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Georg Evers
**Human Rights
in the Socialist
Republic of Vietnam
– Religious Freedom**



The Human Rights Office aims to promote awareness of the human rights situation in Africa, Asia and Oceania. In pursuit of this objective we are actively involved in human rights networking and foster exchanges between **missio's** church partners in Africa, Asia and Oceania and church and political decision-makers in the Federal Republic of Germany. This *Human Rights* series comprises country-by-country studies, thematic studies and the proceedings of specialist conferences.

This study on **Human Rights in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam – Religious Freedom** examines the historical development and present state of religious freedom in Vietnam with a special focus on the situation of the Catholic Church in the country. Vietnam attracted international public attention over a lengthy period, initially during the struggle for independence from French colonial rule (1945-54) and later during the civil war between North Vietnam and South Vietnam, which was backed by the United States (1961-75). The Vietnam War was an emotional issue not just in the USA, but also in Europe and large parts of Asia and it brought about a change in political awareness. Following reunification of the country in 1976, the frequently tragic fate of thousands of boat people initially generated worldwide sympathy and a willingness to help. In view of the large numbers of Vietnamese seeking a new home in neighbouring Asian countries, the USA, Europe and Australia, the authorities in the potential recipient countries began introducing increasingly restrictive measures to stem the tide of refugees. In recent years not much has been heard about Vietnam. However, the Communist Party still asserts its entitlement to unrestricted political and ideological leadership of the country, which it justifies on the basis of its achievements in the struggle for reunification. Following the collapse of the Communist governments in the former USSR and the other eastern European states in the late 1980s, the regime in Vietnam is now under increasing pressure to defend its ideological leadership against potential rivals. The assertion of its entitlement to rule regularly infringes the fundamental human rights to freedom of speech, freedom of political activity and, last but not least, religious freedom.

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General information on the Socialist Republic of Vietnam¹

Name of country	Socialist Republic of Vietnam (Cộng-hoà Xã-hội Chủ-nghĩa Việt-Nam)
Area	331,114 sq. km.
Population	79,515,000 (1999) ²
Inhabitants	87% Vietnamese, 2% Chinese, over 60 ethnic minorities: Khmer, Cham, Hmong, Muong, Nung, Jarai, Ede, Sedang, Bahnar, Thai, etc.
Population growth rate	1.8% (1990-1999) according to official government statistics; 2.4% according to data provided by the <i>Economic and Social Committee for Asia-Pacific</i> in Bangkok.
Life expectancy	68 years (1998)
Languages	Vietnamese (80%), Chinese, tribal languages, French and English
Form of government	Socialist Republic since 1980; administrative division into seven regions, 50 provinces and three urban districts
Supreme constitutional body	National Assembly with 400 members elected for a five-year term.
Head of state	Trần Duc Luong (since 25 September 1997)
Head of government	Phan Van Khai (since 25 September 1997)
Religions	55% Buddhists, 7% Catholics ³ , 0.6% Protestants, 1,5% Cao Dai, 1.2% Hoa Hao, 0.5% Muslims, Taoists and Confucians, for whom there are no precise statistics. Reliable figures on religious affiliation are generally difficult to obtain and vary considerably depending on the source.

Human Rights in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam – Religious Freedom

The political situation after reunification

Political restructuring issues after reunification

After reunification in 1976 the country was renamed the *Socialist Republic of Vietnam* and the *Vietnamese Workers' Party* subsequently called itself the Communist Party of Vietnam. The *dictatorship of the proletariat* and the *fight against international capitalism* were enshrined in the constitution of reunited Vietnam in 1980 as objectives to be pursued by the state. The policy of the party and hence of the Vietnamese government is officially based on *Marxism-Leninism and the ideas of Hồ Chí Minh*. Article 4 of the constitution makes clear reference to the Communist Party's monopoly of power: *The Communist Party of Vietnam, the vanguard of the Vietnamese working class, the faithful representative of the rights and interests of the working class, the toiling people, and the whole nation, acting upon the Marxist-Leninist doctrine and Hồ Chí Minh's thought, is the force leading the State and society.*⁴ The constitutionally guaranteed power of the Communist Party is based on a policy of three no's: 1. the rejection of a pluralism of views, 2. the refusal to authorise several political parties and 3. the rejection of Western-style democracy.

After reunification in 1976 power was almost exclusively in the hands of the Communist cadres from North Vietnam and they alone determined the policy of "democratic centralism" pursued by the Provisional Revolutionary Government. Even the forces who had fought for the reunification of the country with the *National Liberation Front* (NLF) in the former South Vietnam received little acknowledgement of their efforts and to all intents and purposes were excluded from deliberations on the new start the country was to make. The radical collectivisation of agriculture and the seamless transfer to the South of the North's socialist planned economy after reunification produced major economic problems, hunger and chronic shortages of food between 1979 and 1988.

The military invasion of Cambodia by the Vietnamese army in December 1978 ended Pol Pot's reign of terror but imposed a huge burden on the Vietnamese economy. Moreover, the Chinese People's Liberation Army attacked the north of Vietnam in March 1979 to "punish" the Vietnamese for their policy of aggression towards Cambodia. Confronted with political repression, a disastrous economic situation and the resulting lack of prospects, thousands of Vietnamese

opted to leave the country in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The refugee movement was triggered by government measures taken in the spring of 1978, which banned private trading in South Vietnam and were quickly followed by a currency reform. These measures, which were primarily aimed at depriving Chinese traders and businessmen of their economic existence, were the main reason for the mass exodus of the “boat people”, as they came to be called. It is estimated that between 900,000 and one million Vietnamese boat people left the country between 1975 and 1990. Most of them were members of the Chinese minority who had been the strongest force in business and commerce in South Vietnam and were deprived of their livelihood by the government’s restrictive economic measures. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 30% of the boat people lost their lives at sea as a result of storms, shipwrecks and piracy. The exodus of the boat people and thousands of other legal emigrants robbed the country of urgently needed specialists in all fields - traders, intellectuals and artists as well as other people crucial to the reconstruction of the country. Some 500,000 refugees were Chinese, most of whom could trace the presence of their ancestors in Vietnam over several generations. In addition to the boat people some 250,000 Vietnamese were sent to the fraternal socialist countries – the USSR, the GDR and other eastern European countries – as migrant labourers to enable Vietnam to pay off part of its foreign currency debt or to acquire foreign exchange.

Ideological crisis of the Communist Party

At the 1996 Party Congress, a leading Communist described the plight of the Communist Party of Vietnam as follows: *The Party is like a big chest. It looks quite impressive from the outside. It gives off a pleasant sound if you happen to run into it. But when you open it you find it is empty inside.* The Communist Party of Vietnam is in the throes of an ideological crisis. It suffers from an internal split, many of its officials have proved to be corrupt, it is not prepared to concede that it has made mistakes in the past and it has no charismatic leaders.⁵ The constantly repeated justification for the Communist Party’s assertion of power is: We won the war. But that has less and less appeal to the younger generation, who have no recollection of the heroic struggle that was waged. This has forced the party to devise a different legitimisation for its ongoing autocratic rule. Hence it now stresses that it alone can ensure implementation of the programme of economic revival and thus a future for the country free of disturbances and inner turmoil.

This argument is barely credible in the light of the disastrous errors made in agriculture, in particular, and the general development of the country as a whole.

The party and government programme of *Industrialisation and Modernisation* is unlikely to inspire participation. The cautious attempts to introduce reform within the party and thus among the political leadership, too, are regularly halted by the old cadres, who are afraid of losing their sinecures. At the 8th Party Congress in 1995 the then Prime Minister, Vo Van Kiet, called for recognition of the independence of the laws of the market, which should not be contradicted by ideological instructions issued by the party. The rule of law should be introduced in Vietnam, he said, and it should be respected by the state and the party so that domestic and foreign companies may rest assured that their investments are safe. Leading officials should be appointed in recognition of their abilities and not because of their party allegiance. Slogans, such as *democratic centralism* and the *dictatorship of the proletariat*, were outdated. While Vo Van Kiet stressed his ongoing allegiance to *socialism* as the ruling ideology, his proposals suggest the contrary. At best they can be seen as a plea for Vietnamese nationalism. In terms of content, the Communist Party has long since lost the battle for ideological leadership of the country. Pure Marxism-Leninism enriched with national ingredients in the form of *Hô Chi Minh’s ideas* no longer have any appeal to the young generation. The party continues to observe commemoration days combined with mass rallies, but these have now taken on the form of ritual exercises. The last remaining argument for the party’s claim to power, which is repeated time and again, is a picture of potential chaos in the country similar to that which followed the sudden collapse of the former Eastern bloc countries should there be a change in the balance of power in Vietnam. In the long term this is unlikely to prove a reliable foundation for the party’s retention of power in the light of the major social, economic and thus, inevitably, the political changes taking place in Vietnam⁶. At the 9th Party Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in April 2001, Nong Duc Manh, the former President of the National Assembly, was elected to succeed Le Kha Phieu as General Secretary of the Communist Party. This election was generally taken as a sign that the programme of economic renewal will be continued and that the ideological hardliners failed to assert their position.

The current political and economic situation

Together with the People’s Republic of China the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is one of the last bastions of the former socialist camp in Asia. After reunification in 1976 Vietnam’s foreign policy was for a long time directed unilaterally towards co-operation with the USSR and the Comecon countries of eastern Europe. Following the collapse of socialism in eastern Europe and the demise of the USSR in 1989 Vietnam spent a long period in political and economic isola-

tion. After the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978 and the subsequent punitive expedition into North Vietnam by the Chinese People's Army in the spring of 1979 relations between the two countries were at a very low ebb. The Vietnamese troops pulled out of Cambodia in September 1989, but relations between China and Vietnam are marked by mutual mistrust to this very day. They concluded a treaty in December 2001 resolving most of the contentious issues between them, but the issue of sovereignty over the Spratley Islands was bracketed off, since not only the People's Republic of China and Vietnam, but also Indonesia and the Philippines lay claim to them in view of the suspected oil deposits there. It was only after being admitted to the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in July 1995 that Vietnam succeeded in improving relations with its immediate neighbours in South-East Asia. The complex and burdensome chapter of the Vietnam War was finally closed in 1995 following the resumption of diplomatic relations with the USA, which was preceded by the ending of the trade embargo by the USA in 1994.

The ground for these developments had been laid by far-reaching changes in Vietnam's economic policy. Given the disastrous economic and supply situation, the Communist Party had been forced to introduce radical economic changes at the 6th Party Congress in 1986. The renunciation of the socialist planned economy and the incorporation of many elements of a market economy were designed to boost agricultural and industrial production. The steps taken by the government included a far-reaching decontrol of prices, the disbanding of agricultural co-operatives, the authorisation of individual use of the land for agricultural purposes and permission to set up private and family-run companies. The new economic policy saw private initiative as being the engine of the economy and it initially led to economic growth and a strengthening of the private sector.⁷ One indication of this early success was that Vietnam succeeded from the early 1990s onwards in once more producing enough rice to make it the world's third largest exporter after the USA and Thailand. One side-effect of the new economic arrangements, which has left its mark on the social climate in Vietnam right up to the present day, is the huge leap in income differentials. This has led to tensions in society that have been aggravated by corruption, which has spread like a cancerous growth throughout the administration and the economy. The fight against bribery and corruption tops the Vietnamese government's list of priorities, but since the government and party apparatus is itself infected by the virus the measures that might have a practical impact actually achieve very little. The surviving veterans from the ranks of the Vietcong, whose battle against the Americans often left them handicapped for life, are filled with bitterness when they see leading party officials and their sons and daughters living

a life of luxury at the expense of the general public, whereas there is no money to pay the pensions that would ensure the veterans a reasonably decent life.⁸ In the economic pages of the international press Vietnam is listed among the countries that suffer most from corruption. The image of a thoroughly corrupt country has naturally had a very negative impact on the willingness of foreign companies to invest. Exacerbating the situation is the excessive red tape that turns every transaction into a long march from one department to the next.

The Communist Party's assertion of its entitlement to monopoly rule

Despite the far-reaching changes in its economic policy the Communist Party of Vietnam still clings steadfastly to its monopoly of political leadership in all fields that is euphemistically termed "democratic centralism". The Communist Party bases its claim to ideological supremacy on its victory in the battle to reunite the country, which it brought to a successful conclusion in 1975 by inflicting defeat on the USA and its allied regime in South Vietnam. 25 years after this historical event the claim to sole leadership strikes most Vietnamese, 60% of whom were born after 1975, as being less and less plausible. The old Communist Party cadres, who still call the tune in the Politburo and the other political bodies in the country, give the impression of being fossils from a long-gone past. The response to the rhetoric of class struggle and slogans calling for the construction of a socialist society is virtually nil. The lifestyle and conduct of the vast majority of the population reflect the economic changes: the longer they continue, the fewer "socialist" traits they have.

The many bribery scandals involving Communist Party officials at all levels also undermine the credibility of the political rulers. The party and government have responded by tightening up controls to halt the disintegration of political and ideological power and strengthen their command over the political apparatus. When the economic reform movement was launched in December 1986, there were people in the Communist Party who were willing to contemplate ideological changes that would lead to a fundamental reform not only of the economy, but also of the country's policy as a whole. However, the hardliners soon crushed the zeal of the reformers within the party, who were either forced into the background, imprisoned or sent to labour camps. The cautious attempts at political liberalisation were quickly shelved in 1989 following the collapse of the USSR and "real socialism" in the other countries of eastern Europe. The governments in Vietnam and the People's Republic of China were far too concerned that the spark of democratisation might set their own countries alight and bring about the downfall of their regimes.

The Catholic Church in Vietnam from the end of the colonial period to reunification (1945-1976)

The role of the Catholic Church in the struggle for national independence (1941-45)

During the Pacific War (1941-45) the Catholic Church in Vietnam supported the resistance against Japanese occupation. After the French reasserted their claim to colonial rule over Vietnam following the defeat of the Japanese in 1945, many Vietnamese Catholics joined the fight for independence against the French colonial administration, but in the eyes of their fellow-countrymen they were unable to shake off the negative image they had of not being proper patriots. They were still tainted from colonial times with being members of a “foreign religion”, traitors to their country and “vassals of the French”. When Hồ Chi Minh, the leader of the League for Independence (*Viet Minh*) that he had founded in 1941, proclaimed Vietnam’s independence on 2 September 1945 in Hanoi, his government enjoyed the support of the large majority of Catholics. Initially, relations and co-operation with Hồ Chi Minh’s government were for the most part unclouded. The national enthusiasm at the gaining of independence was shared by all sections of the Vietnamese population, including the Catholics. The Communist Party of Vietnam played the national card and carefully concealed its real objective, which was to achieve political and ideological supremacy.

When the French, led by General LeClerc, set about restoring colonial rule in November 1945, the Vietnamese Bishops sent a letter to Christians all over the world urging them to support the Vietnamese people in their struggle to preserve their independence. Hồ Chi Minh likewise sought co-operation with the Vietnamese Catholics, whose high level of education enabled them to play a major role in the construction of the new state.⁹ 1950 saw the establishment in North Vietnam of the *Unified Catholics Committee*, which brought together priests and lay people co-operating with the liberation movement under Hồ Chi Minh in its struggle against the French. At this time the majority of Catholics were on the side of the forces fighting for Vietnam’s independence from France.

In the early 1950s, the domestic climate in Vietnam changed dramatically because the real intentions of the Viet Minh government, which were to make Communism the state ideology and the sole determining force in the country, began to shine through.¹⁰ The way in which the Communists eliminated the other patriotic forces in order to take over control on their own meant that many Catho-

lics started to see French colonial rule as the lesser of two evils and so they withdrew from the resistance struggle. In November 1951, the Vietnamese Bishops’ Conference issued a statement reiterating the pontifical guidelines, which stipulated that Catholics were forbidden to join the Communist Party or to cooperate with it. The Communist government responded by taking repressive measures against the Catholic Church. These included the expropriation of schools, hospitals and other Church institutions, the imposition of punitive taxes and the toleration of acts of violence against individuals and Church property.

The Catholic Church in divided Vietnam (1954-1975)

The Viet Minh government’s battle with the French colonial power for control of the country was waged with increasing intensity between 1949 and 1954. The military struggle ended with the fall of the fiercely contested fortress at Dien Bien Phu on 7 May 1954, thus marking a spectacular defeat for the French and a victory for the Viet Minh that attracted considerable attention in the so-called Third World. On 21 July 1954 a ceasefire was agreed in Geneva that divided Vietnam at latitude 17° N into North Vietnam and South Vietnam. The population had a period of 300 days up to the cut-off date on 20 July 1955 to decide whether they wished to remain in the north or the south of the country respectively. In 1954, Vietnam had a population of 23 million, who were divided almost equally between the two halves of the country. The freedom of movement agreed at the Geneva Conference led for the most part to a wave of emigration from the North to the South. 860,000 Vietnamese from the North, including some 650,000 Catholics alone, i.e. around 40% of the Catholics and over 70% of the priests in North Vietnam, decided to emigrate to the South to escape Communist rule. The efforts made by Hồ Chi Minh’s government to persuade the Catholics in the North that they would be granted full religious freedom were not enough to prevent the exodus of the vast majority of Catholics to the South. Having failed to gain the trust of the Catholics, the Communist government in the North began taking tough measures against the organisers of the migration, who were persecuted, arrested and in a number of cases executed.¹¹

The Catholic Church in North Vietnam (1954-1975)

The 650,000 Catholics from North Vietnam, who opted in 1954 for a life in South Vietnam, constituted two-thirds of the Catholics living there. Of the 1,127 priests engaged in pastoral care in the North only 300 – many of them old and infirm – remained. The huge drain of members and priests of the Catholic

Church appeared to threaten its continued existence in North Vietnam, where membership shrank from one million to 300,000. Making the situation even more difficult was the issuing by the Communist government of a series of orders and regulations that systematically hindered the training of new priests. The acceptance of new candidates and the ordination of the seminarists following the completion of their studies required the approval of the government and the Communist Party, for instance. Many prospective seminarists were deliberately called up for extended periods of military service or prevented by other forms of harassment from beginning or continuing their studies. The Communist government treated Catholics as ideological opponents, since many Catholics had documented their opposition to the ruling regime in North Vietnam in unmistakable terms by leaving for the South.

In June 1955, the North Vietnamese government issued a religious decree guaranteeing religious freedom, but making the exercise of this freedom dependent upon many conditions and restrictive regulations. The decree states the following on religious freedom: "Every citizen is granted religious freedom. Nobody has the right to infringe this freedom. Every citizen has the right to profess and propagate any religion he wishes, provided such religion is not detrimental to the independence, national freedom, social order and laws of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam"¹². Article 14 refers not only to the right to free practice of religion, but also makes specific mention of the duties of the ministers of the religion in the exercise of their religious office: "When the worshipping ministers of the religion preach, they are obliged to inspire in the faithful a sense of patriotism, an awareness of their civic duties and respect for the democratic authorities and the laws of the People's Republic." Special regulations on financial support for priests and the upkeep of places of worship were included in the law on agricultural reform. While this law provided for the confiscation of land and property, the churches, pagodas and other places of worship were allowed to keep some of their fields to cover the costs of maintenance (Article 10 of the Law on Religion).

Although freedom of religion was written into the constitution, everyday religious life in North Vietnam was marked by a series of restrictive orders. The mobility of priests was severely limited, which made it impossible for them to visit sick or dying patients outside the main parish area. Priests were banned from entering hospitals because the performance of religious ritual acts was strictly confined to the interiors of churches. Priests were not allowed to preach the Gospel to outsiders because the "influencing of the way other people think" that went with it might lead to a disruption of peace, unity and internal security.

A report issued in 1965, i.e. ten years after the decree on religious freedom, painted a bleak picture of the situation the Church faced in North Vietnam. It

said that the government had confiscated Church property, banned the religious press and nationalised all Church schools. Religious instruction for adolescents was only possible in Church rooms. Frequent disturbances of Church services by youth gangs were tolerated by the security forces and went unpunished.¹³ Several of the 12 bishoprics in North Vietnam had been deprived of a bishop for years because new appointments to vacant positions were postponed or rejected by the religious authorities. Illness forced the Papal delegate, John Dooley, to leave the country and his deputy, Terence O'Driscoll, was expelled from North Vietnam on 17 August 1959. In 1955, the party and government of North Vietnam followed in the footsteps of the People's Republic of China in attempting to set up a *National Union of Patriotic and Peace-Loving Catholics*, but their efforts were to little avail. North Vietnam's bishops countered this attempt to break the inner unity of the Church by forbidding priests and believers to join the *Catholic Liaison Committee*. It was all too obvious that the government's motive in setting up this movement was to split the Catholic Church and, above all, to weaken ties between the Catholics in North Vietnam and the Pope in Rome. The bishops' clear and unmistakable rejection of this committee was instrumental in ensuring that the few priests and Catholic people who nevertheless joined it were largely isolated within the Church. The small minority of priests and believers who retained their membership of the *Liaison Committee* were regarded by the Communist leadership as the official representatives of the Vietnamese Catholics vis-à-vis the state.

During the 1960s and 70s the links between the Catholic Church in North Vietnam and the outside world were severely limited and almost non-existent. None of the bishops in North Vietnam was allowed to participate in the discussions of Vatican Council II (1962-1965). For a long time afterwards it was impossible for the decrees of the council to be published and its decisions implemented in North Vietnam. The Vietnam War dominated the international news, the coverage reflecting mainly the South Vietnamese point of view. There were virtually no reports on the life of the Church and Catholics in North Vietnam. Contacts between the Church and the outside world were maintained solely by *Cari-tas Internationalis*, whose President, Prelate Georg Hüßler, was able to visit the country on several occasions. Misereor, the German Catholic Bishops' Organisation for Development Co-operation, also kept up contacts in Vietnam at this time and succeeded in providing humanitarian aid. Shortly before reunification the then Suffragan Bishop of Hanoi, Trinh van Can, was allowed to take part in the synod of bishops in Rome.¹⁴ On the other hand, the government refused to allow the North Vietnamese Bishops' Conference to become a member of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) founded in 1970.

The Catholic Church in South Vietnam (1954-1975)

The division of the country after the Geneva Conference of 1954 was a major turning point in the history of both the country and the Catholic Church. The flight from the north of 650,000 Catholics wishing to escape Communist rule meant that the ranks of the Catholic Church in the south of the country, where the population numbered 11 million, suddenly swelled to 1.4 million. The election of a Catholic, Ngo Dinh Diem, as Prime Minister (1955-1963), made Catholics the leading political force in the country.¹⁵ Although they only constituted around 7% of the South Vietnamese population prior to immigration from the north, their occupation of prominent political and military positions in the country was disproportionate to that figure. In 1960, 66% of the Senators were Catholics, as were 30% of the Members of Parliament and 21% of the high-ranking officers; Catholics also occupied all the key portfolios in the cabinet. Together with his brother, Cardinal Ngo Dinh Thuc in Hue, Ngo Dinh Diem adopted a tough anti-Communist stance. The policy pursued by Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic, who had no qualms about the methods he used to preserve his power, tarnished the reputation of the Catholic Church in Vietnam and cast a shadow over relations with the Buddhists, in particular, for a long time. President Diem's personal integrity stood in stark contrast to his obsession with power and his unscrupulousness in preserving it. The close ties he maintained with his family, who occupied important positions in the government apparatus and used their access to power to engage in corruption and manipulation, ultimately undermined the credibility of the entire government. The violent overthrow of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in November 1963 was, therefore, welcomed by the majority of the population in South Vietnam.

The period from 1954 to 1969 saw a major expansion of the Catholic-maintained school system. Whereas there were just three lower and upper secondary schools in 1953, that figure had risen to 226 schools with 82,827 Catholic and 70,101 non-Catholic pupils by 1969. The Catholic primary school system was also greatly extended and numbered 1,030 schools in 1969. Catholic universities were established in Saigon, Da Lat and Hue. The Catholics' active role in the health service and charitable organisations gave them an excellent reputation in the country. The South Vietnamese bishops took an active part in Vatican Council II (1962-65). The council's decisions on the reform of the liturgy, the training of priests, the attitude to other religions as well as the Pastoral Constitution and many other suggestions for reform that emerged from the council were implemented relatively quickly in South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese Bishops' Conference was one of the founding members of the *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences* (FABC) in 1970.

Outlines of religious policy in Vietnam after 1975

Marxist-Leninist critique of religion as the basis for religious policy

As in other Communist countries past and present, the religious policy of the Communist Party and government in Vietnam is based on the Marxist-Leninist critique of religion. According to this critique, religion became an *opium* for the people under certain social conditions that involved oppression and the exploitation of the proletariat. Religions and the illusory consolation they offered of a paradise to come were temporarily able to alleviate their sufferings. From the point of view of *scientific atheism*, however, religions would die out and disappear after the construction of a socialist society. Until that was the case, it was necessary and meaningful for them to be incorporated as far as possible in the work of constructing a socialist society, for which an appropriate religious policy was needed. Ironically, the religions would thus be helping to create the conditions for their own decline.

In Vietnam the negative attitude to religions is made worse by the fact that the Vietnamese Communists have always regarded them as being the allies of their enemies and thus as the friends of the "reactionary forces of capitalism", which work together with other enemies to topple the existing socialist regime. For years the Vietnamese Communists have pursued a rigorous anti-religious policy. Anti-religious texts are to be found not just in the official proclamations of the party and government. The negative view of religions as forces of pretence, deception and hypocrisy is also to be found in art and especially in literature, where priests and Catholic believers are portrayed as people who merely feign their religious convictions and attitudes and are not genuinely convinced of them.

The negative attitude of the Communist Party and the government of Vietnam is reflected in many theoretical works on questions of religious policy written both before and after reunification in 1976.¹⁶ Three attitudes / instructions on the wording to be used in respect of religion can be distinguished. On the one hand, there is the *language of tolerance* or *open arms approach*, which is used in meetings between representatives of the party and state and representatives of the religions. This invokes the ideal of a "United Front", in which all the "patriotic" forces join ranks to build a new liberated Vietnam. The same ideology underlies the efforts to set up a *Unifying Committee of Patriotic Catholics*, the basic idea of which is that Marxists and Christians should work together in everyday life. Theoretical discussions and dialogues between Marxists and Christians are rejected because this would not be conducive to their joint activities.

A different language is to be found in the official wording of laws dealing with the practice of religion. Decree 296 of 11 November 1977 states with regard to the objective of religious policy that it is essential to “*guarantee freedom of worship while preventing all anti-revolutionary forces from misusing religion to erect obstacles to the construction of socialism*”. The 1977 decree on religion states in respect of religious freedom that “*All religions and all the activities they undertake are subject to the constitution, the laws and religious policy*”. Article 68 of the 1980 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam says that “*Citizens enjoy the freedom to worship, the freedom to profess a religion or not. No-one may use religion to contravene the law or to oppose the policy of the Government*”. Article 38 of the same constitution states with regard to real power in the state that “*Marxism-Leninism determines the development of society*”. The government of Vietnam officially recognises six religions: Buddhism, Catholicism, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, Islam and Protestantism. A number of groups, such as the *Unified Buddhist Church*¹⁷, and parts of the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao and the Protestants do not work in the government-recognised organisations.

The Catholic Church and religious freedom after 1975

After the reunification of Vietnam in 1976 relations between the Catholic Church and the Communist Party were very strained as a result of the earlier anti-Communist attitude of the Catholics in South Vietnam. There were several trials of priests and Catholic lay people, in which one of the repeated charges was that they themselves or a large number of Catholics, at least, had documented their fundamental opposition to Communism-Socialism by fleeing from North to South Vietnam. After 1975, many of the former refugees were held for years in re-education camps, where the harsh living conditions meant that they either died of hunger and disease or suffered lasting damage to their health. Catholic-run schools, student hostels, orphanages and hospitals were expropriated and nationalised. The Papal nuncio, Archbishop Henri Lemaître, and the foreign missionaries were expelled from the country. For years the many priests, members of religious orders and Catholic lay people were joined in the re-education camps by over 200,000 former members of the South Vietnamese army, police and government machinery as well as by many intellectuals, doctors and artists.

Religious life developed in very different ways in North and South Vietnam. Up to 1975, the Church in South Vietnam had implemented the major changes introduced by Vatican Council II and played a key role in the *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences* (FABC). After reunification, the external contacts of the Vietnamese Church, which had merged in 1980 to form the national Vietnamese

Bishops' Conference, were greatly reduced. Co-operation between the Asian churches was very badly affected. However, the contacts between the bishops and the Pope, such as the five-yearly *ad limina* visits by the bishops to Rome, were approved of in principle by the Vietnamese government.¹⁸ After 1980, the Vietnamese bishops were able to make the regular *ad limina* visits to Rome and participate in the meetings of the synod of bishops. The situation was different, however, as regards collaboration with the *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences* (FABC), the Vietnamese bishops not being allowed to attend its meetings for several years.¹⁹

Despite a series of negative experiences in the early stages, the Vietnamese bishops attempted to express the willingness of the Catholic Church to make a positive contribution to the reconstruction of the reunited Vietnamese nation in the context of a socialist society and to become actively involved in education, health care, culture and social communication. In July 1976, the Vietnamese bishops had distributed a remarkably open pastoral letter to the faithful, which was designed to give them guidance for their lives under Communist rule. Believers were called upon to be of service to the fatherland and the construction of a new Vietnamese society in respect of everyday activities which they could reconcile with their faith and their conscience. Archbishop Paul Ngyuen Van Binh of Saigon, the Chairman of the Bishops' Conference at the time, made great efforts to find a *modus vivendi* with the Communist regime. While he went too far for many of his critics, they were unable to accuse him of violating fundamental principles of his faith or morality.

From 24 April to 1 May 1980, the Vietnamese bishops were able to hold a general assembly in Hanoi for the first time since 1952.²⁰ In a joint pastoral letter the bishops strongly urged that a settlement be reached with the Communist government.²¹ In this pastoral letter the Vietnamese bishops stressed a) that the Catholic Church wished to work together with all Vietnamese to build up and defend the state and b) that it wished to build a Church that would be orientated towards the country's traditions in everyday life and in the manner in which the faith would be professed. In an internal paper of the Communist Party of Vietnam dating from 1982 the aims of religious policy as regards the country's Catholic Church were described in clear terms.²² The aim was to transform the Catholic Church from an *instrument of imperialism and anti-communism* into a *religion in the service of the state*, which would be “*patriotic*” and “*close to socialism*”. In the case of the Catholic Church the party and government should aim to “*build up an independent Church that would be free of any external dependence*”. The party should apply a policy of “*divide et impera*” in an attempt to exploit differences between progressives, the undecided and opponents of the Communist Party

within the Catholic Church. Essentially it was a matter of ensuring that “*progressive forces*” should be appointed as priests and bishops. It was recommended that the tactical approach to be adopted towards the churches should be to develop a polite and cordial relationship that would avoid any unnecessary hardships.

The role of the Protestant Churches

The first Protestant missionaries arrived in Vietnam in 1911. Most of them came from the USA and were members of the traditional Puritan *Christian and Missionary Alliance* (CMA), who mostly worked among the mountain peoples in the central highlands. Following the division of the country into North and South Vietnam in 1954, the majority of the Protestant faithful resettled in the South, which meant that the *Evangelical Church in Vietnam* was also split in two. Only 11 pastors and preachers remained behind in the North with just a few thousand faithful. The Evangelical Church of North Vietnam was given legal recognition by the Communist authorities in North Vietnam in 1958. Meanwhile, the Evangelical Church in South Vietnam was able to develop unhindered during the twenty years of civil war (1954-1975). It maintained several Bible schools in various provinces and established a Biblical Theological School in Nha Trang in 1968. After reunification the Protestant Churches and communities suffered harsher treatment than the Catholics.²³ The reasons for the persecution of the Protestants was that the Evangelical Church of South Vietnam was accused by the Communist government of having had very close ties with the USA and of, therefore, being unreliable in patriotic terms. Hence it has never been officially recognised by the government. At the time of reunification in 1976 there were some 150,000 Protestants in Vietnam, two-thirds of whom belonged to the various ethnic minorities, above all the Hmong. 300 of their churches were destroyed or confiscated, while the training centres for pastors in Nha Trang, Ban Ma Thuot and Da Lat were closed down and many pastors were arrested or interned. Attempts to set up a new training centre for pastors and church workers were obstructed for a long time by the authorities. However, attempts were made to introduce distance learning for theology as a form of provisional theological training at least.

Despite these restrictions the number of Protestants has grown steadily since the launching of the reform policy in the 1980s. Now estimated to number 800,000, they generally meet in house churches, whose numbers are put at around 3,500.²⁴ 1976 was the last year in which the Protestants were able to hold a national assembly. However, there was no further attempt at co-ordinated national co-operation in the period up to 2001. The lack of a national organisation

hampered efforts to normalise relations with state organisations for a long time. Attempts to achieve recognition by the state were difficult, because the Protestant missionaries, who had succeeded in converting large numbers of people among the ethnic minorities in the mountain regions, were suspected by the government of actively supporting the efforts of these groups to achieve autonomy.²⁵ Hence, at a reception for a delegation of Protestant pastors in Hanoi at Christmas 2001, the Dean of the National Assembly, Nguyen Van An, urged the representatives of the Protestant Church to eliminate the bad elements in their congregations who were misusing the Protestant religion as an excuse to break away. There were many reports in 2001 and early 2002 of unrest and armed conflicts between members of the ethnic minorities and Vietnamese authorities and soldiers. The authorities frequently blame the Protestant missionaries for the autonomy movements among the ethnic minorities. Many pastors have been arrested or expelled from the mountain provinces. Protestant believers from among the minorities have been forced under duress and probably torture into renouncing their faith and returning to the religious practices of their traditional faiths.

Despite its reservations, the government allowed a congress of Protestants to be held in South Vietnam in February 2001 at which delegates from several hundred Protestant churches were represented.

In April 2001, the establishment of the *Evangelical Church of South Vietnam* was recognised by the National Office of Religious Affairs, and the Protestant congregations represented in them were given the status of a recognised religious community. The government also allowed a theological seminary for the training of pastors to be opened in Nha Trang.²⁶ On the one hand, the establishment of the pro-government *Evangelical Church of Vietnam* meant that the Protestants were at long last accorded state recognition as a religious community but, on the other hand, all Protestants were called upon to subordinate themselves to this new organisation if they did not wish to be regarded as illegal. This confronted the estimated 3,000 house churches with a serious stigmatisation problem, since they constituted illegal meeting places not just in the eyes of the state but also of the Church. In summer 2002 there were increasing reports of the authorities taking action against house churches. A number of Protestants were arrested for having engaged in illegal preaching. Moreover there were persistent rumours that the Communist Party and government had manipulated the composition of the preparatory committee and the election of the delegates for the new umbrella organisation. In the course of 2001 many house congregations, to which 50% of all Protestants are said to belong, were forcibly dissolved by the police and security forces. Some of the worshippers were temporarily arrested and often fined.

The official religious policy of the Communist Party and the Vietnamese government

Article 70 of the Vietnamese Constitution of 15 April 1992 describes the right to religious freedom as follows: “*The citizen shall enjoy freedom of belief and of religion; he can follow any religion or follow none. All religions are equal before the law. The places of worship of all faiths and religions are protected by the law. No one can violate freedom of belief and of religion; nor can anyone misuse beliefs and religions to contravene the law and State policies*”.²⁷

This constitutional provision lays down the general framework within which religious freedom is publicly recognised and guaranteed in Vietnam. However, everyday practice of this constitutionally guaranteed right to religious freedom is limited by many regulations and restrictions that are imposed by the Communist Party, the security offices, the police and other government agencies. In the way they act the authorities are guided less by the constitutional principles in respect of religions than by their Marxist understanding of religion.

Vietnamese government decree on religious activities

Decree 26 of 19 April 1999, which replaces the regulations concerning religious activities dating from 30 September 1992, is an important theoretical foundation for the understanding and practice of religious freedom in Vietnam.²⁸ The following is a selection of the key regulations.

The State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam ensures the freedom of belief and religion and the freedom of non-belief and non-religion (*Article 1*). Religious activities must obey the law of the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (*Article 3*). Religious activities in the legitimate and lawful interests of the believers are assured (*Article 4*). All acts of violation of the freedom of belief and religion, all acts of misusing belief and religion to oppose the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, prevent believers from discharging their citizen’s obligations, sabotage the cause of unity of the entire people, and harm the healthy culture of the nation, and all superstitious practices shall be dealt with according to law (*Article 5*). Religious believers have the right to carry out religious activities not contrary to the undertakings, policies and laws of the State, to conduct rites of worship and prayers at the family, take part in religious activities, study religious teachings and ethics, and attend to religious rites at the places of worship. Religious believers must not misuse belief and religion to act in contravention of law and must not engage in superstitious activities (*Article 7*). The following articles list the administrative authorities that are responsible for the issuing of licences for religious activities that require approval.

The *central government* is responsible for all meetings at the national level, for the establishment of church training centres, such as seminaries for priests and colleges for religious orders, and for their control, e.g. the appointment of professors and the monitoring of curricula. The *central government* reserves the right to appoint and ordain cardinals and bishops. It is also responsible for monitoring the support given to the Vietnamese Church by foreign aid organisations.

The *provincial governments* are responsible for meetings and activities at the regional level, such as the annual spiritual exercises of priests and members of religious orders, repair work on churches, permission for the ordination of priests, appointments of church personnel and their postings.

The detailed executive provisions of Decree 26 issued in July 1999 leave no doubt that the state authorities wish to ensure that they are informed of all the activities going on within the Church so that they can intervene if necessary and control things whenever and wherever they see fit.²⁹ As a rule, religious matters are attended to by the Offices of Religious Affairs, which in turn are agencies within the *Patriotic Front*. This is the umbrella organisation and liaison body between the Communist Party and the various social groupings, such as the ethnic minorities, Vietnamese living abroad and all the religious communities. In the amendments and improvements to the 1992 constitution that were introduced at the end of 2001 a change was made to Article 9 concerning the *Patriotic Front*. It was conceded that it might assume greater significance in a possible process of democratisation and the influence of the Communist Party was ensured for such an eventuality. In addition, the already far-reaching control of the religions was extended even further, since all the religious communities were obliged to become members of this organisation to obtain recognition by the state. The last member to be admitted in the course of 2001 was the Evangelical Church of South Vietnam. Not all the religious groups have so far bowed to this pressure. They include the *Unified Buddhist Church* and the many Protestant house churches. The Catholic Church is a member, but has restricted its co-operation solely to the level of the Bishops’ Conference.³⁰

Control of all religious activities – the heart of religious policy

The times in which those responsible for religious policy wished to destroy the religions by means of extremely repressive measures, such as stiff prison sentences, internment in work camps and torture, came to an end in Vietnam several years ago. These measures have been replaced by less obtrusive forms of political and religious persecution, such as intimidation through regular house searches, interrogations by the authorities, the imposition of *administrative arrest*, house

arrest and forced resettlement in outlying rural areas. While the practical implementation of the religious policy pursued by the Vietnamese Communist Party and government has changed for the better in recent years, the administrative restrictions and legal regulations have not been amended accordingly.³¹ Hence a statutory offence included in the penal code in 1997, which states that all *attempts to undermine national unity and to sow conflict between the followers of religions and those who do not profess a religion* will incur severe penalties, remains in force. This means that no alterations have been made to the fundamental approach, which is to prevent any organisations, such as religious communities, from questioning the absolute rule of the Communist Party in the country.

The present situation as regards religious freedom can best be described as the absolute control of all religious activities by the state. At the local level this surveillance is performed in the first instance by the local police, who can make arrests without a court order if more than three people without a local residence permit come together. A key instrument for the control of individuals is the residence permit, which contains information on the person concerned as well as his religious affiliation and political reliability, and which has to be presented for many formal purposes, such as the start of employment, admission to a school and medical treatment. This residence permit is issued by the local police authorities, who can withhold or withdraw it. Another important document is the *curriculum vitae*, which contains information about earlier activities, contributions to the revolution and entries concerning political views before and after reunification. When a prospective priest is to be ordained, for instance, consideration is given not only to his own curriculum vitae, but also to those of his relatives and acquaintances.

Control of religious freedom

Many things that ought to form part of the *normal* practice of religion are only possible in Vietnam after additional permits have been issued. The Catholic Church provides a good example of the extent of the controls that are exercised and of the range of permits that have to be obtained from various state offices. The state claims the right to be informed of all religious activities, to intervene for the purposes of control and correction and to impose penalties if necessary. Every sermon is listened to and recorded by the state security authorities. All meetings of more than seven people that take place outside of authorised Church services must be registered and approved. The maintenance, repair and construction of church buildings always have to be approved by the authorities. Before a seminarian is allowed to begin his training as a priest in a seminary, he has to have obtained approval from the party and government authorities. Permits for

admission to one of the six seminaries authorised by the state for the whole country are only issued every two years. For years now the Vietnamese Bishops' Conference has tried in vain to gain state permission for two further seminaries to be opened in Thai Binh and Xuan Loc so as to ease the burden on the crowded seminaries in Hanoi and Hô Chi Minh City. The number of seminarists that can be admitted is determined and arbitrarily restricted by the government authorities and is not appropriate to the needs of the dioceses. One additional form of harassment in the admission of candidates is the rule which states that candidates must come from the region in which they will later work. On the one hand, this means that after a bishop has been ordained there are automatic limitations on his appointment to a place of work. On the other hand, the government is thus able to further restrict the already limited number of candidates for admission. It often happens that highly qualified applicants from one and the same region cannot be admitted, while a less qualified candidate has to be accepted. For a region that does not have sufficient applicants this can mean that the lack of priests is made even worse and the bishops are deprived of the means to ensure an even distribution of appointments.

Permission to enter a seminary by no means implies admission to the ordination process, which is often only granted – or refused – after a long period of waiting. The criteria laid down by the state authorities for admission to the ordination process mean that the candidates are assessed solely on the grounds of their political reliability. These criteria are unacceptable to the Church, which claims the right to assess candidates solely on the basis of religious criteria. Those who wish to go on special studies abroad have to subject themselves to intense interrogation by the police. Their personal files are checked for weak points and suspicious matters. The holding of the general assembly of the national Bishops' Conference of Vietnam requires the submission of an application for approval to the State Office of Religious Affairs together with the agenda and a list of participants. Before the general assembly begins, the head of the national Office of Religious Affairs voices criticism of the work of the bishops and makes demands on behalf of the government concerning their future work.

The bishops are restricted in their pastoral work because they cannot move around freely. In the case of pastoral journeys to undertake confirmations, for instance, they have to obtain advance permission from the police. The same applies to the five-yearly *ad limina* visits to Rome, for which permission has to be granted each time. One annoying issue is that of the appointment of bishops and their ordination.³² There are still dioceses in the north of Vietnam that have been without a bishop for many years. New appointments are only possible after tough negotiations with the state authorities, which do not deny the Pope's right

of appointment as such, but nevertheless reserve themselves a very far-reaching right of examination and rejection. Furthermore, the government insists on religious materials distributed by all the recognised religions being published by a government-authorised printing house. Only after long drawn-out negotiations were the bishops given permission to publish an internal news bulletin provided they adhered to certain conditions and limitations. As regards the Vietnamese Bishops' Conference's membership of the *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences* (FABC), all the applications submitted to the government requesting approval for regular membership of this body have been turned down.

Disputes between the government and the Catholic Church

The Catholic bishops' call for the free practice of religion

The Vietnamese government's Decree 26 on religions has been sharply criticised by some of the religious groups in the country. Reservations were expressed by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam at its annual meeting in Nha Trang in October 1999.³³ Vietnam's Catholic bishops called on the government to terminate the far-reaching state controls imposed on the religious communities. The bishops referred specifically to four points which, in their view, constituted restrictions on religious freedom:

1. The country's religious circles saw the regulations contained in Decree 26 not as an opening, but rather as a restriction of religious freedom.
2. Many regulations did not provide better conditions, but hindered religious activities instead.
3. Decree 26 erected unnecessary obstacles that prevented rather than promoted a positive contribution by the religions to the construction of the country.
4. Decree 26 prevented individual initiative, promoting instead a system of state responsibility for all expressions of religious life. It granted the religious communities free exercise of religion, but the state retained far-reaching controls which to all intents and purposes did away with religious freedom. While these controls did not apply to everyday or Sunday church services, they did apply to all activities that extended beyond the everyday work of a parish. The question as to what constituted *customary or extraordinary* religious activities in individual cases was a constant bone of contention between the state religious authorities and Church offices.

Arguments over the "Unifying Committee of Patriotic Catholics"

After the reunification of the country in 1976 the Communist government tried to establish a "*Unifying Committee of Patriotic Catholics*", sometimes called the "*Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Patriotic Catholics*", in the south of the country, just as it had done in the north, so that it could act as an official negotiating partner for the government. After hesitating for some time, the then Archbishop of Saigon, Paul Nguyen Van Binh, agreed to the establishment of a liaison committee in 1980 which, together with the committee that had existed in North Vietnam since 1955, was to prepare for the setting up of a *Unifying Committee of Patriotic Catholics*. The *Unifying Committee of Patriotic Catholics* was founded on 10 November 1983 on the initiative of the Communist Party.³⁴ The then Prime Minister, Pham Van Dong, made it clear on this occasion that patriotism in Vietnam entailed *loving socialism* and that deviating from it meant being *neither a good Vietnamese nor a good Catholic*. The organisers of the founding congress repeatedly referred to the pastoral letter issued by the Vietnamese Bishops' Conference in 1980, in which it declared that, as patriots, Vietnam's Catholics were prepared to participate in whatever way they could in the construction of the country. Those responsible for managing the congress skilfully used the pastoral letter for their own purposes by equating *patriotism with support for socialism*. Resistance to the establishment of this pro-government organisation came primarily from the Vietnamese episcopate. Most of the bishops in Vietnam rejected the unifying committee, although they avoided openly condemning the membership of Catholic priests and lay people in the organisation and thus risking arguments with the party. The one exception was Archbishop Nguyen Kim Dien of Hue, who suspended a priest from his diocese by the name of Vinh for having taken part in the founding event and in a toughly worded letter rejected any form of co-operation with this organisation as being irreconcilable with the Catholic faith. This letter was disseminated very quickly throughout the country. The party took harsh action against Archbishop Dien, placing him under house arrest for 120 days and subjecting him to rigorous interrogation during this period in order to "re-educate" him. How little progress they made in their efforts was indicated by the pastoral letter that Archbishop Dien subsequently wrote, in which he summarised his experiences by referring to the passage in the Bible which states: "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye" (Acts of the Apostles 4,19).

Crisis over the canonisation of the Vietnamese martyrs

The Vietnamese Church is proud of being a “Church of martyrs”. Over a period of 261 years, i.e. between 1625 and 1886, 130,000 Catholics are said to have been victims of the persecution of Christians. On 19 June 1988 in Rome, Pope John Paul II canonised 117 Vietnamese martyrs³⁵ who had given their lives as witnesses of the faith between 1745 und 1862. This act drew severe criticism from the Communist Party and government of Vietnam³⁶, which felt that it denigrated the rulers of the country at that time. In an official statement it was pointed out that the Communist government naturally had its reservations about the feudal lords of the time, but from the national point of view it considered the action taken by the feudal rulers against the foreign missionaries and their Vietnamese accomplices to be appropriate, justified and necessary. The Communist Party went on to criticise the fact that the new Vietnamese saints included not just genuinely saintly men and women, but also people who had committed criminal acts against their fatherland, including treachery, and who had, therefore, rightly been executed. This glorification of the *lackeys of the colonialists* as *saints* was an insult to the honour of the entire Vietnamese people. The government prevented any official participation by Vietnamese bishops and Catholics in the canonisation in Rome. The Communist government was afraid that Vietnamese living abroad would use the canonisation celebrations to denounce the Communist government.

Argument over the successor to Archbishop Paul Nguyen Van Binh of Hô Chi Minh City

Following the death of the Archbishop of Hô Chi Minh City (Saigon), Paul Nguyen Van Binh, on 1 July 1995 after a long and serious illness, there was an extended dispute between the Vietnamese government and the Vatican over his successor. 20 years previously, shortly before reunification, Rome had attempted to introduce a precautionary regulation of the question of succession by appointing the then Bishop of Nha Trang, Francois Xaver Nguyen Van Thuan, as *coadjutor with the right to succession* for the archbishopric of Saigon. However, the new Communist government refused to approve of the appointment of Bishop Van Thuan, since he was the nephew of the former president, Ngo Dinh Diem, and was therefore considered politically unacceptable. Bishop Van Thuan was first placed under house arrest in his diocese of Nha Trang, later arrested and released in 1988 on certain conditions after spending 13 years in prison.³⁷ By way of an interim solution the Pope subsequently appointed the Bishop of Phan Thiêt, Nicolas Huynh Van Nghi, as Apostolic Administrator of the archdiocese of Hô

Chi Minh City in 1993. The Vietnamese government again refused to grant its approval and prevented Bishop Nicolas Huynh Van Nghi from taking up residence in Hô Chi Minh City and exercising his function as Apostolic Administrator. The Communist rulers regarded the appointment of an Apostolic Administrator for the archdiocese of Hô Chi Minh City as an attempt by the Vatican to keep the definitive filling of the position of archbishop open with a view to the possible return of Archbishop Thuan. The argument was not finally settled until 1998, when the Vatican negotiator, Monsignor Celestino Migliore, succeeded in gaining government approval for the appointment of the then suffragan bishop of My Tho, J. B. Pham Minh Man, as the Archbishop of Hô Chi Minh City. The government also allowed Bishop Nicolas Huynh Van Nghi to preside over the ceremonial installation and officially hand over the powers invested in him by the Vatican, which the government had consistently refused to recognise, to the new archbishop.

Obstruction of the Virgin Mary pilgrimage to the national shrine at La Vang

There was also an argument between the state and the Catholic Church in Vietnam about the staging of national celebrations by the Church in August 1999 to mark the bicentenary of the apparition of Our Lady of La Vang in Quang Tri province.³⁸ In the run-up to the celebrations the Vietnamese government refused to allow the Pope’s special envoy, Jose Sanchez, the Cardinal of the Roman Curia, to enter the country, which meant that the celebrations had to be led by the Archbishop of Hanoi, Cardinal Paul Joseph Pham Ding Tung. The authorities imposed strict limits on the number of pilgrims officially allowed to attend. The government justified its restrictive policy by saying that the safety of the pilgrims would be in jeopardy if hundreds of thousands of people were to attend the national celebrations at La Vang. They subsequently went off without any major incident, however, because the several hundred thousand pilgrims, described by Radio Vatican as the *largest gathering of people in Vietnam since the reunification of the country in 1976*, behaved in a very disciplined manner to avoid giving the authorities any grounds for intervening. The security forces and the police limited their activities for the most part to filming all the participants.

Religious policy between regimentation and occasional room for manoeuvre

At its general assembly in Hanoi from 15 to 22 September 2001 the Vietnamese Bishops' Conference elected Bishop Paul Nguyen Van Hoa of Nha Trang as its chairman. Having initially rejected the outcome of the election, the government finally recognised it on 14 November. However, the government has thus far refused to accept the Vatican's envisaged appointment of Bishop Paul Nguyen Van Hoa as Archbishop of Hanoi in succession to Cardinal Phaolo Giuse Pham Dinh Tung. Nevertheless, Bishop Hoa was allowed to participate in the meeting of the Philippines Bishops' Conference in Tagaytay in July 2002. This shows how inconsistent the government is in its approach, the trust it places in a certain person on one occasion being withdrawn from that same person on a subsequent occasion.

In his capacity as the new Chairman of the Vietnamese Bishops' Conference, Bishop Paul Nguyen Van Hoa took the opportunity of a courtesy visit to the Prime Minister, Phan Van Khai, and the country's civic authorities in late December 2001 to present some of the Vietnamese bishops' desiderata.³⁹ He prefaced his words with the declared desire of the Vietnamese Catholics to contribute to the social and economic construction of the country, above all by combating poverty. He then presented a list of demands that had frequently been made of the government by the Vietnamese bishops. They included applications submitted to the government by the Vietnamese Bishops' Conference first in 1992 and again in 1997, to which the Vietnamese government had not bothered to reply.

One of these demands was that the bishops should be given the right to move about freely in their dioceses without having to obtain advance permission from the police. Among the other demands were that the bishops should be able to meet freely and that their contacts with Rome and the ad limina visits should not have to be sanctioned each and every time. Admission to the seminaries should be on a yearly and not a two-yearly basis, which is the case at present, and the limitation on the number of seminarists to be admitted should match the requirements of the dioceses and not be laid down by the government. The criteria for admission to ordination should be exclusively religious and decided on solely by the Church authorities. The criteria currently applied by the state authorities, which admit candidates for ordination purely on the basis of their political reliability, are unacceptable for the Church. The maintenance, repair and construction of church buildings are a normal part of everyday Church life and they should not require individual approval by the authorities. Finally, the bishops expressed the wish to publish an internal news bulletin and to have greater freedom to publish.⁴⁰ The final point bishop Hoa raised was the regulation of the many problems concerning properties expropriated on various grounds

between 1975 and 1980 and on whose return the Church insisted. All the party newspaper, *Nhân Dân*, had to report on this meeting was that the Catholic Church wished to play a positive part in the construction of the country. No mention was made of the demands submitted to the government.⁴¹

Differences in the assessment of present-day religious freedom

Vietnam has been reunited for the past 27 years. In 2002, a number of Catholics expressed the view that, in retrospect, the Catholic Church in Vietnam had grown internally and matured in the period of Communist rule. At a service held on 30 April 2002 to mark the anniversary of the capture of Saigon by the Vietcong troops the priest of Hien Linh parish in Hồ Chí Minh City, Mathieu Le Minh Chau, painted a largely positive picture. Despite the disadvantages and persecution it had suffered following the seizure of power by the Communists, the Catholic Church had had the chance to rid itself of the organisational ballast involved in the running of schools, hospitals and other facilities and hence to concentrate on essentials of the faith. Even though thousands of boat people had fled the country, many opportunities had arisen over the years for the Catholic Church to tend to people's needs. The harsh period of re-education which many priests and members of religious orders had undergone in the work camps had failed to break their spirit. On the contrary, it had provided with them renewed impetus to lend their religious vocation greater depth and consistency. The experience of hard physical labour accompanied by hunger and poverty had been a tough school, but the new insights that had been gained into the mission of the Church among the poor had proved both useful and rewarding. Their Christian faith had matured as a result and their contacts with Communist Party officials had given them an opportunity to study the mentality of non-believers and atheists. For their part the representatives of the party and government had partly changed their attitude to the Church, priests, members of religious orders and believers over the years, because they had recognised that the Catholics in Vietnam performed useful services within Vietnamese society.⁴²

This view is more the exception than the rule. Most Catholics paint a negative picture when assessing the impact of the Communist government's religious policy. They still see relations between the party and government, on the one hand, and the Catholic Church, on the other, as being far from normal. They feel that the attitude of the government and the party to the Catholic Church – and very likely to other religious communities, too – is still very similar to that of an occupying power that wishes to keep everything on enemy territory under

control and is at constant pains to preserve its position of power. At all events it in no way constitutes a relationship between partners dealing with each other on a more or less equal footing. The party and government in Vietnam treat the Catholic Church and the other religious communities more like enemy forces who are only allowed to exercise certain religious functions on a case-by-case basis and these are always dependent on the granting of permission by the government. Redemptorist Father Chan Tin, who is known for his criticism of the regime, has said that, while there has not been any bloody persecution of religions for quite some time, the Communist Party and government now adopt a much more subtle approach. He has pointedly described the state *Office of Religious Affairs* as an *Office for the Destruction of Religion (bureau de destruction de la religion)*. The government, he says, has planned a gradual crushing and strangulation of religious life that attracts less attention but is all the more dangerous.⁴³

Examples of action taken against individuals and institutions

At regular intervals international human rights organisations publish reports on violations by the Vietnamese authorities of the right to religious freedom. There are long-standing cases, such as that of the members of the *Congregation of the Mother Co-Redemptrix (CMC)*⁴⁴, who were arrested in 1987. Two of them, Father Pham Ngoc Lien und Brother Nguyen Thien Phung, were sentenced to 20 years in prison for giving unauthorised courses in religion and distributing religious books.⁴⁵ A more recent case is that of the arrest and conviction of a parish priest, Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly, in May 2001 for infringing probation orders. At his trial in Hue on 19 October 2001, which was held in camera and without any defending lawyer, he was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment and house arrest.⁴⁶ Father Ly had previously been detained from 1977 to 1978 and again from 1983 to 1992. After his release he worked in the parish of Thuy Bieu in the diocese of Hue. He became known nationally and internationally for his repeated denunciation of the serious shortcomings in Vietnam's religious policy. In doing so, he exploited his contacts with the *Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam*, which has its head office in the USA. During the disastrous flooding in 1999 he made use of financial resources provided by the Committee. The Vietnamese authorities view this link and Father Nguyen Van Ly's many other foreign contacts with a great deal of mistrust. *Amnesty International* has repeatedly lent him its support and sees in him a prisoner of conscience, who stands up in a non-violent manner for his religious and political convictions.⁴⁷

In late 2000, the Thien An Benedictine monastery outside the city limits of Hue made the headlines because of a property dispute with the authorities. Over

100 Vietnamese Benedictine monks currently live in the monastery, which was built by French Benedictines in the 1940s. Since April 2000, however, the "heavenly peace", which is the literal translation of the Vietnamese name of the Thien An monastery, has been considerably disturbed.⁴⁸ The local authorities are trying to deprive the monastery of 107 hectares of its land, on which they plan to erect an amusement park that will be run by a commercial company and include saunas and a brothel. On 6 June 2002, the Benedictine monks were officially informed by the state authorities that they had no right of ownership to the land because in Vietnam "*all the land belongs to the people and is administered by the state*", which can extend rights of use to certain persons or institutions. However, the authorities had never granted the Benedictine monks any rights of use. The Benedictine monks of Hue are being supported by their brothers abroad in their struggle with the local authorities. The president of the Benedictine congregation, Notker Wolf, protested against the threat posed to the existence of the *Thien An* Benedictine monastery in an article he wrote for the Catholic News Agency on 13 July 2002.

Problems resulting from conversions among the mountain peoples

"Mountain peoples" (*montagnards*) is the umbrella term used to describe the ethnic minorities consisting of over 50 different tribal communities, the majority of whom live in the mountainous regions of Central Vietnam. They constitute 13% of the Vietnamese population. Each of the largest of these ethnic minorities, such as the Tay, Thai, Hmong, Jarai, Muong and Nung, has a population of between 500,000 and a million. Over the course of Vietnamese history these tribal societies have largely succeeded in preserving an independent existence outside Vietnamese culture. Prior to 1975, foreign missionaries had worked among them and made conversions.⁴⁹ After reunification, their status as marginal groups meant that they were among those sections of the population who were able to resist the strict Communist Party controls to a certain extent. Some of them had become Christians without ever encountering any missionaries or Christians simply by listening to the religious broadcasts of Radio Veritas⁵⁰ and Church radio stations in Hong Kong. From 1990 to 1994 the number of baptisms among the mountain peoples who decided to join the Catholic Church rose to 200,000. The majority of the conversions was the result of the work of catechists, who were able to win many people over by means of the "bible-sharing" method.⁵¹ Protestant missionaries have been more successful among the mountain peoples. Some of them from Laos, who work in the mountain regions, have

close ties with North American Evangelical communities, from which they receive considerable financial and, occasionally, human resources support. The government is very concerned about developments among the mountain peoples, since they have never really been properly integrated into the Vietnamese state. Tensions have risen considerably in recent years and there have been several armed uprisings against the government in these areas, particularly in the provinces of Dac Lac and Gia Lai.

Religious freedom and the non-Christian religions

The non-Christian religions of Vietnam

Philosophies such as Confucianism and religions such as Taoism, Buddhism and Christianity have exerted a major influence in Vietnam. However, popular religious beliefs, which derive from Chinese religious and superstitious practices and owe much to the traditions of the mountain peoples and tribes, have also had a universal, far-reaching impact on how people in Vietnam see the world and mankind. Very much like the situation in China, there is a triad of *three religions (tam giao)*, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, which has left its mark on religious thought. Confucianism, which is essentially more of a philosophical and ethical system, took on many religious aspects in Vietnam. Taoism, which originally was also more of an esoteric philosophy, merged with Buddhist thought to produce various popular religious beliefs. The dominating feature of the religiousness of Vietnamese people is a strong belief in spirits, which are to be found everywhere in nature and have an influence on human fate. The other predominant element is ancestor worship, which occurs when the remembrance of ancestors is to be given a religious dimension. This attitude to the world, life and death, and the fate of humankind has a strong element of animist thought. The emphasis is on cultural identity and tradition and it is very much tied to the locality.

Buddhism was brought to Vietnam in the 2nd century A.D. by Chinese monks, who believed in Mahayana Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism, which came into the country from India and Sri Lanka, is very widespread among the Khmer Krom, who live in the Mekong Delta. At present there are over half a million Khmer living in the provinces south of Hô Chi Minh City (Saigon). After centuries of decline Buddhism experienced a revival at the beginning of the 20th century. A number

of Buddhist monks played a role in the resistance to French colonial rule. Buddhist monks were very prominent under the Catholic President, Ngo Dinh Diem, in the 1960s. The self-immolations of several monks made a major contribution to the toppling of the Diem regime. After reunification in 1976 a number of Buddhist monks, including some who had been active in the resistance against the South Vietnamese system, were sent to work camps for re-education.

The activities of Buddhist monasteries were subjected to strict controls, as were those of the monasteries of all the other religions. It is difficult to say how much support Buddhism enjoys in Vietnam. Some estimates put the number of Buddhists among the Vietnamese population at 60%, while others talk of no more than 15%. After reunification in 1976 the Communists tried to organise all the religious and social forces in the *Patriotic Front*. All the Buddhist groups were supposed to join this association, too. The aim of the party and government was to separate the monks and nuns from the laity by setting up an organisation that would be responsible for Buddhist rites and liturgies, but would not exert any influence on society and would not be active in political, educational and social matters. The government made its admission of novices, who wished to become monks or nuns, dependent on the fulfilment of certain criteria regarding their patriotic attitude and commitment to socialism. Like all the other social and religious groups, the Buddhists were to be brought together in a single national organisation, the *Buddhist Association of Vietnam* and thus placed under the complete control of the government.⁵² The issue of membership of this organisation led to a split among the Buddhists in Vietnam. A group of monks and nuns, who represent the old tradition of Buddhism and regard themselves as its genuine heirs, formed the *Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam*. They refused to be integrated in the manner envisaged by the state. As a result most of the monks were placed under house arrest in their pagodas and prevented from communicating freely with their believers. The Supreme Patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, Thich Huyen Quang, was expelled from Hô Chi Minh City in 1982 and banished to the small town of Quang Ngai, where he has now lived for the past 20 years.⁵³ The government was incensed by the fact that the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam provided its own emergency aid during the disastrous floods in the Mekong Delta in 2000. The government ordered the arrest of the monks who were involved, accusing them of having left the national solidarity front and of misusing their relief programme to spread their divisive teachings.

Confucianism (*Nho Giao* or *Khong Giao*) gained a strong foothold in Vietnam during the over 1,000-year rule of the Chinese from 111 B.C. to 928 A.D. As was the case in China, the administration was in the hands of officials (mandarins), who owed

their appointments to their studies of the writings of Confucius. In the struggle with the European colonial powers, however, the Confucian educational model proved to be largely incapable of moving with the times and it fell into disrepute among the intellectuals. After the Communists seized power, Confucianism was considered for a long time to be a feudalistic religion or philosophy that for centuries had inflicted harm on the country. After all, it was the Confucians who had strengthened the influence of the Chinese in Vietnam. In an attempt to give the thoughts of Hồ Chí Minh the status of a theoretical edifice alongside Marxism-Leninism, reference was made to the teachings of classical Confucianism to underline the importance of a good, moral life of the kind that Hồ Chí Minh had called for.⁵⁴ In defining the “ideal worker” – a key term in Marxist thought – Hồ Chí Minh himself had drawn on the ideas of Meng Tzu. He described the ideal worker as someone *who cannot be tempted by wealth or honour, who is not worried by poverty and does not submit to power or force*. In the attempt to reform the economy and society (*doi moi*) in the 1980s the authorities again fell back on Confucian thought, because it contains approaches to an understanding of community and work discipline that might prove helpful for the reforms. The ultimate aim was to give Vietnam an ideology of its own based on a mixture of Marxism-Leninism, Confucian thought and the *ideas of Hồ Chí Minh*. Now that the era of *socialist brotherhood* with the former USSR and eastern Europe has come to an end, Confucianism is being incorporated in the search for new ways of establishing international ties with Vietnam’s neighbours that also have a Confucian tradition.

Taoism (*Lao Giao* or *Dao Giao*) does not have the kind of structure or organisation that would enable it to become a constituted religious community. There are very few Taoist temples and priests in Vietnam. However, the influence of Taoist ideas is much greater as regards people’s general piety, relations with nature and the awareness of a healthy life. The complementary elements of yin and yang (*am* and *duong*) are well known and they have a strong influence on people’s attitudes to their bodies, nature and the environment. Ancestor worship, which is the foundation of the religiousness of all Vietnamese, is very widespread. The negative attitude to ancestor worship displayed in the 17th and 18th centuries by Christian missionaries, who refused to allow baptised Vietnamese to continue this form of filial love out of a sense of obedience to the central authorities in Rome, has closed off many paths to Christian missionary activity right up to the present day. Even under Communist rule ancestor worship has lost little of its importance. Most Vietnamese houses still have a house altar at which respect can be paid to the dead; graves are tended and a male descendant assumes responsibility for observance of the rites on certain days and festivals.

The Cao Dai movement is an indigenous Vietnamese sect that was founded in the 1920s by Ngo Minh Chieu, who derived the theoretical elements of his syncretistic religion from his own mystic experiences. By linking religious and philosophical ideas from East and West he created a religion that brings believers together in splendid, brightly coloured temples for liturgical ceremonies. Included among its prophets and spiritual leaders are Jesus, Mohammed, Confucius, Sun Yat-Sen and Victor Hugo. The Cao Dai movement is alleged to have around two million followers. After reunification, all the property of the Cao Dai movement was expropriated by the government in 1977 and many of the leading ministers of the religion were arrested. The Council of Priests, its executive committee, was replaced by an administrative committee appointed by the government. The movement suffered a split because the majority of its followers rejected the state-appointed organisation of the Cao Dai movement as being irreconcilable with the original teachings and established an independent movement instead without obtaining the approval of the authorities.

The Hoa Hao (*Phat Giao Hoa*) is a Buddhist sect that was founded by Huynh Phu So in 1939. It is currently estimated to have 1.5 million followers. Great store is set by rites that are performed to heal illnesses. The sect constitutes a simplified form of Buddhism that has taken up many elements of popular religious beliefs. During Japanese occupation the sect was armed by the Japanese and drafted into the struggle against French colonial rule. The founder, Huynh Phu So, was killed in action against the Viet Minh in 1947. The sect was suppressed and persecuted under the Diem regime. After the reunification of the country in 1976 parts of the Hoa Hao sect were again persecuted by the Communist government because they refused to have themselves registered. All the Hoa Hao’s temples, schools, hospitals and other facilities were banned. It was not until May 1999 that the Hoa Hao was officially recognised by the Vietnamese authorities. The executive committee set up on this occasion is not accepted by most Hoa Hao followers, however, because its nature is irreconcilable with the tradition of Hoa Hao and the committee includes members of the party. In late 1999 there were repeated serious conflicts between Hoa Hao followers and the police, who made several arrests. In March 2001, Le Quang Liem, the then 82-year-old Chairman of the Hoa Hao, was placed under house arrest for two years because of what was officially termed his *misuse of religion to engage in anti-state propaganda*. One of the followers of the Hoa Hao burned herself to death in protest against the suppression of religious freedom.

The Muslims, a small minority of around 0.5% of the population, are to be found primarily among the Khmer and the Cham. Today some 5,000 Muslims live in

Hô Chi Minh City, where they have over a dozen mosques including the Grand Mosque in the city centre. The Vietnamese Muslims from among the Cham people have developed their own form of Islam, which deviates considerably from orthodox Islamic concepts. After the reunification of Vietnam the Muslim Association was initially banned until 1992, but then once again received official recognition from the state as the legitimate representative of the Muslims. For the most part the Muslims are free of any restrictions on their religious life, daily prayers and the observance of Ramadan. Every year 30 to 40 Muslims are allowed to undertake the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca.

Religious freedom and inter-religious dialogue in Vietnam

There is no tradition of inter-religious co-operation in Vietnam. In the past, there has been a tendency for conflict to predominate, especially between Christians and Buddhists during the period of colonial dependence and in South Vietnam under the Catholic President Ngô Đình Diệm. Joint advocacy of the rights of religions vis-à-vis the state authorities is, therefore, a rare occurrence.⁵⁵ In September 1999, four leading figures from different religious communities wrote a joint letter to the state government on the question of religious freedom. They were the Deputy Chairman of the Unified Buddhist Church, Thích Quang Đạo, the well-known dissident and Redemptorist Father Stephan Nguyễn Văn Tin representing the Catholics, Trần Quang Châu for the Cao Đài movement and Lê Quang Liêm, the Chairman of the Hòa Hảo Buddhists, who are not recognised by the Vietnamese state. The government is very reserved about, not to say hostile to, any form of co-operation between the religions, because it regards their growing influence on Vietnamese society as a threat to its monopoly of power and hence as a danger. It is, therefore, opposed to any attempts on the part of the religious communities to become active in the social or medical sector, in attempts to combat the harmful consequences of the rapid economic changes or in the fight against drugs, Aids and other social problems. The joint prayer session in the Tu Hieu Pagoda in Hue in May 2001, which was organised by the Buddhist monks, Thích Thiên Hạnh and Chân Trí, and attended by the well-known dissident and Catholic priest, Thadeus Nguyễn Văn Lý, and Lê Quang Liêm from the Hòa Hảo Buddhists, caused a sensation. The government treated this prayer session as a dangerous and unlawful attempt to set up an inter-religious organisation independent of the government.⁵⁶ In their pastoral letter of September 2001 the Catholic bishops drew attention to the need for inter-religious dialogue and called on the faithful to enter into a “dialogue of life” with the members of the other religions.⁵⁷

The changed role of the religions in Vietnamese society

Acknowledgement of the contribution made by the religions to society

Within the Communist Party of Vietnam there have been moves to re-assess the role that the religions can play in society. A declaration made at the 7th Party Congress in 1993 stated, for instance, that “Most people have a spiritual need for religion and faith. This need will continue for a long time. Furthermore, there are several aspects in the teachings of religions that may prove particularly useful for the construction of a new society.” There are more and more public articles and contributions that make positive references to the religions in a review of Vietnamese history.⁵⁸ In the large encyclopaedia of 1993 tribute is paid to the services of a number of Catholic missionaries. It is emphasised, for instance, that Alexandre de Rhodes S.J., who published his *Dictionarium Annamiticum, Lusitanum et Latinum* in 1651, made a valuable contribution to the formation of a Vietnamese written language. In February 2000, the Catholic Solidarity Committee in Hô Chi Minh City held a symposium at which the contribution of Bishop de Behaine (d.1799) was acknowledged. As the Apostolic Vicar of Cochinchina (1772-1773) he compiled a Vietnamese-Latin dictionary, the *Vocabularium Anamitico-Latinum*, which helped to advance the Vietnamese language (quốc ngữ).

In early 1998, public attention was attracted by an anthology of questions on religion and religious policy in a semi-official publication on politics and social affairs issued under the overall responsibility of Prof. Phạm Xuân Nam. This anthology deals with the role played by religions in present-day Vietnam and considers the need for a revision of state religious policy. The tenets of Marxist religious critique are largely adhered to, but it is conceded that the influence of religions in Vietnam is still very strong and that in some respects it is still growing, e.g. among the mountain peoples of the Hmông. It is also pointed out that family ancestor worship is still astonishingly widespread. According to the statistics, it is practised by over 80% of the population. The anthology warns the government and the party against contemplating repressive measures in view of the widespread anti-Communist attitudes among the religious communities. *Religious activities* need to be distinguished from the practice of magic, it says. In contrast to the practitioners of magic the religions essentially play an important role in society. The religious faithful need to be won over as partners in the construction of a socialist society. In recent years in Vietnam there has been a

marked increase in religious activities. This is especially evident in the revival of popular religious beliefs with their variety of customs and rituals, many of which revolve around ancestor worship.

The Communist Party in Vietnam sees the revival of religious life in the country with more than mixed feelings. The long-standing ideological efforts to establish an enlightened atheism based on Marxist religious critique have clearly failed.⁵⁹ The many temples, churches and pagodas that were initially destroyed or used for different purposes after the victory of the Communists are being rebuilt or renovated.⁶⁰ The religious authorities and the party are worried because this renaissance of religious practices is not limited just to the officially recognised religious communities. It also extends to the emergence of new cults and superstitious practices⁶¹, which are barely controllable and potentially dangerous. Faith healers and other people with genuine or feigned spiritual capabilities are very popular among the population at large. Some of these new cults are obviously more capable of satisfying popular needs than the established religions. On the one hand, the Communist rulers can point to these developments as proof that there is genuine religious freedom in Vietnam. On the other hand, this phenomenon constitutes an ideological challenge for the party, because it is clear that for many Vietnamese the ideas of socialism-Marxism are not enough to satisfy their desire for meaning in life. In their quest for more satisfactory answers to help them address their everyday needs and concerns they are turning away in disappointment from Communist ideology and embracing new pseudo-religious and superstitious beliefs instead. At a meeting of the National Office of Religious Affairs in March 1998 the Deputy Prime Minister, Ngyuen Tan Dung, said that compliance with religious teachings could help to alleviate shortcomings and inadequacies in the country. After all, there was a need to acknowledge that religious believers had made a major contribution to the stability of the country and that they continued to do so. Unjustified reproaches voiced in respect of religious believers by government and party members only served to widen the gap between the government and the people. More and more frequently members of the religions now receive honours at the regular award ceremonies for people who have made outstanding contributions to society. In August 2001, for instance, the municipal authorities of Hô Chi Minh City publicly honoured several Catholics, a sister from a Catholic religious order who had built up a large home for orphans and handicapped people, a teacher, a midwife, a female optician and a doctor, whose contributions to society were considered to have set an example to others.

The social commitment of the Catholic Church

As is the case in all socialist countries, the Communist government of Vietnam has a monopoly in the fields of education, health care and social work. Religious communities and churches are restricted to strictly religious activities within their own organisations. In the 1990s, the Vietnamese government moderated its strict disapproval, tolerating limited activities by Church organisations in health care and education wherever state services were inadequate. Sisters from Catholic religious orders were thus allowed to become actively involved in caring for victims of leprosy, which is particularly widespread among the mountain peoples of Vietnam, and to build homes to look after them.⁶² The government was also prepared to at least tolerate Catholic-run kindergartens and out-of-school training centres for the upbringing and training of socially disadvantaged groups in Vietnamese society.⁶³ The social centre in the diocese of Bui Chu in North Vietnam looks after children who have been abandoned by their parents because they are sick or handicapped. Their numbers have increased greatly in recent years. In May 2002, a centre for traditional medicine in Nha Trang celebrated its 20th anniversary. The centre is run by the *Society of the Divine Word* (SVD), which currently has 15 priests, 59 brothers, 10 novices and 74 candidates. The centre has a team of more than 12 doctors and experts for plant medicine, all of whom are paid the same low salary. A large number of the patients, who are poor and needy, are treated free of charge. The centre lives off its modest income and is dependent on donations.⁶⁴ In the field of education, nuns are currently only allowed to provide services for infants. Priests and members of religious orders are not allowed to teach in other educational establishments. There are several private schools where Catholic lay people are allowed to teach. In the field of nursing, Catholic nuns are employed to look after Aids victims. They maintain a hospice for terminally ill Aids patients, for instance.

Religious representatives in the National Assembly

Part of the policy of the "United Front" is to have all social groups share responsibility for the development of the country. For this reason candidates from the religious communities are always nominated for elections to the National Assembly and some of them ultimately win seats. In the elections for the 11th National Assembly, which were held on 18 May 2002 with the participation of 99.73% of those entitled to vote, six representatives of the religions were among the 498 members of the new assembly. They consisted of three Buddhist monks, one representative of the Hoa Hao movement and two Catholic priests.⁶⁵ In the previous National Assembly, which was elected in 1997, there were eight religious repre-

representatives – four Buddhist monks and four Catholic priests. Both the Catholic priests in the present National Assembly had their candidature approved by their bishops, since canon law normally forbids priests from assuming political office. In the case of Vietnam, however, the bishops accept that there are exceptional circumstances in which it is in the interests of the local Church for priests to act as elected representatives in a national body.⁶⁶ 762 candidates stood for the 498 seats in the National Assembly. In most cases, therefore, voters had a genuine choice between several candidates. A third of the candidates were women – an exceptionally large number – which was the result of a new regulation in the electoral law. The number of non-Communist Party candidates was also very high (127 or 16.7%). 53 of them succeeded in winning a seat. As expected, the Communist Party of Vietnam emerged as the largest group in the Assembly with 89.4% of the successful candidates, thus reasserting its position as the leading political force. There were 69 independent candidates, but only 13 of them were allowed to stand. The Patriotic Front, the body uniting representatives of all the social, ethnic and religious groups, plays the key role in the selection of the independent candidates.⁶⁷

Freedom of the press and religious freedom through the eyes of the Vietnamese Communists

The press is firmly in the hands of the Communist Party, which occupies all the leading positions in the editorial departments. There is rigorous censorship and journalists are given strict instructions as to what they should write and how. Do Muoi, the former General Secretary of the Communist Party, once formulated his concept of press freedom for Vietnam as follows: *In Vietnam freedom of the press should serve the interests of the entire people, the country and the new political system.* Do Muoi argued that collective rights should consistently have priority over individual rights. There have always been periods in Vietnam's development when there was greater freedom for the press and journalists, but as a rule the party insists on absolute control. The upshot is that the party newspaper, *Nhân Dân*, publishes all the communiqués of the party and government, but its low price means that most people treat it more as “raw material” than as a source of information.⁶⁸

For some years now the *Unifying Committee of Patriotic Catholics* in Hồ Chí Minh City has published the journal *Catholicism and the Nation* (Cônqiáo và Dân Tộc). For a long time it caused controversy within the Catholic Church because of its pro-government stand. In the meantime it has gained sufficient standing for the Union Catholique Internationale de Presse (UCIP) to award it a gold medal in 2001 *for its exemplary defence of the freedom of information.*⁶⁹ The 32-page jour-

nal appears weekly in an A4 format with several photos, cartoons and reports on both the local and the world Church. A number of priests work regularly for the journal, the July 2002 edition of which (No. 1,363) ran to 13,000 copies. The Bishop of Long Xuyên, Gioan Baotixita Bui Tuan, for example, has a regular column in which he interprets the week's texts from the Bible. There is one other Catholic newspaper, the Hanoi weekly, *Vietnamese Catholics* (Nguoi Cong Giao Viet Nam), which is also published by the *Committee of Patriotic Catholics*.

State birth control and the religions

The restrictive birth control policy pursued by the government, which officially propagates two children per family (euphemistically referred to as ensuring the existence of “small, happy families”), has led to a drop in the birth rate from 3.8 per woman of childbearing age in 1989 to 2.3 in 2001. 30% of all pregnancies end in abortion, which puts Vietnam at the top of the world abortion table.⁷⁰ On average every Vietnamese woman has 2.5 abortions, which are performed in state-run clinics, where they cost just US\$ 5 and are undertaken with a minimum of administrative effort. Women who give birth in hospital are sterilised after their first child and not after their second. Infringements of birth control policy incur various sanctions, such as fines, postponement of job promotion and, in the case of Communist Party members, expulsion from the party. However, the state's birth control policy is only applied with the utmost rigour in towns and cities. In the countryside things are more difficult to control and hence it is much more often the case that women have several children. State birth control policy naturally also propagates other forms of contraception. However, there is a lack of condoms, contraceptive pills and frequently of the relevant information. The state birth control authorities focus solely on married couples and are blind to sexual intercourse that takes place before and outside of marriage. Vietnam's population increased from 52 million in 1979 to 64.5 million in 1989 and to 79.5 million in 1999. Vietnam thus ranks second in the ASEAN states' population table behind Indonesia, which has 210 million inhabitants.

The Church does not agree with this restrictive birth control policy, but has no opportunity to voice its views in public and, indeed, it does not attempt to do so. However, it tries to make its opposing views clear during direct pastoral contacts. This only serves to underline that the Church has no access of its own to the press, radio and television. The press and information system is firmly in the hands of the party and state. The other religious communities, above all the Buddhists, who regard respect for life as a supreme value, have no opportunity either to voice their opposition in public to the government's birth control policy.

Government justification in the face of accusations of the violation of religious freedom

In October 1998, Abdelfattah Amor paid an official visit to Vietnam as the UN Human Rights Commissioner's Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance. The Vietnamese government had refused for a long time to approve a visit by a UN delegation, permission for which had initially been requested in 1995. Severe restrictions were imposed on the group's ability to make contact with people, but the report that was finally issued nevertheless contained many details of violations of the human right to religious freedom.⁷¹ The Vietnamese government accused the UN delegation of interfering unjustifiably in the "country's internal affairs". International criticism of religious policy in Vietnam has continued in the years since then. In July 2002, for instance, the *Vietnamese Committee for the Defence of Human Rights* in Geneva published a paper on human rights in Vietnam. This states that religious freedom is violated in Vietnam, since Protestants from among the ethnic minorities are persecuted, monks belonging to the Unified Buddhist Church are imprisoned and extensive repressive measures are imposed on the Hoa Hao and the Catholic Church.

The Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman, Phan Thúy Than, protested vigorously against these accusations, which she said were completely untrue. Nobody in Vietnam was imprisoned because of his political or religious beliefs. The country had signed most of the international conventions on the safeguarding of human rights and ensured compliance with them. As an example of the right of free speech she referred to the fact that 99.73% of those entitled to vote had participated in the most recent elections to the National Assembly. It apparently did not occur to her that such a high percentage is more a reflection of massive pressure being exerted on the people than of an ideal level of political participation on the part of the entire population. The government also talks of complete freedom of the press. The restriction is contained in the rider that there is, of course, a ban on reporting and on any other activities that might prove harmful to the unity of the state as well as on the spreading of ideas that are incompatible with the culture and lifestyle of the country. This includes all reports that "denigrate" institutions of the state, decisions of the government and individual persons, the definition of what actually constitutes "denigration" resting entirely with the authorities. In practical terms this means that the press, the religious communities and other social groups are not allowed to voice any criticism of the state, the party or the work of the authorities and individual politicians.⁷²

Religious leaders and the government: joint witnesses to religious freedom in Vietnam?

In May 2002, two delegations from Vietnam travelled to the USA with the ostensible aim of rectifying the country's human rights image in the international arena, which the Vietnamese government considered to be distorted. For the first time since the reunification of the country an inter-religious, mixed group of representatives of various religions in Vietnam was allowed to accept an invitation from Church and human rights groups in the USA. The group comprised Buddhist monks, representatives of the Hoa Hao movement, a Protestant pastor and Dominican Father Joseph Dinh Chau Tran as the sole Catholic representative.⁷³ The chosen representatives of the religious communities met representatives of human rights organisations, the churches and other groups in the USA, but in describing religious life in Vietnam they kept strictly to the instructions they had clearly been given by the government. The Catholic representative in the group, Dominican Father Dinh Chau Tran, was accused by Redemptorist Father Cha Tin of being too obliging to the party in his depiction of the life of the Catholic Church of Vietnam. It was ultimately misleading for Dinh Chau Tran to make positive mention of the fact that priests are ordained and bishops appointed in Vietnam, that the number of Catholics has grown and that there is an active religious life in the parishes, while at the same time making no reference to the many restrictions on religious life imposed by the Communist Party and the government. The positive signs of life within the Catholic Church in Vietnam were by no means an indication of the solicitude shown by the government for the country's religions, but rather examples of the heroic resistance to attempts by the government to control, hinder and, wherever possible, to destroy every aspect of religious life.⁷⁴ Before the delegation travelled to the USA, Le Quang Vinh, head of the National Office of Religious Affairs, addressed the issue of religious freedom in Vietnam in the party newspaper, *Nhân Dân*, on 28 May 2002. He emphasised that religious freedom was guaranteed by the constitution in Vietnam and that allegations from abroad that there were violations of this fundamental right were incorrect. At the same time, however, he made it clear that the government would act against any activities that might endanger the security of the state under the cover of religion.

A different official delegation of the Vietnamese government was in the USA for nine days at the same time as the group of religious representatives at the invitation of the *Vietnamese Embassy in the USA*. It was led by the head of the National Office of Religious Affairs, Le Quang Vinh, and other government representatives. In the course of meetings in the USA Le Quang Vinh rejected accusations that there was oppression of the Catholic Church by referring to the fact

that during the 80 years of French colonial rule only four indigenous priests had been ordained as bishops. Between 1945 and 1975, by contrast, 33 indigenous priests had been ordained as bishops and in the period between 1975 and 2000 as many as 42. In Vietnam there were currently 2,410 priests, of whom 1,142 were ordained before 1975 and the remaining 1,268 after that date. He went on to provide similar figures for the growth in the number of functional executives among the Buddhists, who could also point to an increase in the number of nuns and monks and the relevant training centres. From 1993 to 2001 alone the number of nuns and monks had risen from 26,269 to 33,066.⁷⁵

Conclusion

This study has attempted to document the historical conditions and developments that have affected religious freedom in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. It transpires that relations between the Communist Party and government of Vietnam and the country's religions are determined by exaggerated efforts to exercise complete control over all aspects of religious life. The overriding objective of this restrictive religious policy is to secure the present balance of power in the country, which is expressed in the unrestricted political and ideological rule of the Communist Party. All the other social forces, including the religions, are limited to a role supporting the status quo and they are excluded from any active co-determination of social and political life. However, the economic changes introduced by the Vietnamese government and the political opening up of the country as a result of its membership of both the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other international alliances will inevitably lead to changes in the domestic situation and ultimately to a renunciation of the monopoly rule of the Communist Party.

The country's religious communities have largely adapted to the present system and fight shy of any direct confrontation with it. In the words of a Catholic Church leader, they are pursuing a policy that is characterised by three somewhat passive attitudes: "patience, prudence and perseverance".⁷⁶ In view of the negative experiences of the past, the leaders of the religions and the churches are reluctant to engage in any vocal protests or confrontation with the party and the state. They prefer to wait for a gradual improvement in their present situation. On the other hand, the reactions of the Vietnamese authorities to critical reports from abroad on human rights violations show that such voices are listened to and taken seriously. Hence there are certainly ways and means of making it clear to the Vietnamese leadership that co-operation within the international community is only possible in the long run if human rights, and not least religious freedom, are respected. Ultimately the stance taken by politicians, journalists and economic experts may be more decisive for adherence to human rights in Vietnam than the necessary and helpful contributions of human rights organisations and representatives of the religious communities.

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Footnotes

- 1 Der Fischer Weltalmanach 2002, Frankfurt 2001, 857-858; M. Florence/R. Storey (eds.) *Travel Handbuch Vietnam*, Berlin 2001, pp. 144-150.
- 2 Allgemeines Büro für nationale Statistiken Vietnams, quoted after: Lâm Thanh Liêm, *Vietnam: Mutation Progressive de la Société Vietnamienne: Repères Démographiques et Économiques*, Eglise D'Asie, Dossier et Document N° 8/2001, Supplément N° 339, p. 2.
- 3 According to statistics issued by the Vietnamese Bishops' Conference in September 2001, the Catholics in the country's 25 dioceses numbered 4,944,084 out of a total population of 76,716,203 or 6.44%. Cf. *Statistiques de L'Eglise Catholique Au Vietnam*, in: *Eglises d'Asie N° 343*, 16 décembre 2001, Document Annexe N°2, p. 31.
- 4 This article was also included in the new 1992 constitution. It was retained unaltered in the amendments to the constitution made in 2001. Cf. *Eglises d'Asie N° 345*, 16 janvier 2002, p. 22f.
- 5 In a survey of young people carried out by the youth magazine of the Communist Party, *Tuôi Tre*, to find out who they regarded as being role models, the Prime Minister, Phan Van Khai, claimed just 3.2% of the votes, while none of the other leading Communist figures was even mentioned. The journalists responsible for the survey were subsequently dismissed. Cf. *Trois journalistes de l'organe de presse le plus lu au Vietnam sanctionnés pour crime de lèse majesté*, *Eglises d'Asie N° 350*, 1 avril 2002, p. 23.
- 6 Cf. *Vietnam – Victorious but Poor*, in: V. Mallet, *The Trouble with Tigers, The Rise and Fall of South-East Asia*, London 1999, pp. 243-248.
- 7 Cf. G. Evers, *Wie weit geht der Wandel?, Vietnam zwischen Aufbruch und Stagnation*, in: *Herder Korrespondenz* 48 (1994), pp. 369-374.
- 8 Cf. G. Evers, *Bei Hồ Chí Minh's Nachlassverwaltern, Zur Diskrepanz zwischen Verfassung und Alltag in Vietnam*, in: *Katholische Missionen* 118 (1998), pp. 137-142.
- 9 Cf. *Herder Korrespondenz* 8 (1953), p. 402.
- 10 Cf. P. Gheddo, *Katholiken und Buddhisten in Vietnam*, München 1970, p. 44.
- 11 Cf. *Herder Korrespondenz* 10 (1955), p. 172.
- 12 Cf. P. Gheddo, *op. cit.* p. 78.
- 13 Cf. *Herder Korrespondenz* 20 (1965), p. 186f.
- 14 Cf. *Die Katholischen Missionen* 94 (1975), pp. 58-61.
- 15 P. Gheddo describes the relationship between the Catholics and President Ngo Dinh Diem as follows: "The Catholics celebrated him unanimously as the saviour of the fatherland and placed themselves completely at his service". Cf. P. Gheddo, *op. cit.* p. 132.
- 16 Cf. Jean Mais, *Religion et Communisme au Vietnam, A Propos de Deux Textes Théoriques, Echange France-Asie, Dossier N° 3/86*, Mars 1986.
- 17 The literature refers to the Unified Buddhist Church. It would be better to use the term Association of Buddhist Pagodas, since Buddhists do not normally talk of "churches". This description is used by B. R. Siebert, for instance, in: H. Kotte / R. Siebert, *op. cit.* p. 224.
- 18 The first ad limina visit after the reunification of the country was in 1980. Subsequent visits took place in 1985, 1990, 1996 and again in 2002, the number of bishops allowed to travel on each occasion varying considerably. Cf. *Eglises d'Asie, N° 346*, 1 février 2002, pp. 20-24.
- 19 This allegedly happened because only "South Vietnam" was officially a member. By contrast, six bishops participated "as guests" in the 7th general assembly of the FABC in Bangkok in January 2000.
- 20 Cf. *Vietnam: Bischofsversammlung als Aushängeschild*, in: *Katholische Missionen* 99 (1980), pp. 147-148.
- 21 Cf. Jean Mais, *Church-State Relations in Vietnam*, in: *Pro Mundi Vita, Asia-Australia Dossiers No. 35*, Brussels 1985/4.
- 22 Cf. *Echange France Asie, Dossier no. 72, Février 1982*.
- 23 *La Persécution des Chrétiens Protestants au Vietnam, Dossier et Documents N° 5/2000, Eglises d'Asie N° 309*, 16 mai 2000, pp. 19-26.
- 24 There are other estimates that put the number of Protestants in the whole of Vietnam in late 2001 at 1.2 million, 200,000 of whom are alleged to belong to the Southern ECVN, 10,000 to the Northern ECVN, 450,000 to the house churches in the south, 40,000 to the house churches in the north and 500,000 to the ethnic minorities in north and south Vietnam.
- 25 Cf. *La Tension reste vive dans les communautés protestantes des Haut Plateaux du Centre Vietnam*, in: *Eglises d'Asie, N° 344*, 1er Janvier 2002, p. 18f.
- 26 Cf. *Vietnam Evangelical Church to Open Seminary To Serve Growing Membership*, *UCA News* October 3, 2001.
- 27 Cf. *Amnesty International*, July 2001, p. 8, AI Index: ASA 41/005/200.
- 28 Cf. *Vietnam Government Decree on Religious Activities*, in: *Asia Focus*, June 18, 1999, p. 8.
- 29 Cf. *Directive orientant l'application d'un certain nombre d'articles du décret gouvernemental N° 26/1999/ND-CP du 14 avril 1999*, in: *Eglises d'Asie, N° 291*, 16 juillet 1999.
- 30 Les amendements apportés à la Constitution de 1992 reflètent les transformations de la société civile vietnamienne au cours de ces dernières années, in: *Eglises d'Asie N° 345*, 16 janvier 2002, p. 22f.
- 31 Cf. *Une Nouvelle Approche de la Religion dans le Parti Communiste Vietnamien*, in: *Eglises d'Asie, N° 171*, février 1994.
- 32 The annual consultations between the Vietnamese religious authorities and a delegation from the Vatican, which have been held for a number of years now, are regularly concerned with the occupation of vacant Episcopal sees. It is clearly part of religious policy that permission is given for the ordination of only a few bishops so that some sees remain vacant. At least Joseph Hoang Van Tiem was ordained as bishop of the diocese of Bui Chu in North Vietnam in August 2001.
- 33 Cf. G. Evers, *Immer noch kontrolliert, Katholiken und Kommunisten in Vietnam*, in: *Herder Korrespondenz* 54 (2000), pp. 526-532.

- 34 Cf. W. Hunger, *Kirchenkampf in Vietnam, Die Rolle des „Unionskomitees Patriotischer Katholiken“*, in: *Katholische Missionen* 104 (1985), pp. 162-166.
- 35 Of the 117 martyrs 96 were Vietnamese, 11 were Spanish Dominicans and 10 were priests of the Paris Mission Society.
- 36 Vietnam: Heiligsprechung mit Hindernissen, in: *Katholische Missionen* 107 (1988), pp. 149-160.
- 37 Cf. W. Hunger, Vietnam, in: *Katholische Missionen* 108 (1989), 98-101. He went to Rome in 1994 where he was first Vice-President and from 2001 President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. In February 2001 he was made a cardinal by John Paul II. Cardinal Thuan died in Rome on 16 September 2002.
- 38 Tradition has it that Mary appeared during the persecution of Christians in 1798 to a group of Catholics as they were praying in a remote mountainous area of La Vang near Quang Tri. The cathedral that was built there was badly damaged during the Vietnam War. A group of 10,000 pilgrims headed by the Archbishop of Hue first succeeded in making the traditional pilgrimage and holding a service in the cathedral ruins on 15 August 1981. Cf. W. Hunger, Vietnam, in: *Katholische Missionen* 103 (1984), pp. 201-205.
- 39 Bishops Call on Prime Minister, Reiterate Pending Petitions, in: *UCA News*, January 4, 2002; La Conférence des Evêques Catholiques expose au Premier Ministre Phan Van Khai un certain nombre de souhaits, *Eglise d'Asie*, N° 346, 1 février 2002, pp. 30-31.
- 40 So far the government has only allowed the Vietnamese Bishops' Conference to publish a two-monthly, 50-page information bulletin in an edition limited to 100 copies. In return, publication of the previous bulletin *Hiệp Thông* (Communio), which had appeared unlicensed since 1995, had to be discontinued. Cf. *Vietnam Bishops' Information Bulletin Relaunches With Government Approval*, *UCA News*, February 5, 2002; *Eglises d'Asie*, N° 346, 1 février 2002, p. 23.
- 41 Cf. Le nouveau président de la Conférence Episcopale rencontre le Premier ministre et lui expose la liste de la revendications de l'Eglise catholique dans le pays, in: *Eglises d'Asie*, N° 345, 16 janvier 2002, pp. 21-22.
- 42 Church Has Matured Under Communist Rule, Some Catholics Say, *UCA News*, May 10, 2002.
- 43 Cf. Considération du P. Chàn Tin au sujet de la mission de désintoxication menée par des dignitaires religieux Vietnamiens aux Etats-Unis, *Eglise d'Asie*, N° 356, 1 juillet 2002, p. 22f.
- 44 The Congregation of the Mother Co-Redemptrix was founded by the Catholic priest, Tran Dinh Thu, in the diocese of Bui Chu in 1953. The congregation was always strongly anti-Communist. In 1988, the congregation's main building in Hồ Chí Minh city was seized by the police and a number of priests and lay people were arrested. Father Thu was sentenced to 20 years in prison and was released after five years in 1993.
- 45 Cf. W. Hunger, Vietnam, in: *Katholische Missionen* 107 (1988) 62-65, p. 62.
- 46 Catholic Priest Arrested After Allegedly Causing 'Social Unrest', *UCA News* May 19, 2001; Cf. Amnesty International Deutschland, *Länderkurzinfo: Vietnam*, 01.06.2001, p. 7; *Menschenrechte in Vietnam 2001*, Internationale Gesellschaft für Menschenrechte.
- 47 Amnesty International, *Socialist Republic of Vietnam: Fr. Thadeus Nguyen Van Ly – Prisoner of Conscience*, AI Index: ASA 41/005/2001.
- 48 Le monastère Bénédictin de Thiên An accentue sa résistance à la tentative de spoliation de son domaine menée par les services gouvernementaux, in: *Eglises d'Asie*, N° 347, 16 février, 16. Cf. also: *Plainte du monastère Bénédictin de Thiên An aux autorités de l'état Vietnamien*, *ibid.* pp. 27-30.
- 49 Cf. J. Dournes, *Gott liebt die Heiden, Christliche Mission auf dem Plateau von Vietnam*, Freiburg 1968.
- 50 The Catholic radio station, Radio Veritas, which is run by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), broadcasts to Vietnam daily in Vietnamese as well as for the mountain peoples in tribal languages, e.g. the language of the Hmong. Cf. Catholics maintain faith through Radio Veritas, *UCA News* April 19, 2002.
- 51 Cf. W. Hunger, in: *Katholische Missionen* 116 (1996), pp. 97-100.
- 52 According to a directory published in May 2001 the Buddhist Association of Vietnam consists of 45 sections. There are 31,845 monks and nuns living in 14,043 pagodas. Cf. *UCA News*, May 31, 2001.
- 53 As Patriarch of the Unified Buddhist Church, Thich Huyen Quang made his point of view unmistakably clear in petitions to the government and in public declarations that Buddhism, which forms an integral part of the Vietnamese national heritage, must be involved in the construction of society. The Buddhists thus reject the Communist claim to political and ideological leadership of the country, which is written into the constitution. Cf. *Dossier of the Vietnam Committee on Human Rights, Religious Intolerance in Vietnam: Repression against the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam*, Gennevilliers 1995, pp. 16-22.
- 54 Cf. R. Templer, *Shadows and Wind, A View of Modern Vietnam*, London 1999, pp. 283-308.
- 55 Cf. K. Dietrich, *Verletzung der Religionsfreiheit in Vietnam*, in: *Stimmen der Zeit* 126 (2001), pp. 615-629.
- 56 Father Van Ly's participation in this event constituted one of the charges levelled against him by the police later in the same month of May 2001. Among the other charges were the passing on of material on the violation of religious freedom to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (CIRF).
- 57 "In our country, since the majority of the population are people with a belief or religion, there is a need for dialogue so as to understand, respect and love each other as well as help each other improve everybody's life. Such a dialogue must take place in the daily life among Catholics living in the same neighbourhood by communicating, doing business, trading and sharing food and clothes with one another. Religions must be the foundation for people to come close to one another. Besides, friendly meetings among leaders at every level should have an impact on religious followers, foster understanding and respect, and help enhance collaboration in service to the well-being of compatriots." Cf. *Vietnam Bishops' Pastoral for 2001*, Nr. 13, in: *UCA News*, October 6, 2001.
- 58 Cf. *Dossiers et Documents, Supplément Eglises d'Asie*, N° 171, 1994.
- 59 Cf. G. Evers, *Das Verhältnis von Staat und Kirche in einigen Ländern Asiens: Die Religionspolitik in der Volksrepublik China und Vietnam im Vergleich mit der von Taiwan, Singapur und Südkorea*, in: R.Malek/W.Prawdzik (Hrsg.), *Zwischen Autonomie und Anlehnung*, Nettetal 1989, pp. 55-73.
- 60 Party Alerted To Spread of Cults, Superstitious Practices, *UCA News*, May 11, 2001.

- 61 The Communist Party has taken over from the People's Republic of China the distinction between "legitimate religious activities" of the officially recognised "major" religions and the "superstitious practices" that form part of popular religious beliefs. The Vietnamese word for "superstition" – *mì tin* – is taken directly from the Chinese word – *mì xìn* – and only appeared in the Vietnamese language after 1949.
- 62 For example, the then Prime Minister, Vo Van Kiet, visited a lepers' hospital on 24 November 1995 that is run by nuns in Qui Hoa near Quyn Hon and expressed recognition of their work. Cf. *Caritas ja, Mission nein*, in: *Katholische Missionen* 116 (1996), p. 113.
- 63 Questioned by the Vietnamese Bishops' Conference, the head of the Office of Religious Affairs, Vu Quang, said that this limited permission or toleration will apply as long as it concerns institutions set up by "the people" that do not compete in any way with state schools.
- 64 Cf. *UCA News*, May 10, 2002.
- 65 Cf. W. M. Prohl, *Parlamentwahl in Vietnam, Neunundneunzig Komma Sieben Prozent*, in: *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Auslandsinformationen* 7 (2002), pp. 14-22; *New National Assembly Opens With Elected Religious Representatives*, *UCA News*, July 24, 2002.
- 66 Cf. *New National Assembly Opens With Elected Religious Representatives*, in: *UCA News*, July 24, 2002.
- 67 Cf. Werner M. Prohl, *Parlamentwahl in Vietnam, Neunundneunzig Komma Sieben Prozent*, in: *KAS/Auslandsinformationen*, 7(2002), pp. 14-22.
- 68 An anecdote makes this clear. During a football match the sun shone down brightly from the sky. The news vendor selling *Nhân Dân* extolled its virtues by shouting: "Strong sun! Avoid a headache! Buy a newspaper!".
- 69 Readers See Catholic Newspaper As Forum To Express Opinion, *Build Church*, *UCA News*, July 25, 2002.
- 70 Cf. Lâm Thanh Liêm, Vietnam: Mutation Progressive de la Société Vietnamienne: Repères Démographiques et Economiques, *Eglise D'Asie*, Dossier et Document N° 8/2001, Supplément N° 339, pp. 3-4.
- 71 Cf. Civil and Political Rights, Including the Question of Religious Intolerance, Report submitted by Mr. Abdelfattah Amor, Special Rapporteur, in accordance with Commission on Human Rights resolution 1998/18, on his visit to Vietnam, 29 December 1998. (<http://www.state.gov/www/global>).
- 72 Cf. *Vietnam News*, *The National English Language Daily* of 10 July 2002, p. 4.
- 73 Le voyage d'une délégation interreligieuse aux Etats-Unis a donné lieu à une controverse, *Eglises d'Asie*, N° 356, 1 juillet 2002.
- 74 Considérations du P. Chan Tin au sujet de la mission de désintoxication menée par des dignitaires religieux Vietnamiens aux Etats-Unis, in: *Eglises d'Asie*, N° 356, 1 juillet 2002, pp. 22-23.
- 75 Freedom of Religion Respected Nationwide, *Vietnamese Official Says*, *UCA News*, June 13, 2002.
- 76 In the French, as in the English, it is a question of attitudes that all begin with a "p", i.e. patience, prudence and perseverance.

