

Vietnam



Philip Taylor, ed. *Modernity and Re-enchantment: Religion in Post-revolutionary Vietnam*.

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DURING THE past decades, two topics have dominated the conversations of Vietnam scholars. *Modernity and Re-enchantment* defines, documents, and discusses each issue thus providing a huge contribution to Vietnam Studies, as well as to cross-cultural research. The first issue concerns the effects of modernity on religious practice. This is often associated with *Đổi Mới*, the 1986 renovation that catapulted Vietnam into the market economy, lessened restrictions on religious activities, and led to increased religious activities. How has the market economy

influenced religious practice? Is religious activity increasing or decreasing in Vietnam? Are all religious activities and behaviors equally valued or are some considered to be more relevant to contemporary concerns? Also, what is meant by “modernity”? Do different individuals or social groups have different ideas about what it means to be modern? What are the potential varieties of modernity and how do they impact religious practice? These questions are addressed in this volume. The second issue concerns re-enchantment, the gap between outsider and insider perceptions of religion in Vietnam, and the role of the state in religious practice. Whereas scholars often read about religious intolerance, and Vietnam was placed on the US Department of State’s list of countries that restrict religious freedom, what they see in the field is something entirely different. What they see, in fact, is a lively, dynamic, and complicated web of religious behavior that is flourishing in contemporary Vietnam. Contributors to the volume address such questions as: Is Vietnam becoming more religiously active, or have people always practiced their religions, albeit quietly? How are state-sponsored festivals religious in nature? Why does the state promote some practices but reject others? How do individuals and religious groups respond to state intervention?

The book emerged out of two international workshops on religion in Vietnam held at the Australian National University in the summer of 2005, as part of their Vietnam Update Series. The first workshop was titled “Religion in Contemporary Vietnam” and the second “Not by Rice Alone: Making Sense of Spirituality in Reform-era Vietnam.” The book includes the work of seventeen researchers, including independent scholars, religious practitioners, sociologists, historians, and anthropologists.

In the introductory chapter Taylor situates the book within the larger context of global research on religion. Why study Vietnam? What do studies of Vietnam have to offer cross-cultural studies? First, Vietnam challenges the prediction that religions will lose their importance with the rise of capitalism, that local identities will dissolve into a monoculture, and that all communist states are opposed to religion. Instead, Vietnam represents a continuum and for every rule there is an exception. For example, some religions lose importance with globalization while others thrive, some religions emphasize local identities in a global context whereas other local practices disappear, and the state is not singularly opposed to religion but uses religion to promote certain values and develop citizenship. Secondly, Vietnam provides ethnographers with the opportunity to study the relationship between religious belief and practice in a newly opened market economy but, at the same time, it is a place where “modernity has seldom been appreciated.” In addition to setting forth the main topics of the book and situating Vietnam in cross-cultural research, the introduction raises questions about what we do not know about Vietnam, such as the role of transnationalism in re-enchantment and modernity, how ideas about the relationship between materiality and consumption are contested, and how we can explain the rise of place-based religions in regions characterized by movement and migration.

One of the stated goals of the book is to present a “new wave of scholarship” based on ethnographic fieldwork and the volume is extremely successful in com-

pleting this task. The articles are rich in field data, they are clear and well written and they avoid excess jargon. The ethnographic articles cover several different religious and/or ritual practices and several different locales. This is a great addition to Vietnamese studies because although several scholars have dealt with questions of modernity and re-enchantment in Vietnam, they often focus on a particular kind of ritual or a particular place (TAI 1983, viii–ix; FJELSTAD and NGUYEN 2006, 7–8; MALARNEY 2002; NGUYEN Thi Hien, 2002, vi; NORTON 2002, 69; TAYLOR 2004, 9–13). This book adds depth and variety to the dialogue.

The chapters are organized into themes, and each deals with a specific set of issues in modernity and re-enchantment. This section of the review will present some of the more important findings. Importantly, ethnographic research employs a holistic approach that often complicates issues, making them more complex but better understood. In Chapter 5 Kirsten Endres says the motivations of spirit mediums are no longer simple and linear, but are multiple and diverse. Individuals respond differently to integration into a market economy and they respond in markedly different ways. Chapter 6, written by Pham Quynh Phuong, describes how female mediums turn to the strong male figure of Tran Hung Dao for empowerment. Chapter 8, written by Elise DeVido, explains that members of the Buddhist Revival turn to “engaged Buddhism” to empower the world, nation and spirit. Nir Avieli (Chapter 4) and Thien Do (Chapter 5) show that many people use food or votive offerings to imbue their rituals with meaning. Ethnographic research also reveals that histories are often imagined: Chapter 8 argues that the Buddhist revival is not new and that it has been around for a long time, and is not just a “political” movement but instead is shaped by social, spiritual, and transnational forces as well as immigration. John Chapman (Chapter 9) explores the so-called primacy of Zen Buddhism as one such imagined history.

In Vietnam the state influences religious practice, but it is not a simple matter of restricting religious freedom. Chapters by Kate Jellema (Chapter 2) and Horim Choi (Chapter 3) examine how the state guides religion by promoting certain activities (for example, ancestor worship and communal village festivals) and limiting others (spirit possession and fortune telling), but guarantees individuals and many organizations religious freedom. Even so, certain religions have been restricted while others are encouraged to grow. For example, in Chapter 9 John Chapman discusses why and how the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam has long been persecuted whereas the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha is the official Buddhism of Vietnam. As the state has been publicly accused of curtailing religious freedom, it has tried to demonstrate the opposite by public displays such as inviting Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh back to Vietnam for a three-month teaching tour after his forty-year exile.

It may be futile or even impossible to say what is Vietnamese and what is foreign because the lines are blurred and the religions of Vietnam are global. Buddhism and Christianity are world religions but ancestor veneration, *lên đồng* spirit possession, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao are also practiced in several different countries, having traveled with overseas Vietnamese. In fact, in Chapter 12, Andrew Wells Dang says that the religious practices of Vietnam are so widespread that the state may guide

but is no longer able to control them. Overseas Vietnamese, for example, are able to exert a great deal of religious influence by providing funds for religious development, supporting certain religions over others, and by trying to influence the state. They have influenced the Buddhist revival, spirit possession, Catholicism, and the presence of NGOs in Vietnam.

The migration and mobility of Vietnamese populations is re-enacted in ritual. Many rituals emphasize leaving the natal village or home and a subsequent return to place of origin. According to Kate Jellema (Chapter 2) this leaving and returning is characteristic of ancestors and their festivals, migrants who return to their native villages to celebrate ancestral rites, and to overseas Vietnamese. Ancestral rituals are encouraged by the state because they are thought to promote good social behavior and citizenship and they tie individuals to society thus preventing social anomie. Such rites also legitimize the mobility of people. In Chapter 3 Horim Choi shows us that migration is not limited to overseas Vietnamese who leave the country, and is common even in “traditional villages” where natives need help with the production of local goods and most of the migrants are illegal. In such villages, communal ceremonies help to make statements about village history and celebrate a return to their roots.

Migration sometimes leads to the veneration of marginal characters, such as the spirits of deceased travelers, who are associated with ancestors from southern or frontier areas. Do Thien (Chapter 5) also says that it is common to find people making votive offerings to individuals who died young or died violent deaths in such areas, and the status of those dead are sometimes raised so they become tutelary deities of their communities. Why are such individuals venerated in migrant communities? They represent the marginal, they are liminal both in social standing and geography, and elevating their status represents an attempt to pull them into the care of a community.

In Vietnam, as well as many other parts of the world, “modernity” is not new; it is a continuation of processes that began during the colonial era. Therefore the historical context of modernity must be known before the religious behavior can be fully understood. For example, in Chapter 6 Endres states that female practitioners of spirit possession were criticized in French colonial literature for trying to be too modern (dancing in public) but also for not being modern enough (practicing a traditional religion.) Such criticisms are commonly found among Vietnamese populations today. Also, Elise DeVido says the Buddhist Revival began in the 1920s and it had different characteristics in northern, central, and southern Vietnam. The recent return of Thich Nhat Hanh to Vietnam can only be appreciated in the view of John Chapman (Chapter 9) in light of his association with the Buddhist Revival and the presentation of his five-point peace proposal to Lyndon Johnson in 1966, an act that led to his exile.

The population of Vietnam is diverse and many groups have specific interests based on age, gender, class, geographic point of origin, migration, and religious affiliation. This helps to explain why Vietnam is characterized by multiple modernities, and it would be incorrect or even irresponsible to assert otherwise. Endres declares that the performance of ritual is a creative process that facilitates the contest

between multiple modernities, and many groups are in the process of negotiating modernity. *Len dong* spirit mediums are, for example, currently engaged in discussions over what constitutes a beautiful ceremony. Does a beautiful ceremony follow tradition closely or can some things change? How much change is possible? What can change and what has to stay the same? Performance also involves the development and spread of imagined histories, including the idea that Zen is the basis of Vietnamese Buddhism even though it is difficult to find a Zen master (for example, Alexander Soucy, Chapter 10); that ancestor worship is the fundamental Vietnamese religion even though many other kinds of dead are worshipped (for example, Do Thien, Chapter 5); and the designation of Catholicism as a “foreign religion” even though it has a several-hundred-year history in Vietnam (for example, Jacob Ramsay, Chapter 11).

The performance of ritual allows individuals and groups the opportunity to try alternate ways of doing things, and provides researchers with ways to measure and assess change. The study of ritual performance in Vietnam has revealed that many rituals have a symbolic value for the dead and the living. For example, the use of food in ancestral rituals shows that food is given to the dead, but in Chapter 4 Nir Avieli says it has significant social consequences for the living. Food can define family boundaries and clarify status relationships, feasting helps individuals to increase nutritional status, and the redistribution of food by extended family members expresses family solidarity. At the same time, the ways in which food is (or is not) consumed expresses social conflict and a reluctance to become indebted to another person or family.

Do Thien (Chapter 5) explores the presentation of burnt offerings as a way to honor the dead that has social consequences for the living. The distribution of burnt offerings holds spiritual and market forces in check and balance because the status economy gives to the offerings to kin-based order, thereby developing moral values that impact the market economy. The market economy then feeds its surplus into the status economy. The market and status economies are thus not entirely separate from one another: they are linked, they work together, and they enhance each other.

Religious change can empower people, helping them to deal with contemporary problems. For example, the incorporation of St. Tran into Tu Phu has helped women who have been negatively influenced by *Đổi Mới* due to the narrowing of female social roles. Pham Quynh Phuong (Chapter 7) states that possession by St. Tran elevates the status of women, legitimizes their authority, and explains how and why their behavior differs from that of other women. Religious change can also help to empower the state. Ancestral rituals emphasize the coming and going of the dead and the living, and Kate Jellema (Chapter 2) asserts that they provide an available model for the state that emphasizes the return of Vietnamese to the homeland. Ancestor veneration and communal village festivals also help to deal with problems of social isolation in a world that is characterized by migration and rapid social change. Finally, the state is able to use religion to highlight its strengths to the populace. By inviting, for example, Thich Nhat Hanh back to his native country, the state was able to illustrate that it has changed its attitude toward

religious freedom. Religion is clearly thriving in Vietnam and it is in a constant state of flux as it negotiates change, defines values, and helps people to deal with contemporary problems. These processes occur under the sometimes watchful eye of a state that recognizes how important religion is to people and to the state.

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