papers, *Constitution of Republic of Vietnam*, Saigon, 1956.
3. Fall, B. Bernard. *Vietnam witness, 1953-1966*, Frederick A Preager Publisher, New York, 1967.
4. Piero Ghedo. *Die Katholiken und Buddhisten in Vietnam*, Uebersetzung aus dem Italienischen Original, Muenchen, 1970.
5. Phan Thanh Hai. Thu phu cac chua Nguyen (Capitel of the Nguyen Lords), in: *Xua va Nay*, No. 317, October 2008.
6. Peter Hansen. *The Virgin heads South: Northern Catholic Refugees in South Vietnam, 1954-1964*, a thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Melbourne College of Divinity, Kew Victoria 3101.
7. Nguyen Thi Hau, *Nguyen Hoang va Buoc dau Nam tien* (Nguyen Hoang and the beginning of the March to the South), In *Xua va Nay* Review, N^o. 317, October 2008.
8. Harry Haas. *The Church in Vietnam*, In: Quigley E. Thomas, *American Catholics and Vietnam*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand rapids, Michigan, 1968.
9. Phan Phat Huon. *Viet Nam giao su* (History of Religions in Vietnam), Dong Chua Cuu the, vol. I, Saigon, 1958.
10. Le Cung. *Phong trao dau tranh cua Phat giao mien Nam chong My Diem* (Buddhist Struggle Movements against American and Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam), Publishing House of Social Sciences, Hanoi, 1999.
11. *Le Monde*, December 29th, 1959.
12. David Marr. *Vietnamese tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, University of California, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1981.
13. Richard Nixon. *No More Vietnam*, New York, 1985.
14. Alexandre deRhodes. *Hanh trinh va Truyen giao* (Long Trip and Mission), Vietnamese translation from French origin by Hong Nhue, Ho Chi Minh city, 1994.
15. Patrick O' Connor. *Letter to the Editor*, The New York Times, July 25th, 1963.
16. Gregory A. Olson. *Mansfield and Vietnam, a Study in Rhetorical Adaptation*, Michigan, 1995.
17. Jerrold Schecter. *The new face of Buddha, Buddhism and political power in Southeast Asia*, Coward-McCann, Inc. New York, 1967.
18. Robert Scigliano. *South Vietnam. Nation under Stress*, Boston, 1964.
19. Jacobs Seth. *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam. Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race and US. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2004.
20. Trung tâm lưu trữ Quốc gia II, TP. Hà Chử Minh, Hà s- SC.04-HS.8466 (National Archive Center N^o. 2, Ho Chi Minh City), document SC.04-HS.8466.
21. Vi Chua, March 5th, 1937; June 11th, 1937; May 6th, 1938.
22. *Vien am*, N^o. 4, March, 1934; N^o. 12, July 1934; N^o. 27, August, 1937.