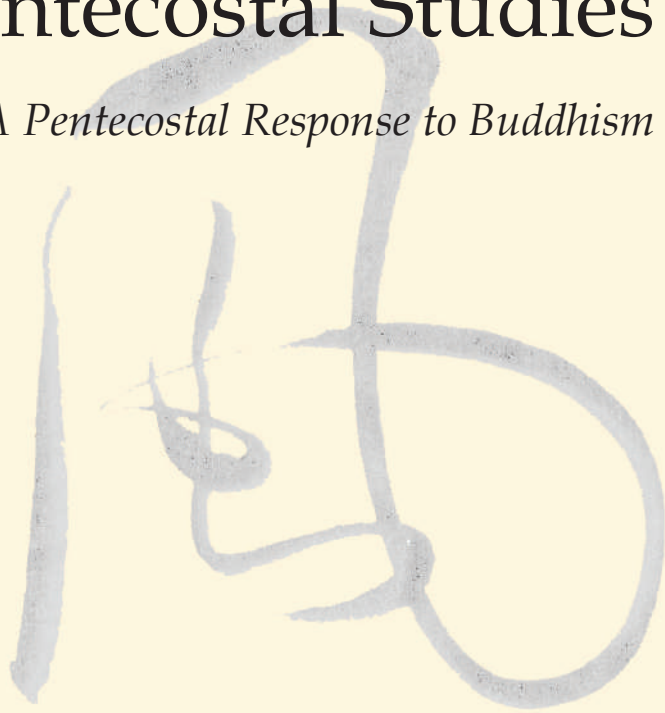
Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies

A Pentecostal Response to Buddhism



Volume 24, Number 2 (August 2021)

[AJPS 24.2 (August 2021), pp. 25-38]

Buddhism in Vietnam

by Jason Morris

Introduction and Thesis

For two millennia, Buddhism, one of the major world religions, has sought to provide a means through which humanity can encounter the divine, escape reality, and find peace. It has widely impacted the spiritual landscape of Vietnam for the past thousand years. Consequently, local and cross-cultural Christian workers in Vietnam must seek to effectively engage Buddhists when sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. In this article, I will discuss the history of Buddhism in Vietnam—its introduction into Vietnam, its spread throughout Vietnam, and its practice in modern-day Vietnam. Then, I will then make key observations for facilitating missiological engagement with Vietnamese Buddhists. These two major elements serve as a foundation for Christian workers to gain a better understanding of Buddhism in the Vietnamese context, and to more effectively engage Vietnamese Buddhists with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Delimitations

This paper does not attempt to address global Buddhism due to the expansive development of Buddhism over the past 2500 years. There is much debate among religious studies experts and Buddhist scholars on the number of official schools of Buddhism. This article will only refer

to the two major historical branches: *Mahayana* and *Theravada*. These developed within the first two hundred years of Buddhism.[1]

Buddhism in Vietnam

Buddhism was first established in northern India by Siddhartha Gautama, who became known as Lord Buddha. In the mid-500s BC (Gethin 2010, 23), it would have been hard for him to imagine the impact that this religion would have in Asia and around the world.

Within the first 300 years (Farhadian 2015, 145) of the birth of this religion, due to passionate Buddhist monks and influential political leaders in India, Buddhist missionaries began carrying the message of Buddhism outside of India. Buddhism made its way to Vietnam and became a significant part of the spiritual fabric of the Vietnamese people. While syncretized with the cult of spirits/ancestral worship, Buddhism has survived and become one of the country's largest organized religions. Buddhism is widely practiced throughout modern-day Vietnam. It has become a defining worldview for many people who do not actually ascribe to its religious tenants.

Early History of Buddhism in Vietnam

Although some scholars assume that Buddhism was introduced to Vietnam from China, "historical evidence indicates that Indians first brought Buddhism to Vietnam" (T. T. Nguyen and Hoàng 2008, 9). Northern Vietnam was along the direct sea route between China and India, so it became the center of activity for Buddhist propagation (SE Asia Project Staff 1966, 11).While the exact date is unclear, the religion clearly had made its debut in Vietnam by the second century AD:

> Indian merchants often traveled in the company of Buddhist monks, who would pray for peace, a smooth passage on the seas and good trade. . . . Monks on Indian trading ships certainly

[1]At the second Buddhist council, held in Vaisali in Northwestern Bihar around 350 BC, a division rose among the monks gathered for this council over the interpretation of the Buddhist scriptures (Noss and Grangaard 2018, 192). This disagreement led to the irreparable division of the Buddhist religion that resulted in the formation of its two major branches. Those branches would eventually become known as Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions (Bowker 1997, 174). Initially the Theravāda group was larger, due to their strict conservative interpretation of Buddhist scripture, but in modern times has become the smaller group, while the Mahāyāna tradition, which appeals more to the laity and common people because of its loose interpretation of scripture and emphasis on experience, has become the largest branch of Buddhism (Farhadian 2015, 148).

> arrived [in Vietnam]during the first century AD, but it wasn't until the end of the second century AD when monks' names appeared on passenger list (Xuan Thanh Nguyen 2020, 9).

Early popular attractions of Buddhism included its power to tame nature, and foster agriculture. "Buddhism sank deep roots in the Vietnamese psyche because all its metaphors had to do with water" (Kiernan 2017, 93). It also continued the tradition of focusing prominence on selected Viet women. This symbolic affinity with local Vietnamese religions resulted in a deep connection with the spiritual practice of the people.

Vietnamese Buddhists teach the following:

> By the time that Buddhism was introduced into China, twenty Buddhist Towers had already been built [in Vietnam], more than 500 monks trained and fifteen books of Buddhist sutras translated in Luy Lau. . . . The foundation of the Buddhist center in Luy Lau was probably influenced by Mahayana Buddhism (T. T. Nguyen and Hoàng 2008, 19).

"At Luy Lâu . . . Vietnamese monks, follow Indian style, wear clothes made of red material, and do not follow Confucian rites in their relationships with other people" (Kiernan 2017, 93). The class of people coming through Vietnam from India at that time were monks, diplomats, students of Sanskrit, and other religiously cultured people (Mole 1964, 9).

Season of Buddhist Popularity in Vietnam

Buddhism established itself among Vietnamese traditional religious practice and thought soon after being brought to Vietnam, yet its advance stagnated for some time in the early Middle Ages. Then, between AD 940-1570, Buddhism hit a growth spurt (Kiernan 2017, 17). During the Dinh dynasty, approximately AD 971, there was a policy to support Buddhism. Though not declared Vietnam's official religion, Buddhism was understood to be its foremost organized religion (Xuan Thanh Nguyen 2020, 21). Early Jesuit missionaries who arrived in Vietnam in the seventeenth century noted that "Buddhism enjoyed greater prestige in Vietnam than in China, and that there were innumerable pagodas and idols" at that time (Phan 2006, 83). This was a significant period in Vietnam's development as an independent nation, beginning with the Lý dynasty (AD 1009-1028) and it coincided with a season of growth for Buddhism.

Although some of the rulers within the Lê dynasty, AD 980-1009, not to be confused with the Lý dynasty, practiced and respected Buddhist teaching, it was the famous Buddhist monk, Van Hanh, who helped overthrow the Lê dynasty to help the first king of the Lý dynasty take the throne (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 2766). This act of heroism by a Buddhist monk to help establish the Lý dynasty seems to have helped Buddhism rise to a new level of respectability within the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people.

Kiernan notes that the Lý dynasty was marked by economic growth and political independence:

> The Lý era was the first long and relatively stable period in independent Vietnam. . . . The Lý dynasty slowly moved to assemble the regions of Đại Việt into a more centralized kingdom. . . . It forged a new Việt political culture that mingled indigenous spirit worship with Buddhism . . . [and] other northern cultural influences (2017, 148).

The Lý dynasty was the first Vietnamese ruling power to implement something similar to what the Indian king Asoka had done in India several century's earlier, that is making a religious declaration for the Vietnamese nation state regarding Buddhism as its official religion. "King Ly Thai To, the founder of the Ly Dynasty, was the pupil of the Ly Khanh Van and was initiated into the monkhood. . . . and fully supported Buddhism" (Xuan Thanh Nguyen 2020, 25). This deep commitment to the religious, philosophical, and spiritual aspect of Buddhism under the Lý dynasty continued with the next ruling family.

Under the Trần dynasty, Buddhism built on the popularity it had gained under Lý kings. The Lý dynasty was the first ruling family to promote and advance Buddhism from a position of political power, but under the Trần dynasty, Buddhism became the national religion (Xuan Thanh Nguyen 2020, 33). "During his 33-year reign, from 1225-1258, Tran Thai Tong governed the country while studying Buddhism. . . ." (Xuan Thanh Nguyen 2020, 34). When Trần Thai Tong's son, Trần Nhan Tong, came to power, his personal devotion to Buddhism through scholarly thinking and writing helped solidify Buddhism as Vietnam's national religion.

Buddhism's Season of Decline in Vietnam

Under the Lý and Trần dynasties, from the tenth to fourteenth centuries, Buddhism gained popularity and expanded throughout Vietnam. But, in 1428, the Lê dynasty, headed by local hero Lê Lợi,

seized control of Vietnam (Tran Trong Kim 2015, 199). He not only changed the name of the country to Đại Việt, but also prioritized Confucianism. This left Buddhism no longer protected or promoted by the ruling family (Kiernan 2017, 200). With the coming of the Lê dynasty, "Buddhism had clearly been forced to yield its place to Confucianism . . . " (T. T. Nguyen and Hoàng 2008, 165-66). On a national scale, Buddhism declined throughout the fifteenth to the eighteenth century.

During the Trịnh, Nguyễn, and Minh Mạng rule, and the coinciding period of French colonial rule, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were spurts of Buddhist popularity at the grass roots level. But, Buddhism remained largely unsupported by national/official rulers. Despite some Nguyễn lords' personal affinity for Buddhism, Confucian philosophy and religious ideals largely superseded Buddhist thought throughout this period (Kiernan 2017, 276). Thus, Buddhism in Vietnam began to decline under the early Le Dynasty and continued in decline until the 1920s.

This extended period of decline in Buddhism's popularity and its lack of official support from the courts should not be understood as a replacement or removal of Buddhism. At the grassroots level, the religious and spiritual ideals of Buddhism had sunk deeply into the cultural and spiritual worldview of many Vietnamese people from north to south.

Twentieth-Century Buddhist Revival in Vietnam

After several centuries of stagnation, a combination of factors merged to fan into flame a national Buddhist revival in Vietnam in the early twentieth century. Buddhist historians and scholars agree that this revival was neither sustained nor defined by the political ebb and flow that happened throughout the twentieth century in Vietnam. Philip Taylor notes that this revival took place

> in a transnational context when many Asian countries, from the nineteenth century on, faced similar crises brought on by modernization and imperialism. . . . From the 1920s, Vietnamese Buddhist reformers revitalize[d] their religion inspired in part by the Chinese monk Taixu's (1890-1947) blueprint to modernize and systematize *sangha* education and temple administration (Taylor 2007, 252).

The tagline for this Buddhist revival, initiated by Taixu, was "Buddhism for this world" or in Vietnamese, *Nhan Gian Phat Giao*.

Taixu ". . . believed that Buddhism had become ossified in China and needed to be reformed into a force that would both inspire and improve society" (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 2567). Reform-minded Vietnamese Buddhists were most interested in Chinese efforts to re-tailor Buddhism to the needs of a rapidly-changing world (Goscha 2016, 170). Much of this renewal of Buddhism was not led by traditional monks or scholars but rather by Buddhist professionals from medical and educational sectors of society (Taylor 2007, 251).

This revival was unique in many ways. One notable difference was that the center of the movement came from modern urban areas rather than rural mountainous areas.

Nguyen notes:

> New [Buddhist] centers began to spring up on in large cities such as Saigon and Hanoi. Such new centers were composed of large pagodas, modern monastic schools, and printing facilities for the dissemination of books, magazines, newspapers (T. T. Nguyen and Hoàng 2008, 271).

In addition to the shift in training and the publication of material, this Buddhist revival also called for clergy to find ways to engage in humanitarian relief through the development of relief organizations, medical clinics, and helping the poor and oppressed (Goscha 2016, 170). The focus on humanitarian involvement was due partly to a new interpretation of the fundamental teaching about alleviating human suffering. This new interpretation of the old message moved the focus of Buddhism off of the afterlife, reincarnation, and nirvana, and placed significant emphasis on the here and now (Taylor 2007, 258). The positive impact of these humanitarian organizations was seen in part during the severe famine of 1944-1945, when Buddhist relief agencies helped throughout Northern Vietnam.

Finally, the Buddhist revival that began in the early twentieth century began to prepare the way for a unified Buddhist Church[2] throughout Vietnam. By this time both Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhism[3] and various sects of these major branches were practiced. Historically, Buddhism's major branches could peacefully coexist but not operate under a unified institutional banner. While maintaining

[2]Although possibly a bit unusual to the Christian community, the word "Church" as associated with the Buddhist movement in Vietnam and in other countries is an acceptable and often an official part of the name.

[3]See footnote on page 1 for an explanation of Theravada Buddhism.

aspects of their respective identities, this revival brought together Vietnamese Buddhists from every sect of Buddhism:

> An important event in the history of Vietnamese Buddhism, and the results of the movement to revive Buddhism, occurred in 1951 in [the city of] Hue: the regional Buddhist organizations gathered to establish the General Association of Vietnamese. This was considered to be the first campaign for uniting Buddhism in Vietnam (Xuan Thanh Nguyen 2020, 66).

Just one year after the legal recognition of this historic Buddhist association, the political landscape changed due to the 1954 Geneva Accords (Gheddo 1968, 57). This effectively divided Vietnam into two nations following withdrawal of French colonial powers. This, too, impacted the development of Buddhism.

In South Vietnam under the Ngo Dinh Diem regime, Buddhism experienced explosive growth. "Under Diem there is no doubt that Buddhism enjoyed the fullest religious freedom. . . . From 1954-63, Buddhism amply developed in South Vietnam and became clearly aware not only of its religious identity but also of its political strength" (Gheddo 1968, 176). In December 1963, at the Xá Lợi pagoda in Saigon, another significant Buddhist council further stirred the revival of Buddhism and moved the community even more toward a unified Buddhist Church (Xuan Thanh Nguyen 2020, 72).

Blended Expression of Buddhist Thought and Practice in Vietnam

Vietnamese Buddhism, introduced by Indian Buddhist proselytizers and merchants, fortified and propagated by both Vietnamese royalty and Chinese rulers, has seemingly found a permanent place in the Vietnamese culture. Its blended rendition of Buddhism is influenced by both major branches, the Mahāyāna and Theravāda schools. Bowker notes, "Vietnamese Buddhism differs from that of other mainland SE Asian Buddhist countries in that it was both Theravadin and Mahayanist from an early stage" (1997, 177). The Mahāyāna school of thought was likely the first to reach Vietnam from India and theologically remains dominant in Vietnam. The syncretistic nature of Vietnamese spirituality has since the early AD 1000s blurred the line between the two major branches (K. S. Nguyen 2019, Kindle: Loc. 517). As mentioned, the 1951 meeting in Huế that established the General Association of Buddhists, was a major step not only in the Buddhist revival, but also in formally bringing all Buddhist branches together under one blended heading (Xuan Thanh Nguyen 2020, 66).

Another significant formal attempt to blend the various schools of Buddhist thought was the 1963 meeting that saw the founding of the United Church of Vietnamese Buddhism (also called the Association of Unified Buddhism). "In this organization of unified Buddhism an attempt has been made to integrate the two great currents of Mahayana and Theravada to high-level contacts and discussions between bonzes in (sic) layman of both currents"(Gheddo 1968, 268).

This organization provided a unified voice for Buddhists as they sought to protect their religious faith and stand against the injustices of the Vietnam War (Topmiller 2000, 234). In addition to providing a unified platform, "The United Vietnamese Buddhist Church . . . united Theravadins and Mahayanist[s] in a single ecclesiastical structure" (Bowker 1997, 177). These initiatives to unify Buddhism had far-reaching impact in blending the major branches and various sects of each branch.

Following the reunification of Vietnam in 1975 under communist rule, a congress convened in Hanoi in 1981 to establish a new association. The purpose was to unify Buddhists in a manner compatible with the one-party government that had reunified Vietnam, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. "The Congress set up the Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation, approved the Charter and Action Program under the motto 'Dharma-Nation-Socialism'" (Xuan Thanh Nguyen 2020, 74). The establishment of this association satisfied the government and provided a national platform for a unified Buddhist voice throughout the country.

Summary of Buddhism in Vietnam

Vietnamese Buddhism embodies the slogan of the early twentieth-century Buddhist revival, "Buddhism for this world." It lends religious and spiritual components of both major currents, while at the same time embracing social responsibility for the here and now (Taylor 2007, 284). As Xuan Thanh Nguyen notes, "Vietnamese Buddhism is the convergence of both Mahayana (from the North) and Theravada (from the South) . . . while also being influenced and shaped by Confucianism and Taosim as well as Vietnamese folk religions" (Nguyen 2020, 93).

Numbers differ widely regarding current-day numbers of Buddhist adherents within Vietnam. Buddhism remains a major player on the religious scene. Buddhist experts indicate that about 12-18 percent of the Vietnamese population are practicing Vietnamese Buddhist (Kane 2015). The Vietnamese government census shows that 19.8 percent of the population claim to be Buddhist (Vietnam Public Records 2009, 1). It is believed by religious studies researchers, however, that at least 50

percent of the Vietnamese population—with many not actively practicing Buddhism—ascribe to some aspects of a Buddhist worldview.

Missiological Applications

The prevalence of Buddhism in Vietnam in both practice and worldview necessitates that Christian workers, desiring to engage Buddhists with the gospel of Jesus Christ, seriously consider the implications of this religion on the average person. Understanding Vietnamese Buddhism and the rich religious tapestry of the nation, coupled with the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, enables the Christian worker to contextualize and communicate the gospel comprehensibly to the Vietnamese Buddhist mind.

In the following paragraphs I explore a few missiological insights that aid in contextualizing the gospel so that it can be understood, and so that the deeper questions Vietnamese Buddhists may have can be resolved.

Knowing the Vietnamese Orientation to Buddhist Doctrine

A working knowledge of the doctrinal tenets and ideological perspectives of global Buddhism will sometimes, but not always, prove helpful. In some instances, this kind of knowledge may be unnecessary for Christian workers in Vietnam. Due to the syncretistic nature of Vietnamese folk religion—including Buddhism—(Nguyen 2019, Kindle: Loc. 517), simply knowing the official perspective of global Buddhism is insufficient when dealing with Vietnamese Buddhists. This is because: (1) Confucian and Taoistic thought have greatly influenced Vietnamese Buddhism; (2) blended aspects of both major branches of Buddhism, Mahāyāna and Theravāda, have also joined into one national Buddhist religion. This syncretistic expression of Buddhism must inform evangelistic engagement with Vietnamese Buddhists. In Sri Lanka and parts of India, one may engage in deep theological discussion with Buddhists from the official doctrinal position of global Buddhism due to one's familiarity with Buddhist scriptures (Fernando 2019, 166). Such an approach is likely to prove unsuccessful in Vietnam due to a lack of emphasis on doctrinal teaching. Vietnamese Buddhists do not like to think deeply about religious practices, choosing a more mystical and less philosophical approach to religion and spirituality. In a conversation on October 30, 2019, Khoi Phan, a former Buddhist and shaman, expressed to me that despite philosophical and religious contradictions between aspects of Vietnamese folk religion in Vietnamese Buddhism, many choose to accept both religions at the same time but do not want to talk

deeply about it. Understanding contrasts between Vietnamese Buddhism related to Buddhist doctrine at large can greatly inform cross-cultural workers when engaging Vietnamese Buddhists with the gospel.

Awareness of Key Spiritual Ideas Among Vietnamese Buddhists

In addition to understanding the Vietnamese perspective on Buddhist doctrine, one must also see the critical importance of remaining aware of the broader perspective of spirituality embraced by Buddhist practitioners and those with a Buddhist worldview.

Though not a formalized religion with a holy book, monks, or temples, the animistic practice of spirit worship is likely the oldest and most practiced form of spirituality within Vietnamese culture. It is often combined with Buddhism. Animistic practices of Vietnam remain deeply embedded in the social, religious, and psychological makeup of the people and thus bend the rules of Buddhism, creating a sort folk Buddhism (Bowers 2003, 4):

> The cult of spirits, . . . extends back to the origins of the race, preceding imported philosophies. . . . Often described as animism, spirit worship has been described by many writers as a Southeast Asian cultural subtract, an endemic religion, tied to place an enduring through time (Taylor 2007, 16).

Father Leopold Cadiere (1929, 275), who served in Vietnam from 1882-1945, believed that "the underlying web of Vietnamese religion is pervasive animism." The cult of spirits is as old as Vietnamese culture itself and is the altar at which all other religions are expected to bow. Reg Reimer observes that veneration of ancestors is one of the most prevalent aspects of the cult of spirits:

> The veneration of ancestors is the most widely practiced religious ritual in all of Vietnam. This is a high form of animism which ascribes spiritual power to the spirits of the parties' family members. . . . The rituals for honoring ancestors are among the most highly developed Vietnamese cultural institutions (2011, 6).

In discussing folk spirituality within Vietnam, Peter Phan states,

> Vietnamese indigenous religion is characterized by a belief in a multitude of spirits . . . and above all by the cult of ancestors.

> This is the primary religious matrix into which [other religions have been] amalgamated (2006, 92).

Religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, which many assume to be official Vietnamese religions, are only Vietnamese to the extent that they have assimilated the cult of spirits. The philosophical aspects of these three main religions have been syncretized with the cult of spirits (Phan 2006, 27). Folk Buddhism often thrives in this type of religious and spiritual milieu. In Vietnam, such syncretized folk Buddhism departs from many of the high religious ideals of reincarnation and nirvana that are central to traditional Buddhism. It embraces a more pragmatic spirituality for the here and now and the afterlife (Bowers 2003, 6).

A Need for Truth, Grace, and Power

A keen understanding of Buddhism and its localized expression within Vietnam is nonnegotiable. Moreover, the cross-cultural gospel worker must maintain a tenacious commitment to sharing the truth of the Word—seasoned with grace and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Understanding Vietnamese Buddhism and its worldview assumptions only serves the cross-cultural evangelist when that information helps contextualize the gospel into a clear, understandable presentation of the good news of Jesus. In order for Vietnamese Buddhists to be saved, the grace and truth that came through Jesus must be unashamedly presented (Peiris 1980, 32). God has extended his grace to Buddhist people, and the truth must be declared for them to know about this great offer of grace (Thirumalai 2003, 158). In discussing aspects of engaging folk Buddhists, Russell Bowers states, “if we love [Buddhist] people one of the things we will urgently share with them is the words [of truth] they need to hear”(Bowers 2003, 71-72).

The Scriptures are clear regarding the importance of gospel ministry being carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to fill and empower his people to complete the task that he had given them (Acts 1:8):

> The church, God’s new creation (II Cor. 5:17), is created by the empowering of the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost, as the incipient church gathered together, “suddenly a sound like a blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house . . . all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit” (Waltke and Yu 2007, 295).

Through Spirit-empowered prayer and gospel proclamation, the forces of darkness are broken. People can be set free by the truth of the gospel (Peiris 1980, 31). The Holy Spirit gives cross-cultural workers the necessary power to boldly proclaim the message of grace and truth in a manner understandable to the Vietnamese mind.

Conclusion

Around the world and throughout time and a myriad of religious constructs, people have sought to quench their spiritual thirst, bring peace to their hearts, and gain hope for eternity. In Vietnam, a syncretized version of Buddhism is one way people have tried to quench their spiritual thirst. This article clarifies Vietnamese Buddhism by tracing its introduction and formation throughout history. With this basic understanding of how Buddhism has taken shape and how it is practiced in Vietnam, cross-cultural gospel workers can better comprehend Vietnamese Buddhism. In the power of the Holy Spirit, they can more clearly communicate the message of Christ's grace and truth.

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