

# Religion in Vietnam

From Robert Templer, *Shadows and Wind: A View of Modern Vietnam*

In a country where many people follow personal and localized faiths that combine elements of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and village customs, it is impossible to draw a line between religion and superstition. . . .

Most Vietnamese describe themselves as Buddhist although that can mean a multitude of things ranging from branches of Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism to local variants of Zen. The official Buddhist church estimates that 60 per cent of Vietnam's 75 million people [in 1998] are Buddhists. Others put the figure as low as 15 per cent. . . . [According to a Jesuit priest in 1944:]

[Vietnamese] go to [Buddhist monks] not as official representatives of their principal religion but only as providers . . . of one more guarantee against the afflictions of a baleful destiny in this life or the next. Buddhism is a philosophy, a conception of man and of the world; but the number of Vietnamese who understand something of this philosophy is totally nugatory.

A belief that spirits are all around people, concealed in nature and made known through daily mundane actions still pervades much of life, but the worship of these spirits is not always elaborate.

It is the worship of ancestors and spirits that dominates religious life, but this type of faith is highly individualistic and has not led to mass organisations [*sic*].

The other main faiths are Roman Catholicism with about 7 million followers [with fewer than 2000 priests, as the communist government today can deny men the right to enter a seminary], according to the Church . . . , the modern Cao Dai sect with about 2.5 million adherents, Hao Hoa with 1.5 million followers and about half a million Protestants of a variety of denominations.

The [communist] Party is haunted by a past when religions ran private armies, amassed vast properties and commanded extraordinary loyalty. It still remembers the religious role in the fight against colonialism and later the symbolic power of self-immolating monks and the way those appalling suicides galvanized opposition to the South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem. Those times are over; those extreme acts were mostly reactions to colonialism and the aggressive anti-Buddhist policies of Diem . . . .