

Research Notes and Comments

Vietnamese Party-State and Religious Pluralism since 1986: Building the Fatherland?

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While religion continues to be kept under close scrutiny by the Vietnamese state, an undeniably positive state discourse on religious practices has emerged since the 1990s. The current state approach towards religious practices and ceremonies has transformed religion from a strictly private affair to a matter of public interest, with political leaders participating in religious festivals on behalf of the state, and religious institutions being recognized as a lasting contribution towards "building the fatherland". This essay looks at the Vietnamese state's management of religious activities and explores the extent to which religious attitudes and practices are co-opted for nation-building and state-affirming purposes. It concludes with a discussion on the relations between the religious and the political sphere in *doi moi* Vietnam.

Keywords: ancestor worship, cults, religion, state, Vietnam

Over the last thirty years, since the reunification of modern Vietnam, Vietnamese religious policies have experienced tremendous changes. Thirty years ago, under a strict socialist approach inspired by Marxist-Leninist views, religions were widely seen as one of the expressions of class struggle, fated to progressively disappear from the public sphere with the implementation of the socialist political and socio-economic agenda. Though religious expressions were not banned, they were far from being encouraged, and religious activities in the public realm were closely monitored. This approach prevailed in the North from 1954 and during the American War and was implemented in the

South after 1975 and reunification. It prevailed at least until the late 1980s, even after the launch of the *doi moi* policy in 1986.¹ Subsequently, cult places were less attended and religious practices had a tendency to dwindle.

Nowadays, in vivid contrast, Vietnamese religious institutions are regularly praised in the public sphere by political leaders for their achievements and their contribution to the national project, "building the fatherland" (*xay dung to quoc*). The deep and rapid transformations experienced by the Vietnamese economy and society under the *doi moi* have also touched the religious sphere, particularly through the redefinition of the relation between religions and the state or the party-state. In parallel, pagodas, temples, and churches have recovered their crowds and prestige.

Although some religions look more "Vietnamese" than others, and therefore are more deeply rooted in Vietnamese daily life and mental representations, all have been subject to the same evolutions over the last thirty years, though with various intensities, depending on the characteristics of each religious trend. This includes the main institutional religions (Buddhist and Christian cults) as well as more local and traditional cults or "superstitious" practices. The latter being clearly fought by communist cadres in charge of implementing revolutionary socio-economic reforms.

The new, positive discourse of the party-state on religions is still accompanied by a strong will to keep close control over all religious activities. Organized cults have to go through a process of official recognition before gaining any legal existence² — which grants them the legal guarantees provided by the increasingly sophisticated legal framework developed since the early 1990s. The current approach nonetheless stands far from the Leninist approach of religious affairs: from strictly private, religion has become a matter of public interest, with political leaders participating in religious festivals on behalf of the state, and religious institutions being recognized for a lasting contribution in "building the fatherland".

How can we explain the stronger commitment of the party-state to both manage religious activities and praise the achievements of

religious institutions? To what extent does the new approach of the party-state include a co-optation of religious attitudes at the state level? Finally, what does the desire of the party-state to firmly control public religious expressions and religious institutions reveal about the relations between the religious and the political spheres in *doi moi* Vietnam?

A Redefinition of the State-Religions' Relationship

The first major step of the redefinition of the relationship between the state and religions occurred in 1990, with the decisive reconsideration of the official approach to religious issues. Whereas religion was until then considered from a Marxist-Leninist point of view, the twenty-fourth resolution of the Sixth Congress of the VCP (Vietnamese Communist Party), adopted on 16 October by the newly elected Politburo, states:

Belief and religion are spiritual needs of a segment of the population. Those needs currently exist and will continue to co-exist with the nation during the process of building socialism in Vietnam. (Resolution No. 24-NQ/TW)

This resolution is a major reconsideration of the ideological approach which prevailed in socialist Vietnam, since 1954 in the North and 1975 in the reunified country. Though it has not been immediately followed by spectacular measures (as was the case for economic activities), this recognition of the social role of religions is a major concession from the party-state.

Interestingly, this ideological shift, which was foregone by various signs from the Politburo since early 1990, occurred some months after the collapse of East-European socialism. Following this world event, Vietnamese Catholics were urged by the party-state to openly condemn the European upheavals, in which many analyses saw a major role played by the Catholic Church, specifically in Poland. The twenty-fourth resolution was then seen as a great hope by overseas Vietnamese, especially Catholics, campaigning for more religious freedom in socialist Vietnam. Their hopes would be dismissed,

though, as the ideological shift did not lead to any major lifting of control of the party-state over the public sphere.

The resolution paved the way for bolder reforms through the 1990s and until today, with numerous resolutions and decrees on religious issues being adopted. This intense legal activity has mainly been aimed at organizing the activities of religious organizations in the public space, whereas measures regarding religions taken in the previous era were mainly aimed at organizing their activities inside of the party-state framework.

The measures have been more and more detailed by policymakers, which culminated in the adoption of the *Ordinance on Belief and Religion* by the National Assembly on 18 June 2004. This ordinance of forty-one articles, certainly the last step before the adoption of a general law on religions and beliefs which is currently under preparation, details the procedures that religious organizations have to follow and the rights and duties of religious citizens. It also lists the “illegal activities linked to religion”. A white paper on *Religion and Policies Regarding Religions*, issued in 2006 by the Vietnamese Government Committee for Religious Affairs, aimed at “explaining” the orientations of these policies, especially to foreign actors (this white paper is available on all websites of Vietnamese embassies around the world), describes the intentions of the *Ordinance on Belief and Religion*:

The *Ordinance on Belief and Religion* consists of six chapters and 41 articles. These articles lay down democratic policies that respect the people's right to freedom of belief and religion; clearly state rights and duties of religious individuals and religious organizations as well as the responsibilities of State agencies in guaranteeing rights and duties of individuals and organizations in activities linked to belief and religion; and respect and guarantee the principle that internal affairs of religious organizations are to be settled by the organizations themselves in accordance with their charters and regulations, which have been recognized by the State. The responsibilities of competent State agencies in regard to religious activities have been specified in line with administrative reform, including: clear procedures and deadlines, clear delegation of jurisdictional decision-making authority to the different levels of administration to create favorable conditions

for religious organizations and individuals; facilitate wholesome religious relationships and activities to serve the legitimate interests of believers and religious organizations and the shared interests of the entire society within the context of Vietnam's current enhanced international integration. (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2006, p. 25)

Whereas all previous measures and laws referred to religion only, this ordinance deals with both religion *and* beliefs, widening the realm in which the state shows its interest in popular beliefs and cults, as opposed to the institutionally organized religions.

Along with the development of a legal framework to manage religious activities, the party-state developed institutional tools to gain expertise on religious issues. The Institute of Research on Religion, an institute of the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences (VASS), was created in 1992 and has developed and expanded since then. This institute and the other institutes of the VASS are in charge of providing governmental structures with expertise in their fields of study.

The State Publishing House of Religions was created in 1999, in charge of publishing religious books (on which it is supposed to have a monopoly) and of spreading the legislation regarding religions and the point of view of the state (*Cong Giao va Dan Toc*, 28 April 2000).

More recently, a department of religious studies was created in the Ho Chi Minh Institute of Political Studies. The Governmental Committee of Religious Affairs, created in 1955 after the first decree on religions issued by president Ho Chi Minh, publishes its own *Journal of Religions*, while the Institute of Research on Religion, since 2007, publishes two reviews, one in Vietnamese and one in English.

The rapid development of this legal and institutional framework was aimed at providing the state with sophisticated tools to manage the religious revival which exploded in Vietnam in the 1990s, in parallel with the economic transformations.

In the 1990s and 2000s, various cults which had been forbidden because of their political or military activities during the French War

and the American War, like Caodaism or Hoa Hao Buddhism, were officially recognized. The recognition of new cults is still being pursued. Recognition of the Protestant churches is remarkable, because until the late 1990s they were seen by the authorities — perhaps not without reason — as agents of foreign influence (especially engaged in anti-communist destabilization activities).

Though it is obvious that the liberalization process has touched the sphere of religious policies, it is however also obvious that the state-party still adopts a very cautious attitude towards religious activities. The frames built since 1990 replace a more coercive approach, but they still aim at controlling religious activities and providing the authorities with some tools to contain religious activities inside the limits that the party-state delineates as acceptable for the public space. Some religious organizations (like the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam) and practices (like “superstitious behaviours”, a term which often covers animist cults of ethnic minorities) are still relatively strictly forbidden, although there are some signs of a more loosened approach.

The Evolution of the Governmental Discourse on Religion

The building of a more complex legal and institutional framework for religious activities was only a part of the outcome from the ideological shift initiated in the early 1990s. The official discourse on religions has also deeply evolved, with political leaders now publicly praising religious individuals and organizations, quoting them as legitimate contributors to the edification of the fatherland. More than the institutionalization of religious activities, this new attitude reveals a rapprochement between the party-state and religious organizations.

This new attitude includes the publicizing of the participation of state officers in religious celebrations, in internal events of religious organizations, or their discussions with religious dignitaries. For example, President Nguyen Minh Triet took part in the twenty-fifth anniversary of the foundation of the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam in 2006. In September 2006, he welcomed the first visit of Vietnamese

archbishops to a state president. These meetings are not part of an organized dialog between the state and institutional religions, but the fact that the media — which are all under the strict control of the Ministry of Information — report on such events much more frequently than they used to, emphasizes the implementation of a new official discourse on religions.

Such events are official ones; they cannot strictly be seen as a cooption of religious discourses or attitudes by the political leadership. They do illustrate, though, the importance that authorities at the highest levels grant to taking into account religious organizations and communities. These meetings aim at stressing the link between religious organizations and the nation as a whole, in accordance with the official patriotic ideology, emphasizing national unity; a national unity whose only legitimate representative must remain the party-state.

It must be emphasized that this new attitude is aimed at all religious organizations and individuals. But it may be more significant and reveal deeper change when it comes to Vietnamese Catholics, as the relation between the Catholic Church and the Vietnamese Communist Party has been a tense and wary one. Like Buddhism or Islam, Catholicism was imported into Vietnam by foreign missionaries, but its link with what would become the French colonial rule caused it to be viewed with suspicion by many Vietnamese patriots and, therefore, any Vietnamese communist, as the major target of the VCP since its foundation has been to ensure national independence, in the frame of a Marxist revolution. As followers of a *foreign religion*, Vietnamese Catholics were viewed as suspicious on two counts by the VCP. And even for the ones who do not consider religion a problem, the allegiance of Catholics to Rome is still problematic.

This suspicion is a reciprocal one; in 1954, as Vietnam was divided into two parts and Vietnamese were granted 300 days to choose their side, hundreds of thousands of Catholics, motivated by fierce anti-communist preaching in their churches, fled the communist North to join the more liberal South (then ruled by fellow Catholic

Ngo Dinh Diem). This wariness has diminished among Vietnamese Catholics since the beginning of religious reforms, but it is still vivid among the 1954 “refugees”.

The perception of Vietnamese Catholics as agents of foreign powers still lingers today, as demonstrated by some reactions to the confrontations between the Catholic Church and the state in 2008.³ However, steps taken by the government in recent years illustrate the interest of the authorities in praising the role of Catholics in “building the fatherland”. On 29 November 2005, the historical ordination of fifty-seven priests took place at a sumptuous ceremony in Hanoi Cathedral. Though it was organized by the Vietnamese Catholic Church, this meaningful ceremony, widely publicized in Vietnam along with other Catholic events organized for Catholic youth, had the obvious support of state authorities.

Another illustration of the evolution of the public discourse on Catholicism is the rapprochement with the Vatican, which started in 1990 with the visit of cardinal Etchegaray to Vietnam, and reached the peak of the visit of Nguyen Tan Dung to Pope Benedict XVI, the first ever by a Vietnamese prime minister, on 25 January 2007. The deputy chief of the Committee of Religious Affairs, who accompanied the prime minister, declared that this meeting had diplomatic aims linked to the domestic situation in Vietnam (*Bulletin Eglises D’Asie*, no. 456, 2007).

Bringing Vietnamese Organized Religion to the International Stage

The will to bolster the status of the new Vietnamese religious policies in the international realm is not limited to the Catholic Church. In particular, the Vietnamese government strongly supports the establishment of international connections by Vietnamese Buddhists — by far the strongest religious community in Vietnam — as long as they abide by state regulations. This means that the only Buddhist organization authorized to develop such links is the officially recognized Buddhist Church of Vietnam. Other “illegal” Buddhist Churches, especially the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam,

forbidden since 1982, are blocked in any attempt to get in contact with foreign organizations.

The Vietnamese government strongly advocated the organization of Vesak Day celebrations in Hanoi in May 2008, a festival supported by the United Nations, which welcomed hundreds of Buddhist dignitaries from all around the world. It was the first time that this international festival, originally organized in Thailand, was exported to another country.

Dignitaries of the Buddhist Church of Vietnam also receive support from the government to participate in international events. Officers from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also participate in such events, in coordination with religious dignitaries. It was the case for the Fourth Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialog in Phnom Penh in April 2008 and for the Fifth Buddhist Summit in Japan in November 2008.

The Co-option of Traditional Cults by the State

Along the discursive evolution on religions, clear co-options of religious attitudes or discourses by the state remain rare but are becoming increasingly visible. The most recent and visible one on the national level was the creation of a new public holiday in 2007. Whilst all previous public holidays were linked to international festivals (New Year's Day, Lunar New Year, International Labour Day) or to national events (declaration of independence on 2 September, the fall of Saigon on 30 April), the National Assembly adopted the creation of *gio To Hung Vương* day (literally "death anniversary of Hung Kings' ancestors") on the tenth day of the third month of the lunar calendar. This national public holiday is dedicated to the Hung Kings, the founder of this dynasty being the semi-legendary founder of the first Kingdom of Vietnam.

The worship of the Hung Kings is one among many of Vietnam's traditional ancestor cults. The worship of ancestors is perhaps the foremost of Vietnam's traditional cults, active in the vast majority of Vietnamese families. Some authors, especially those who have long been close to the governmental approach of religion and patriotism,

see the cult of ancestors as the national religion of Vietnam, which may even help protect the country from harmful foreign cultural influences (Dang Nghiem Van, 2001, pp. 336–38).

The establishment of Hung Vuong day was a major expression of the co-option of a religious approach by the state apparatus. Though it is not presented as a religious festival, but rather as a national secular one, it borrows elements from what are often considered religious practices and attitudes by Vietnamese families in an attempt to set up a kind of civil religion (as first described by Jean-Jacques Rousseau) based on deeply-rooted worship habits.

The institution of Hung Vuong day is the most visible expression of the state's investment in the cult of ancestors, though it is not the only one. All around Vietnam since the mid-1990s, commemoration events, statues of national heroes, and temples have been established by local authorities. This had been the case following the war, to commemorate the heroic acts of Vietnamese patriots against foreign invaders. But the new trend does not involve contemporary heroes linked to the revolution and wars of independence; it concerns ancient heroes, "ancestors" of the whole nation. Pilgrimages to such shrines or temples are generally called "tourist" trips (for instance around Dalat in the South or Tam Dao in the North), but they still consist of walking to a place of worship dedicated to local or national figures recognized for their contribution to the nation.

This appeal to ancient national history in a manner which is very similar to Vietnamese traditional cults, whether on a local scale with new symbolic places or on the national level with the institution of a public holiday, is another expression of an ideological shift on the part of the state. This reveals a search for new ways to strengthen national integration and unity, as the memories and prestige of the recent national struggles — the main source of legitimacy for the party-state — are fading away.

State Actors

The co-option of religious attitudes is still timid from the state, and tends to give shape to a kind of civil religion, though the co-option

of religious behaviours is much more visible and obvious when it stems from individual state actors, especially from cadres. Various studies have stressed this trend, especially in the North, where religious practices among state employees had literally disappeared (Monique Selim 2003; Nguyen Kim Hien 2008).

The religious revival observed across Vietnam has not ignored the state apparatus. Among other co-options of so-called religious behaviours, one can think of the very official use of state-appointed mediums to recover the bodies of fallen soldiers from the American War. Such mediums are hired by the families from lists established by the administration. Drawing on indications given by the families of fallen soldiers, war archives, and testimonies, they use their divination capacities to locate the wandering soul and then the body to which it is attached (Selim 2003). These souls obsess the families until the body of the missing has been offered a decent funeral.

Other more individual religious behaviours among cadres can be observed in worship places since the late 1990s. This trend mainly concerns traditional cults, revived in the 1990s, like the Treasure Goddess temple in the village of Co Me, which numerous cadres from the party and from the state attended until 2006 (Nguyen Kim Hien 2008). Though these cadres used their official cars to reach the village, their attendance was not overt, as demonstrated by their wish to hide their identity by concealing their number plates.⁴ The disapproval of the state became obvious when visits to this particular temple became strictly forbidden to state officers in 2006. Other traditional cults have experienced a revival among cadres in the North, especially the ones linked to economic success, which is the case of the Treasure Goddess, but also of Lieu Hanh (Selim 2003).

This trend cannot be accounted for as a co-option of these cults by the state itself, but at least it shows a loosening of the strict though unwritten rule which banned *any* religious expression by state employees, especially in the North. Until the early 1990s, it was very difficult (though not impossible) for a religious Vietnamese

citizen to get a state position. Those reaching such a position were strongly encouraged to remain atheist, making it difficult for religious civil servants to pursue a career. As the trends discussed above show — easily observable even to someone with infrequent contact with various cadres — this barrier has disappeared. Atheism is no longer even a tacit requirement; the party even opens its doors to religious members. This can be seen to be parallel to the recruitment of business people during the 1990s, in order to reflect all the components of a transforming society.

What does the complex redefinition of the relation between the party-state, its actors, and religions reveal, especially as it occurred during the last fifteen years? The upheavals described above are not the only ones during this period in Vietnam, as the country has experienced major socio-economic changes. The only constant which seems to remain from the 1980s is the strong will of the party-state to remain the only, unchallenged, and legitimate actor of political expression. The recent changes in religious policies though, especially the co-option of religious behaviours by the state and its agents, may be more significant, and reveal changes which reach far beyond the ideological shifts toward economics and religion.

A Religious Policy Stemming from Domestic Conditions

The new and deep interest that the party-state has shown for religious affairs since the 1990s was drawn from the religious revival which emerged in the early 1980s. Although official presentations generally emphasize the role of the party-state as a trendsetter, the religious revival among Vietnamese citizens came ahead of the ideological shift which occurred in the early 1990s inside the party. Therefore, the twenty-fourth resolution and religious policy changes which ensued should be seen as a reaction by the party-state to a new situation.

Besides, the perception of the party-state actions regarding religion as a response rather than as a breakthrough is confirmed by the decisions taken since the 1990s. The constitution of a wide and

increasingly complex legal framework for religious activities can be read in two apparently opposite but in fact complementary ways: first, the state is willing to keep a strong control over religious activities in order to avoid the development of any ideological agent which may challenge its legitimacy; second, it can no longer rely on the sole use of coercion or on its past legitimacy to maintain its monopoly over the public sphere, it has to cope with religious actors as emerging agents on the public stage.

The first approach emphasizes the strength of the party-state and its will — and power — to remain the only representative of general interest. The second one shows that the state has lost some degree of legitimacy, and that the inclusive socialist project is no longer sufficiently valid to make the socio-political environment meaningful for the people.

Both approaches are in fact valid. Still today, the party-state unquestionably remains the largest legitimate public actor in Vietnam, as it has managed to curb the constitution of any credible challenger. However, its legitimacy has dwindled and it cannot rely on its sole ideology and role in Vietnamese history to implement its agenda. The opening of Vietnamese society to private economy, then to foreign economic — and to a lesser extent cultural — influence has strongly challenged the socialist project born by the party-state.

For the State: Managing the Inevitable Opening of Vietnamese Society

Whilst this vision was supposed to encompass all socio-economic trends, the decision to take a pause in the implementation of a socialist society⁵ has inevitably challenged the credibility of the official discourse and ideology. Though the VCP had led the nation to independence and to reunification, its recognition of a kind of failure — a failure deeply felt by the population during the economic crisis of the early 1980s — raised the danger of doubt being cast on its legitimacy. Hence, in parallel to the cautious economic

liberalization since 1986, the party-state has had to both control the development of all non-state actors which may have challenged its legitimacy and adapt its reactions to the inevitable evolution of Vietnamese society towards a more open orientation, stemming from the reforms.

The renovation of the religious policy can hardly be dissociated from the wider political orientation of *doi moi*, a strategic choice for economic liberalization originally aiming at pulling Vietnam out of poverty and the economic crisis of the 1980s. Since its launch in 1986, the *doi moi* has been the subject of wide agreement among the Vietnamese political leadership, the only strong disagreements relating to the pace of the reform process. *Doi moi* involves economic liberalization measures, which progressively led to the creation of a fast-growing private economic sector and to a subsequent decrease of the weight of authority of the state. The economic success of the reforms is certain, but it has also inevitably come with the development of more and more autonomous activities, hence the development of spheres relatively independent from state control, a potential challenge for any structure wishing to keep a monopoly over politics.

One of the strongest points of agreement among the political leadership is certainly the fact that the VCP would not accept any challenge from any other political structure. So far, all attempts to create any political competitor to the VCP have been systematically thwarted by the authorities, in general at the very beginning of such attempts. However, influence from non-state actors has inevitably been provoked by the reform process. Coercive means have continuously been used to curb such influences, but the development of a vigorous religious revival may have been difficult to repress, as it was rather general and as it mainly stemmed from individuals or families, not from organized structures which could have been manipulated by hostile forces.

I argue this was a choice of the party-state; rather than facing a costly, ideological fight against a popular religious revival, it opted for a softer approach on religious issues. More than the ideological shift

of 1990, the deepening interest showed by authorities in religious issues, and even more the recent co-options of religious expressions by the state, show that the adoption of a strictly coercive, confrontational approach is more and more unlikely, and that using religious trends instead of curbing them is preferable, at least as long as such a use does not lead to a challenge of the party-state's leadership. Hence, the ideological redefinition of the role of religion and the legal control of religious activities, favoured over control by intimidation, give shape to a consistent method to manage the development of ideological structures. These structures, though potentially challenging, have to be accepted as a consequence of the loss of significance of the official party-state representations.

The Influence of the International Environment

The position of Vietnam on the international scene also undoubtedly played and still plays a role in the development of a law-based rather than repressive approach to religious activities. The implementation of *doi moi* policies coincided with a new diplomatic positioning of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam; with the collapse of European socialist states in the late 1980s, the main support of Vietnam on the international scene disappeared, making it more urgent to develop relations with non-socialist states.

The new orientation of Vietnamese diplomacy put the stress on the necessity to develop friendly relations with all powers, which included former foes like mainland China and the United States. It also included the deepening of the participation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in all international organizations, at a regional and international level. The choice for such an orientation mainly stems from the difficulties provoked by the relative international isolation Vietnam experienced during the 1980s, after its invasion of Cambodia. Though it is also linked to the desire of developing an export oriented, fast growing economy, and therefore aims at developing economic partnerships. Against this backdrop, the development of economic relations with the United States and the

European Union has been a strong axis of Vietnamese foreign policy. These relations had a string attached, though, especially in the case of the United States, due to the American tradition in foreign policy to promote freedom of speech and of faith.⁶ Vietnam has long been listed among the countries of particular concern regarding religious freedom by the American State Department, and is still under the "threat" of this list. This often disturbed bilateral negotiation on economic issues, and especially the ones related to World Trade Organization membership, a crucial step for the Vietnamese economy.

Though pressures from foreign powers may not have worked out the implementation of a new religious policy orientation by the Vietnamese party-state, they have certainly had an influence on the will of the government to soften its image on this particular issue, bolstering a softer approach on issues which may arise in bilateral discussions. Based on conversations I had with various officers and Vietnamese researchers, I argue that, among other evolutions linked to diplomatic positioning, the recent softening of the discourse on Protestantism among ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, once seen as a U.S.-supported attempt to develop anti-communist activities in the region, is a direct consequence of these American pressures. Though a change in the discourse does not necessarily reflect a policy change, it is certainly a step in the direction of a rapprochement in this case.

To a limited extent, religious policies, in fact essentially discourses on religion, have been redefined according to the new international environment. Whilst religious issues had no influence on the international positioning of socialist Vietnam during the Cold War, it has become one of the bones of contention in Vietnam's relations with some of its main economic partners — who are also some of its main providers of foreign aid. Though the measures taken in this frame may have a minor impact compared to the weight of the domestic situation, they still play a perceptible role in the redefinition of the religious policy in Vietnam. One can

then consider the reshuffling of the international environment as a factor in the redefinition of the relationship between the state and religion.

Conclusion

The adoption of some religious behaviours by agents of the party-state, as well as the deeper interest showed by the party-state apparatus for religious activities against a backdrop of national and international integration, emphasizes the wider interactions between politics and religion in *doi moi* Vietnam.

Borrowing the terminology developed by Patrick Michel (2001), initially developed in European socialist countries, the redefinition of the relationships between the state and its agents on the one hand and religious practices and organizations on the other hand appear both as an indicator of (*indicateur*) and a method to manage (*mode de gestion*) the redefinition of the role of the party-state in an ever reshuffling national and international environment. An indicator, as it reveals that the total official ideology which prevailed until the early 1990s is no longer sufficient to ensure the party-state's legitimacy as the holder of political expression in the public sphere. And a method to manage this redefinition: Firstly, from the point of view of individuals in the sense that the expression of religious beliefs, especially among cadres, reveals the loss of significance of the political project and the subsequent need to find significance in other realms in order to cope with the "new" world; significantly, religion is "used" by these people to address change. Secondly, from the point of view of the party-state, as both the usage of religious references and the constitution of a legal framework are tools to adapt to an ever more uncertain national environment in a context of international integration.

As a consequence, the shifts observed in the relations between the party-state and Vietnamese religions and beliefs can be seen as a strong indication of the ideological orientation of the party-state, and especially on its confidence in facing potential ideological challengers, whether they be direct political competitors or not.

NOTES

1. The *doi moi* is a long-term renovation process that had the initial aim of pulling the country out of the economic crisis it experienced in the 1980s. After the fall of European communism, the main support of socialist Vietnam after 1975, this process was rapidly extended to all realms of social life, and is still the ideological frame of all current political reforms.
2. To date, more than thirty religious organizations have been registered by the Bureau of Religious Affairs, with some religious trends being represented by more than one organization.
3. Mass demonstrations (on the first Sunday of October, which was the last weekend of the demonstration near the cathedral, 10,000 people allegedly showed up) took place in Thai Ha (Dong Da district) and near the cathedral (Hoan Kiem district) in Hanoi from August to October 2008. In both places, claims regarding land disputes were aimed at the local authorities by strongly-motivated Catholics, who were supported if not guided by their religious authorities. Comments on Vietnamese blogs and forums or in articles on the Vietnamese version of the BBC website often emphasized the lack of patriotism of Vietnamese Catholics and the fact that Catholicism is an “imported religion”.
4. Vietnamese state cars display a coloured number plate (red for the army, blue for other state corps), which makes them very easy to identify, as all other number plates are white.
5. Though since 1990 the development of a strong private sector has never been seriously challenged within the party, the official ideology remains socialism, the current agenda being officially considered as a step toward a genuine socialist society.
6. Although this is less direct and visible, the European Union also regularly puts pressure on Vietnamese authorities regarding human rights issues, including religious freedom.

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