

BUDDHISM IN VIETNAM: A FAITH THAT STOOD AGAINST DICTATORS

By Nick Gier

Read “The Long Suffering Vietnamese Enjoy Religious and Economic Liberty but no Political Freedom” at www.home.roadrunner.com/~nickgier/vietnam.htm.

Vietnamese are Confucians in peacetime, but Buddhists in times of trouble.

--Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*

Buddhists all over the world will be celebrating their founder’s 2,573rd birthday on May 21, and we should remember with sadness the deaths of nine Vietnamese Buddhists who were shot by U.S.-armed troops on the Buddha’s birthday, then falling on May 8, 1963.

Buddhist missionaries from India and China brought their faith to Vietnam in the early centuries of the Common Era. What struck me most about Vietnamese Buddhism during my recent visit to the country was the strong influence of Confucianism and Daoism. In addition to Buddhist altars many Vietnamese homes also have ornate temples to their ancestors.

One day our bus broke down, and we wandered along a side road that was decorated with a Confucian-inspired banner saying: “People grow bonsai plants for fun, but people should also grow trees of virtue.” More banners led us to an elaborate family temple where an annual festival was being held. We were invited to burn incense at the ancestors’ altar, and we also were invited to stay for the feast in their honor. We were overwhelmed with their hospitality and declaration that we might very well be part of their family tree.

The Vietnamese do not hide their dislike for the Chinese, but their culture was profoundly influenced by Chinese culture. The French were easily able to recruit Vietnamese mandarin administrators, who passed exams in the Chinese classics, for service in their own colonial government. The Citadel in Hue is a small version of Beijing’s Forbidden City, and at Nam Giao the Vietnamese emperor would perform animal sacrifices as the “Son of Heaven.” These burnt offerings were banned in China in 1911, but were continued by Emperor Bao Dai until 1945.

Knowing my special interest in Buddhism, my guide took me on his scooter to the Giac Lam Pagoda in Saigon. Although built in 1744, it was so well maintained that it looked brand new. After admiring the beautiful statues and side panels devoted to the life of the Buddha and his disciples, I walked around back, fully expecting to see more Buddhas or Bodhisattvas. Instead I saw hundreds of “spirit tablets” of esteemed ancestors. Many Buddhist pagodas also have statues of famous Daoist saints, which are given the same status as the Buddhist ones.

At the Giac Lam Pagoda I also witnessed a service with monks and laypeople, mostly women, chanting the sutras. As in China and Japan, the most popular Buddhist denomination in Vietnam is the Pure Land sect. By chanting the name of the Amida Buddha with a pure heart, devotees are promised a life of bliss in Amida’s Pure Land (=Heaven). Contrary to what you have heard on Fox News, this Buddhists sect is a religion of grace and redemption very much like Christianity.

At the Dong Thuyen Monastery in Hue I ate the best vegetarian food of my life. I also visited the Minh Tu Orphanage, where Buddhist nuns have nurtured thousands of children and have taken great pride in their success in school and their chosen professions. After lunch one in our group asked one of the nuns “What is the purpose of life.” I loved her answer: “Always be true to yourself,” an answer that Gandhi was fond of giving as he constantly criticized the authority of the British over him and his fellow Indians.

When Frances Fitzgerald described the Vietnamese as “Confucians in peacetime” but “Buddhists in times of trouble,” she pointed to the tendency of Confucianism to merge with and support the reigning authority. Buddhism teaches a personal morality that can, if the devotee chooses, be used as a norm to protest an oppressive state.

Although just 10 percent of population, the Roman Catholics were favored by the French colonists, who passed laws that discriminated against Buddhists. On May 8, 1963, South Vietnamese troops opened fire on Buddhists in Hue, the old imperial capital. The reason was that they were flying religious flags in violation of the law. The Buddhists were encouraged to unfurl their banners, because Catholics had flown, several days before, the Vatican flag in Hue.

The murders in Hue led to massive protests by the Buddhist majority against the government Ngo Dinh Diem, a weak leader and devout Roman Catholic. Diem's army attacked the protesters with chemicals and 67 were sent to the hospital. Hundreds of other Buddhists were killed or "disappeared."

The protests culminated in six monks burning themselves to death. The first monk was 66-year-old Thich Quang Duc, who drove all the way from Hue to Saigon to commit suicide on June 11, 1963. Before striking the match, Quang Duc chanted a prayer to the Amida Buddha. A miracle was declared after his heart was found in the ashes. It is alleged that the heart also survived re-cremation and is now displayed as a sacred relic Saigon's Xa Loi Pagoda, the headquarters of the Buddhist rebellion.

While on tour in the U.S., Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem's sister-in-law and wife of Diem's brutal secret police chief, declared that she would "clap her hands at seeing another monk barbecue show." Madame Nhu's father, who had just resigned in protest as Diem's ambassador to the U.S., attempted to preserve the family's honor by speaking out against his renegade daughter.

Starting with the chemical attacks, after which the U.S. told Diem that they would withdraw their support, the death knell for Diem government had sounded. On November 2, 1963, the CIA gave several South Vietnamese generals the green light to overthrow the Diem government. Diem and his brother were shot at point-blank range, but his successors were no better as the U.S. sank deeper into its Vietnam quagmire.

During my first trip to Cambodia in 2002, I discussed the Khmer Rouge (Cambodian Communists) with my driver, a gentle man who had lost most of his family in the "killing fields." I found that I was angrier about this senseless tragedy than he was. Recently Fox News commentator Brit Hume presumed to lecture Tiger Woods about the shortcomings of his Buddhist faith, but it is my experience that Buddhists such as my driver have a very deep sense of forgiveness and an incredible ability to come to terms with even the cruelest twists of fate.

Travelers to Vietnam also comment that the Vietnamese were also inclined to forget and to forgive those, including Communist government officials, who have destroyed their land and

their communities. Even American soldiers have been welcomed with open arms. A 2006 Gallup Poll showed that 46 percent of those Vietnamese 52 years and older said that the war had “not much” effect on their lives. I submit that the Vietnamese have been well served by their Buddhist faith.

The most famous Vietnamese monk today is Thich Nhat Hanh, who is better known for his bestselling books than for his role as political activist. He was banned by the South Vietnamese government and is also *persona non grata* for the current Communist government, although he was allowed back for two visits since 2005. In September of 2009, 380 monks and nuns, followers of Nhat Hanh, were evicted from their monastery in Lam Dong province.

Both Chinese and Vietnamese authorities are fooling themselves if they think that they can satisfy their citizen’s spiritual needs by being such control freaks. Religious liberty has little meaning if it means free to join only those churches or temples sanctioned by the government.

Nick Gier was co-president of the Student-Faculty Committee to End the War in Vietnam from 1965-66 at Oregon State University. He taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years.