

Religion

Religion has exerted a deep influence on Vietnamese culture and the Vietnamese concept of life. Their attitudes towards life, death, and the world beyond bear deep imprints of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism.

BUDDHISM

The predominant religion in Vietnam is Buddhism, which is also one of the world's great religions. Buddhism was introduced into Vietnam under Chinese domination, in the second century B.C., by Chinese immigrants and by Indian preachers coming by sea. Buddhism became the state religion of Vietnam under the Ly Dynasty (1010-1214). Several kings took the cassock or retired into a pagoda after their abdication. Buddhist monks served as counselors to the king at court. Since the Tran Dynasty (1225-1440), Buddhism has lost the status of a state religion but nevertheless remained the dominant religion in Vietnam and a major cultural force.

Buddhism was originated in India by Shiddharta (563-483 B.C.) or Gautama Buddha, which means the Enlightened One." According to Buddha, man was born into this world to suffer. The cause of suffering is the craving for wealth, fame, and power that necessarily brings about frustration and dissapointment. In order to be free from suffering, man must suppress its ultimate cause: craving. He must not be attached to anything in this "world appearance" and live a life full of virtue, according to the Eightfold Path. This core of Buddhist teaching holds that there are eight "right" ways to live virtuously: right views, right thought, right conduct, right speech, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right meditation. An individual's fate in this existence is determined by what he has done in his previous existence. This is the law of Karma, or cause and effect. The soul does not perish at death, but reincarnates in another existence and this goes on and on. The Buddhist's goal is to be freed from the circle of reincarnation and reach Nirvana, which is a state of complete redemption and supreme happiness. Theoretically, any person may become a Buddha by suppressing craving and following the Eightfold Path, but those who actually attain Buddhahood are rare.

There are two branches of Buddhism: Hinayana (Little Vehicle) also called Theravada Buddhism, which nourishes in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma, and Mahayana (Great Vehicle) Buddhism which is found in China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Most Vietnamese Buddhists belong to the Mahayana branch. The Theravada branch exists in communities of ethnic Cambodians and Vietnamese living in the Mekong Delta.

The great majority of Vietnamese people regard themselves as Buddhists but not all of them actively participate in Buddhist rituals at the pagoda. For centuries, the Buddhist clergy had not been organized into a hierarchical system. Each pagoda was completely autonomous of others and was entirely administered by local individuals or communities. The first attempt to organize Buddhism on a national scale was achieved by the General Buddhist Association in 1955. Further efforts culminated in the establishment of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam in 1964.

CONFUCIANISM

Confucianism is more of a religious and social philosophy than a religion in the accepted meaning of the word. It has no church, no clergy, and no Holy Book. It advocates a code of social behavior that man ought to observe so as to live in harmony with society and attain happiness in his individual life. There is little concern about death, the world beyond, and spiritual feelings in this religion.

Confucius, or Kung Futzo (551-479 B.C.), the founder of this religion, stressed the improvement of the moral self as the basic duty of the individual as well as the statesman. In order to rule the world, one must rule one's country; in order to rule the country, one must rule one's family; and in order to rule the family, one must have control of oneself. Consequently, the improvement of the moral self is the cornerstone of Confucianism. Confucius believed that man is born with an essentially good nature which becomes corrupted in his contact with society. In order to improve his moral self and regain that original good nature with which he was born, man must practice the five cardinal virtues of benevolence, propriety, loyalty, intellect, and trustworthiness. In order to keep harmony in the nation and happiness in the family, man must observe the three basic relationships between sovereign and subject, father and son, and husband and wife. On the national level the basic virtue is loyalty to the sovereign, and on the family level, the basic virtue is filial piety. The ritual expression of filial piety is ancestor

worship.

Confucianism was introduced into Vietnam as early as the first century, during the Chinese domination. It was after Vietnam achieved independence that Chinese influence and Confucianism became important in Vietnam. Because of a political philosophy that was favorable for the monarchy, Confucianism was promoted and supported by the government. In 1253 the Institute for National Studies was founded by the king to teach the classical books of Confucius. Under the Le dynasty, studies of the Confucian doctrine attained their apogee. With the French conquest and the influence of Western philosophies, Confucianism began to decline. However, Confucianism still pervades the thinking and behavior of Vietnamese people from all walks of life. It should be noted that the Vietnamese people do not follow many of the Confucian tenets. As an illustration, the pronouncement that "when the father dies, the mother should obey the children" has in reality never been practiced. The widowed mother is still respected and obeyed by all her children.

TAOISM

Another religion which has a deep imprint on the way of life of the Vietnamese is Taoism. Lao Tse (600-500 B.C.), the founder of Taoism, advocated a philosophy of harmony between man and man and between man and nature. To achieve this state of harmony, all forms of confrontation should be avoided. The virtues of simplicity, patience, and self-contentment must be observed. By non-action and keeping away from human strife and cravings, man can reach harmony with himself, other people, and the universe. Reason and knowledge cannot lead man to the right path (Tao), which can be reached only by inward probing and quiet meditation. In essence, Taoism is a religious philosophy. However, the followers of Lao Tse transformed it into a religion with church and a clergy involved in the communication with deities, spirits, and the dead. Taoist clergymen claimed they could cure illness, alleviate misfortune, and predict the future.

Taoism was introduced into Vietnam during the Chinese domination period. By the time Vietnam recovered its independence, it had become one of the main religious faiths of the Vietnamese people. Under King Ly Nhan Ton (1072-1127), the examination for the recruitment of officials consisted of essays on the "three religions." Under the succeeding dynasties, Taoism became a source of inspiration for poets and writers. From the end of the Tran dynasty, Taoism began to turn to mysticism and polytheism. It was this mystic aspect of Taoism that appealed to the common people of Vietnam.

CHRISTIANITY

Although a main religion of the world, Christianity does not play a major role in the culture of Vietnam. It was introduced into Vietnam rather late, in the second half of the sixteenth century, by Portuguese, Spanish and French European missionaries. The first missionary, Ignatio, came to Vietnam in 1533. In the first half of the seventeenth century, the Jesuits came to Vietnam and founded the Cochinchina's mission in Hoi-An. In 1626, Alexandre de Rhodes was chosen to head the Jesuit mission in North Vietnam. He published a catechism book in Latin and Vietnamese in 1650 and the first Vietnamese, Portuguese and Latin dictionary in 1651 in Rome. Christianity began to develop rapidly.

About the middle of the seventeenth century, preaching of Christianity was banned in Vietnam. Despite the proscription, Catholic missionaries continued their evangelization of Vietnam. Under the Nguyen dynasty, especially under Kings Minh-Mang, Thieu Tri, and Tu Duc, the Christians were persecuted and labeled "perverse to the public order." Using the persecution of Christians as a pretext, the French conquered Vietnam in the second half of the nineteenth century. Under the French administration, the Catholics enjoyed the support of the government. It was during the Ngo Dinh Diem regime that the Catholics filled key positions in the government, the army, and the police. Today there are about three million Christians in Vietnam, most of them Catholics. Although they represented a small percentage of the population, the Catholics played an important role in the political life of Vietnam during the last three decades prior to the fall of Saigon in 1975.

OTHER RELIGIONS

There are two religious sects, Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, which have recently been established in Vietnam. They have been confined to the rural sectors of the Southern Delta region. Their influence on Vietnamese culture has been insignificant.

Caodaism is a synthesis of different beliefs, including the teaching of Buddha, Jesus, Confucius, Lao-Tse, Victor Hugo, and so on. It was founded in 1919 by Le Van Trung who established a priestly hierarchy modeled along Roman Catholic lines. The seat of Caodaism is in Tay Ninh, about 60 miles from Saigon. The adherents to Caodaism have been estimated at about one million.

Hoa Hao is a reformed Buddhist sect of the Theravada variety. It was founded in 1939 by Huynh Phu So, who later was killed by the communists. This religious sect is concentrated in the Mekong Delta with a membership estimated at about two million.