

Journal of the Canadian Historical Association Revue de la Société historique du Canada



Tools of Empire? Vietnamese Catholics in South Vietnam

Van Nguyen-Marshall

Volume 20, numéro 2, 2009

Social History of Empire

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/044402ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/044402ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Nguyen-Marshall, V. (2009). Tools of Empire? Vietnamese Catholics in South Vietnam. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 20(2), 138–159. <https://doi.org/10.7202/044402ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article porte sur les activités politiques et sociales des catholiques romains vietnamiens dans le sud du Vietnam au cours de la période allant des années 1950 aux années 1970. Leur présence dans la sphère publique, que ce soit au sein d'organismes humanitaires ou par l'organisation de protestations dans la rue, laisse supposer qu'ils étaient très organisés et proactifs dans leurs efforts de réforme du milieu social et politique. Ces catholiques partageaient certes des opinions et des ambitions politiques avec les gouvernements sud-vietnamien et américain, mais ils s'intéressaient en fait à leurs propres objectifs, participaient à la politique locale et nationale, critiquaient les politiques gouvernementales et conservaient une indépendance certaine par rapport à l'influence de l'État.

Tools of Empire? Vietnamese Catholics in South Vietnam*

VAN NGUYEN-MARSHALL

Abstract

This article examines the social and political activities of Vietnamese Roman Catholics in South Vietnam in the period from the 1950s to the 1970s. The Catholics' participation in the public sphere, ranging from joining humanitarian organizations to organizing street protests, suggests that they were highly organized and proactive in trying to change their social and political environment. While Catholics held some political views and goals in common with the South Vietnamese and the United States governments, they pursued their own objectives, engaged in local and national politics, critiqued government policy, and maintained an important degree of independence from state power and influence.

Résumé

Cet article porte sur les activités politiques et sociales des catholiques romains vietnamiens dans le sud du Vietnam au cours de la période allant des années 1950 aux années 1970. Leur présence dans la sphère publique, que ce soit au sein d'organismes humanitaires ou par l'organisation de protestations dans la rue, laisse supposer qu'ils étaient très organisés et proactifs dans leurs efforts de réforme du milieu social et politique. Ces catholiques partageaient certes des opinions et des ambitions politiques avec les gouvernements sud-vietnamien et américain, mais ils s'intéressaient en fait à leurs propres objectifs, participaient à la politique locale et nationale, critiquaient les politiques gouvernementales et conservaient une indépendance certaine par rapport à l'influence de l'État.

Religion has played an important role in modern Vietnamese history. Buddhist and Christian hierarchies and organizations had a hand in shaping events in the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) from 1954 until 1975.

* I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding this research. I would also like to thank Steven Lee and the anonymous reviewer for their useful suggestions and comments on this paper.

TOOLS OF EMPIRE?
VIETNAMESE CATHOLICS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

Without a doubt, religious beliefs, loyalty, and discourses influenced both Vietnamese and American political choices during this period. Catholicism shaped the contours of South Vietnam when it was first established in 1954, and almost a decade later, in 1963, Buddhist protests contributed to the overthrow of South Vietnam's first president, Ngo Dinh Diem. After the fall of the First Republic (1955–1963), religion continued to assert its influence in society and politics.

During the Vietnam War¹, Buddhist protests and movements caught the world's attention not only because of their dramatic character, which included the self-immolation of monks and nuns, but also because the Buddhist call for peace was compelling in the face of escalating violence and death. Media attention during the war and scholarly research in the past few decades have provided the West with some knowledge and familiarity with activities of Vietnamese Buddhists,² but less is known about the Catholics and their activities in South Vietnam. There is an assumption in both popular and academic English-language literature that the Catholic clergy and lay people identified with and supported the state authority in both the French colonial and the Vietnam War periods.

Scholarly works on the French colonial period tend to focus on the role that Catholic missionaries played in France's colonial conquest and rule.³ For the mid- and late-twentieth century period, historians have mainly focused on how Catholicism influenced the American decision to support Ngo Dinh Diem and how Ngo Dinh Diem's Catholic background shaped his policies and actions.⁴ Among the few exceptions to this trend is the work of Tran Thi Lien, who focuses on Catholics' role in the First Indochina War and their relationships with the governments of both the Democratic Republic and the Republic of Vietnam.⁵ As for Vietnamese Catholics in general, they are usually mentioned in the historiography in relation to the mass migration of 1954 and their role as

1 While there is no agreement on the starting date of the Vietnam War, I use this term as a short hand to date the period from the division of the country in 1954 until the war's end in 1975.

2 Robert Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed: The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam 1964–66* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002); James McAllister, "'Only Religions Count in Vietnam': Thich Tri Quang and the Vietnam War," *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2008): 751–82; Mark Moyer, "The Militant Monks: The Buddhist Movement during the Vietnam War," *Modern Asian Studies* 38, no. 4 (2004): 749–84.

3 Patrick Tuck, *French Catholic Missionaries and the Politics of Imperialism in Vietnam, 1857–1914: A Documentary Survey* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1987).

4 Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and US Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

5 Tran Thi Lien, "Les Catholiques vietnamiens pendant la guerre d'Indochine (1945–1954). Entre la reconquête coloniale et la résistance communiste." (Ph.D. diss., Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris, 1997); Tran Thi Lien, "Les Catholiques Vietnamiens dans la République du Vietnam (1954–1963)," in *Du Conflit d'Indochine aux Conflits Indochine*, ed. Pierre Brocheux (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 2000), 53–77; Tran Thi Lien, "The Catholic Question in North Vietnam: From Polish Sources, 1954–6." *Cold War History* 5, no. 4 (November 2005): 427–49.

supporters of Diem. Negotiations at the Geneva Conference, which ended the First Indochina War, had stipulated the temporary division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel and made provisions for Vietnamese to move to the region of their choice. Of the approximate 810,000 northern migrants who chose to move to the southern region, over 75 percent were Catholic.⁶

The Catholic migrants tended to be staunchly anti-communist and were strong supporters of Ngo Dinh Diem, whose government provided them with resources (much of which came from the United States) for resettlement. According to Seth Jacobs, the Diem government “conspicuously favoured the Catholic refugees from the North: a disproportionate share of U.S. aid went to the refugees; northern Catholics held privileged positions in the army and the state bureaucracy.”⁷ There are some historians who diverge from this interpretation of Diem’s relationship with the Vietnamese Catholic population. Philip Catton and Lan T. Chu, for instance, suggest that Diem’s relationship with the Catholic refugees and the Catholic Church was uneven and at times fraught with tension.⁸ This view, however, is still the minority. The consensus appears to be that Vietnamese Catholics were favoured by the South Vietnamese government, particularly that of Ngo Dinh Diem’s administration.

As a consequence of this selective focus on Vietnamese Catholics as part of the mass migration south and as the foundation of Diem’s anti-communist government, Vietnamese Catholics tend to be depicted as one dimensional, with their dependence on foreign governments and religious hierarchy sometimes overstated. A typical characterization of Vietnamese Catholics is Joseph Buttinger’s statement that most Catholics were “outside the mainstream of the nationalist and anti-foreign sentiments that inspired the non-Catholic majority.”⁹ In other words, Catholics’ religious preference kept them from integrating with the rest of society and also rendered them less patriotic and nationalistic. Another explanation for the Vietnamese Catholics’ supposed alienation from the rest of Vietnamese society was the legacy of persecution they had endured before French colonial conquest. Pierro Gheddo suggests that past persecutions had created a “ghetto” mentality among Vietnamese Catholics to such an extent that they were cut off from mainstream society. Moreover, non-Catholic Vietnamese tended to look upon Catholics, even in the twentieth century, with suspicion.¹⁰

6 Peter Hansen, “The Virgin Heads South: Northern Catholic Refugees in South Vietnam, 1954–64,” (Ph.D. diss., Melbourne College of Divinity, Victoria, Australia, 2008), 4.

7 Jacobs, 189.

8 Philip Catton, *Diem's Final Failure* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 60–; Lan T. Chu, “Catholicism vs. Communism, Continued: The Catholic Church in Vietnam,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3, no. 1 (2008): 161–2.

9 Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, vol. II (New York: Praeger, 1967), 846.

10 Piero Gheddo, *The Cross and the Bo-Tree: Catholics and Buddhists in Vietnam* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1970), 19.

TOOLS OF EMPIRE?
VIETNAMESE CATHOLICS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

This thesis of separation, however, is challenged by current scholarship on colonial Vietnam, which paints a different picture. In her research on nineteenth-century Vietnam, Nola Cooke suggests that with its many similarities with animism and Confucianism, Catholicism was not considered an alien religion and that, by the nineteenth century, it had become incorporated into Vietnamese society.¹¹ Similarly, Jacob Ramsay states that Vietnamese Catholics, particularly those in the south, were not segregated from non-Catholics: "By the early nineteenth century many local Catholics belonged to a heritage spanning several generations and constituted a well-integrated community of mainstream society."¹² By the mid-twentieth century (the period of interest here), Catholicism had more than three centuries of history in Vietnam. Despite Catholicism's deep roots in Vietnamese history, writings on the Vietnam War still associate Vietnamese Catholics with colonial and neo-colonial powers, first with France and then with the United States.

This persistence in identifying Vietnamese Catholics as alien or as part of the neo-colonial agenda results in another typical depiction of them as stooges of the American government and its military and intelligence apparatus. An enduring and frequently invoked image of Vietnamese Catholics is that of a flock of sheep following the dictates of their parish priest and American propaganda to migrate south after the division of the country. Stripped of their own agency, northern Catholic migrants' decision to move south was attributed to the effective tactics of the CIA. As Jacobs describes, "Lansdale's most inspired appeals were to North Vietnamese Catholics. Soldiers of the South Vietnamese army, shipped north and dressed as civilians, distributed fliers advertising that 'Christ Has Gone to the South' and 'The Virgin Mary Has Departed from the North'."¹³

While there is no doubt the United States played a role in facilitating and encouraging the exodus south, little research has been done to examine the motives of these migrants in order to assess the effectiveness of the propaganda on migrants' decisions. In fact, one of the first, serious in-depth studies on northern Catholic migrants suggests the opposite. According to Peter Hansen, Catholic and non-Catholic migrants were not duped by CIA propaganda, but had an array of concerns and reasons which prompted them to leave.¹⁴ Tran Thi

11 Nola Cooke, "Early Nineteenth-Century Vietnamese Catholics and Others in the Pages of the *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi*," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, no. 2 (June 2004): 261–85.

12 Jacob Ramsay, "Extortion and Exploitation in the Nguyen Campaign against Catholicism in 1830s–1840s Vietnam," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, no. 2 (June 2004): 314.

13 Jacobs, 133. This image can also be found in influential books of Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 45; and George Herring, *America's Longest War*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 62–3.

14 Hansen, 127–8.

Lien concurs with this view: "Selon nous, cet exode des catholiques fut l'expression d'un choix politique. Ce refus de vivre dans un régime communiste était basé sur l'expérience concrète de vie sous domination communiste."¹⁵ Some of the reasons included fear of land confiscation and reprisal. Some migrants may have personally experienced repression at the hands of the dominant communist members of the Viet Minh and thus welcomed the opportunity to leave. Likewise, not enough is known about the political aspirations of Catholics throughout the lifetime of South Vietnam to warrant the conclusion that Catholics were not nationalists or the assumption that they supported all South Vietnamese regimes that came to power.

By examining the social and political activities of Vietnamese Catholics and their associations, this paper offers a glimpse into the general Vietnamese Catholic population and their aspirations. The main focus is on the social relief and political activities of Vietnamese Catholics in urban areas, particularly the southern capital, Saigon. This paper does not claim to be an exhaustive or in-depth examination of all Catholic activities throughout the war, but is an exploratory foray that may inspire further investigation.

Vietnamese and American archival documents and Vietnamese journalistic sources suggest that Vietnamese Catholics as a group were highly active in political and social issues. Catholic leaders appeared extraordinarily willing to engage with both the American and Vietnamese political establishments in an attempt to influence events and to look after Catholic interests. They did this within a challenging environment that included authoritarian rule, warfare, and increasing American domination. Consequently, Vietnamese Catholics tended to look to the state and foreign organizations for help in carrying out relief work or to mobilize political support.

This reliance on state support was similar to the predicament faced by American humanitarian organizations. A number of studies conducted on the Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere (CARE), Catholic Relief Services (CRS), and the Vietnam Christian Service have shown how these non-governmental organizations (NGOs) had cooperated and collaborated deeply with both the Vietnamese and American governments.¹⁶ This close relationship was a source of anxiety and frustration for some members of these organizations, particularly those who questioned the morality and futility of American intervention.

15 Tran Thi Lien, "Les Catholiques vietnamiens dans la République du Vietnam," 60.

16 Perry Bush, "The Education of Vietnam Christian Service," *Peace and Change* 27, no. 2 (April 2002): 198–224; Delia T. Pergande, "Private Voluntary Aid And Nation Building in South Vietnam: The Humanitarian Politics Of Care, 1954–61," *Peace & Change* 27, No. 2 (April 2002): 165–97; Christopher J. Kauffman, "Politics, Programs, and Protests: Catholic Relief Services in Vietnam, 1954–1975," *The Catholic Historical Review* XCI, no. 2 (April 2005): 223–50.

TOOLS OF EMPIRE?
VIETNAMESE CATHOLICS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

Vietnamese Catholics' close connection with foreign, particularly Christian, organizations and governments, allowed them to have access to financial and infrastructure support. As a result of these strategic alliances, Catholic organizations were well-organized and funded. The Vietnamese Catholic hierarchy, voluntary associations, and lay people were, however, concerned foremost with protecting their interests. For many Catholics, the viability of a non-Communist, pro-Catholic regime in South Vietnam was of utmost importance. That this goal tended to align with that of the American government may make Vietnamese Catholics appear to be tools of American neo-colonial policies in Vietnam; however, exploring this question from the perspective of South Vietnamese Catholics provides a different picture.

Catholic Relief Activities

In Vietnam humanitarian work was not something new or uniquely Christian. Within Confucianism and Buddhism benevolence has an important place; thus, charity was valued both as a social and religious act. Consequently, in pre-colonial Vietnam charitable endeavours usually received recognition from either the state or the local community.¹⁷ During the French colonial period, Christian, Buddhist, and secular charities existed. Various Catholic orders founded and administered charitable institutions, such as schools, hospitals, and orphanages. Many of these institutions received subsidies from the French colonial government. After 1954, a number of these institutions still operated, with some establishments in the north moving their institution south. A few charitable Catholic institutions which predated 1954 included:¹⁸

- Asile Soeur Antoine, which took care of orphans, the old and sick. Founded in 1911, this institution had 921 people in its care in 1948.
- Saint Theresa Orphanage in Hanoi, which was founded in 1943 by Father Seitz. In 1948 it had 250 orphans.
- Asile des Orphelins de Hai Duong, which was administered by a Catholic mission and had 100 children in its care.
- Orphanage Fatima in Gia Lam, North Vietnam, which was founded and directed by Father Than Duc Mai. This orphanage had 60 children.

In postcolonial South Vietnam, Roman Catholic organizations continued to participate in humanitarian work. As with the colonial period, orphanages

17 Van Nguyen-Marshall, *In Search of Moral Authority* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), chap. 2.

18 National Archives of Vietnam, Number Two, Ho Chi Minh City, Phu Tong Thong De Nhat Cong Hoa [the President's Office of the First Republic], # 16188, "V/v Chính phủ Việt Nam trao cấp cho các cơ quan từ thiện năm 1948-56" [Re: Government subsidies to charitable agencies, 1948-56].

continued to be an important focus for Catholic charity work. While there were state orphanages, the majority of the orphanages and charity daycare centres were private. The South Vietnamese state, however, helped subsidize the private orphanages according to the number of children they housed.¹⁹ In the 1950s–1970s, there were a number of prominent Catholic orphanages including the Thien Phuoc Orphanage which was built in 1878 and managed by the Sisters of St. Paul de Sartres.²⁰ Another important orphanage was the Nu Vuong Hoa Binh Orphanage, which was established in 1935 in Thu Duc, a suburb of Saigon, but relocated to Saigon in 1956. This orphanage was established by Caritas International (an international Catholic organization that focuses on development aid) and had foreign funding from the American Women's Organization, but was directed and managed by the order of Bac Ai Vinh Son (Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent). By 1973, this orphanage housed 397 children.²¹

Foreign Catholic organizations played an important role in financing and directing humanitarian activities in Vietnam. Many of the American Catholic humanitarian endeavours were led by the Catholic Relief Services, which delivered over 50 percent of the American aid to Vietnam.²² In fact, CRS was the largest aid agency in South Vietnam.²³ CRS was particularly important in refugee resettlement. During the war, 318 villages and community projects were funded by American foreign aid and private donations. Agencies connected with CRS helped build schools, hospitals, churches, and orphanages.²⁴ CRS also helped establish and reorganize voluntary and civic associations including youth work camps, labour unions, and social action committees.²⁵

Another important Catholic organization in humanitarian work was Caritas Vietnam. CRS director Joseph Harnett was involved in establishing a Vietnamese branch of Caritas in 1957, but the organization did not become active until 1965 when CRS program director Lawson Mooney reorganized it.²⁶ Bishop Pham Ngoc Chi was also instrumental in the founding of Caritas Vietnam and the Saigon branch was led by Father Ho Van Vui, a militant anti-communist who played an active role in politics.²⁷ The organization received funding from the office of the Archbishop of Saigon, Caritas International, and

19 Dao Thi Kim Dung, "Khao Luan ve mot so co-nhi-vien hoat ong tai Do-Thanh Saigon" [An examination of some orphanages in Saigon], (M.A. thesis, National Institute of Administration, Saigon, 1973), 5–10.

20 Ibid., 27.

21 Ibid.

22 Kauffman, 232.

23 Flipse, "The Latest Casualty of War," 247.

24 Ibid., 250.

25 Ibid.

26 Kauffman, 232 and 238.

27 *Xay Dung*, (19 October 1965), 1.

TOOLS OF EMPIRE?
VIETNAMESE CATHOLICS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

the Vietnam Christian Service.²⁸ In 1970, Caritas supported 267 orphanages, offered 66 sewing classes, and ran 69 medical dispensaries.²⁹ In 1969 Caritas's total expenditure was \$1.1 million (US),³⁰ in addition to the 20,000 tons of food, clothes, and medicine that the organization dispensed.

While foreign and American organizations provided financial and leadership support to many of these relief and charitable endeavours, Vietnamese Catholics themselves were active in initiating and carrying out the work. For instance, the order of Bac Ai Vinh Son was instrumental in managing a number of Caritas International's charity institutions. These included: the Caritas Daycare Centre, the Caritas Social Centre, and the Caritas Nutritional Centre, and the aforementioned Nu Vuong Hoa Binh orphanage.³¹ The Caritas Daycare Centre was established in 1953 under the sponsorship of the French and German Red Cross. The daycare admitted children of labouring families between the ages of one month and six years. In the late 1960s, there were about 150 children at this centre, most of whom were boys. The South Vietnamese government supplemented the centre at a monthly rate of 150 dong per child.³²

The Caritas Nutritional Centre was established by the Caritas School of Social Work and was managed with the support of the American Women's Organization, UNICEF, and the Social Affairs Ministry of the South Vietnamese government. The centre provided temporary care for sick children of poor families. In 1970, it had 100 children between the ages of one and three in its care.³³ The Caritas Social Centre was established in 1964 by the Caritas School of Social Work on Nguyen Thong Street. It provided students of the Social Work School with practical experience, as well as provided social services for the area, including offering kindergarten and primary classes for children, running sewing workshops, and establishing a reading room for children.³⁴ The Bac Ai Vinh Son order also helped to establish and manage the Caritas School of Nursing, which received funding from the French Red Cross. In 1958, they established the Caritas kindergarten teachers' training school — the first of its kind in Vietnam. The Bac Ai Vinh Son order also became involved in elementary, middle, and high school teacher training.³⁵

28 Le Thi Sam, "Cac to chuc tu thien ton giao tai Do Thanh" [Religious charitable organizations in the Capital], (M.A. thesis, National Institute of Administration, Saigon, 1970), 33.

29 Ibid., 34.

30 Le Thi Sam provided the total in Vietnamese dong, which was 224 million, 34. I used the exchange rate of 196.8 provided by Douglas Dacy, *Foreign Aid, War, and Economic Development: South Vietnam 1955–1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), Table 9.1, 181.

31 Le Thi Sam, 20.

32 Ibid., 22.

33 Ibid., 23.

34 Ibid.

35 The Daughters of Charity, St. Vincent de Paul, Vietnam Province, <<http://www.doc-vietnam.org/about/history/apostolic-activities-in-vietnam-1928–1975>>, (viewed June 11, 2009).

Catholic humanitarian activities also focused on refugee and emergency relief. In the 1954 mass migration, Catholic priests played leading roles in helping with resettlement logistics. Joseph Buttinger characterized the Vietnamese priests' leadership during this period as critical: "The ability of this local [Catholic] leadership to organize self-help among the refugees was probably the most remarkable feature of the entire resettlement effort."³⁶ The Vietnamese Catholic hierarchy was vocal in mobilizing donations and volunteers for such humanitarian efforts. Students in particular were mobilized for refugee and emergency relief. Catholic youth groups participated along with secular and Buddhist youth in building temporary shelters and collecting and distributing food and supplies to refugees.

Not only were there war refugees and orphans to care for, but there were also victims of natural disasters. Floods were particularly frequent and tended to devastate areas in Central Vietnam. The Catholic Association bulletin of the Saigon Diocese frequently published appeals for donations for various causes. In the November 1961 issue, the Archbishop of Saigon, Nguyen Van Binh, made an appeal for donations for flood victims in the western region of South Vietnam.³⁷ Archbishop Binh reminded Vietnamese Catholics that helping others was a religious duty. The archbishop made another passionate appeal in the December issue. At this time donations had totalled 400,000 dong along with 200 bags of clothes. The announcement noted that some of the donations came from non-Catholics.³⁸

In the mid-1960s, as the fighting intensified, the refugee problem became even more difficult. Millions of Vietnamese were forced from their villages because of the fighting. According to James Carter, there were about 380,000–500,000 refugees in the summer of 1965. Some went to camps, while others flocked to the cities.³⁹ According to Carter, an exact number of refugees was difficult to determine, since there were incentives for refugee camp supervisors to inflate the number. However, there were also speculations that the South Vietnamese government was keen to mask the problem as well.⁴⁰ A United States congressional investigation estimated that there were about 1.6 million refugees in December 1966.⁴¹

The number of refugees jumped dramatically after the Tet Offensive which began on 30 January 1968. Led jointly by North Vietnamese and National

36 Buttinger, 921–2.

37 *Ban Thong Tin: Giao Hoi Cong Giao dia phan Sai Gon* [Bulletin of the Catholic Diocese of Saigon] 5 (November 1961): 7.

38 *Ibid.*, 6 (December 1961): 3.

39 James Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954–1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 207.

40 *Ibid.*, 208.

41 *Ibid.*

TOOLS OF EMPIRE?
VIETNAMESE CATHOLICS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

Liberation Front (NLF) forces during the Lunar New Year, the surprise assault on South Vietnam created a great deal of shock for urbanites, who until that point had been fairly insulated from direct fighting. In the weeks following the attack on Saigon, secular and religious voluntary organizations were busy tending to those injured and dislocated by the event. Temporary refugee camps were constructed and donations mobilized to help those in need. In Saigon and the surrounding suburbs, 48 camps were set up to help refugees and appeals were made in the media for volunteers and donations.⁴² Transport for foodstuff such as rice and cooking oil were in great demand. The Catholic press, such as the popular daily *Xay Dung*, highlighted these relief efforts, particularly ones carried out by Catholic groups. According to Father Huynh Van Nghi of Caritas Vietnam, his organization began its work on 2 February, several days following the attack on Saigon. During this period, Caritas Vietnam supported roughly 280,000 refugees throughout the greater Saigon area.⁴³

The war certainly created a real need for charitable programs like those organized by the Catholic Church and Catholic lay associations. Vietnamese Catholics took up these endeavours with enthusiasm. For Vietnamese Catholics, relief activities had two equally important dimensions. On the one hand, charity is a core value in Roman Catholicism and as such, priests and lay leaders emphasized the religious aspect of relief in order to mobilize volunteers and donations. On the other hand, relief activities allowed Catholics to contribute to the nation-building process and to the war against communism. For politically active Catholic leaders, such as Fathers Hoang Quynh and Ho Van Vui, these charitable projects were useful reminders to the state and society at large of Catholics' patriotism and commitment to South Vietnam and thus their political importance.

In this regard, Catholic leaders made a conscious effort to emphasize the non-partisan nature of their work: they stressed that aid was provided to everyone of all religions. In discussing the work of Caritas Vietnam, for instance, a writer for *Xay Dung* emphasized that this organization supported all compatriots (*dong bao*) regardless of religion.⁴⁴ In the relief effort following the Tet Offensive, Caritas Vietnam officials were quick to point out that two-thirds of the refugees the organization supported in the temporary camps were not Catholics. It would be difficult to ascertain the accuracy of this statement; however, it is revealing that Caritas officials felt the need to establish that Catholic charities were not parochial in their concerns, but had national interests at heart. This defensive stance was also taken by Catholic charity officials who stressed that they were not recruiting "rice converts";⁴⁵ in other words, converting recip-

42 *Xay Dung* (17 February 1968); (23 February 1968); (24 February 1968).

43 *Ibid.*, (25 February 1968).

44 *Ibid.*, (7 August 1965), 1.

45 *Ibid.*, (29 December 1965), 1.

ients of Catholic charity was not the objective of their relief activities. While this proselytizing may not have been an official goal, it was probably a long-term hope of some religious leaders working in relief. For some other religious leaders, however, proselytizing was probably not as important in the period of war and political instability as asserting the religion's political and social weight in South Vietnam.

Catholic Political Activities

While much of the public activities of Vietnamese Catholics tended to be in the realm of social aid, they were also involved in politics. According to Allan Goodman, even though Buddhists constituted the majority in Vietnam, Catholics were considered better organized politically.⁴⁶ While the consensus is that Catholics were less fractious as a political bloc than Buddhists,⁴⁷ they were by no means a unified movement. There were many competing factions, which emerged in the mid-1960s in a variety of political parties and political blocs within the Vietnamese legislature. Some of the divisions were parochial, rooted in loyalty toward a specific priest. By 1965, there were two powerful factions, both of which were strongly anti-communist. One was headed by Father Hoang Quynh, who had led an important Catholic parish (Phat Diem) in Ninh Binh province of North Vietnam before migrating south. The other faction was led by Fathers Tran Duc Huynh and Mai Ngoc Khue, who had led the Bui Chu parish in Nam Dinh (North Vietnam) before 1954.⁴⁸ There were also factions of Catholics intellectuals who associated with various publications, such as *Song Dao* and *Hanh Trinh*.⁴⁹

In addition, as Peter Hansen argues, regional and ecclesiastical cultural differences created a division between the northern Catholic migrants and those Catholics who had been living in South Vietnam before 1954. Hansen suggests that northern Catholic migrants tended to be more anti-communist and militant.⁵⁰ Moreover, not all Catholics and Catholic priests were anti-communist or supportive of the war effort. Nguyen Thi Oanh, pioneer of social work in Vietnam, wrote in her memoir about a number of progressive Catholic priests who had worked for meaningful social change and who did not support how various South Vietnamese governments were carrying out the war. Among the progressive priests she mentioned was Father Truong Ba Can, who was a north-

46 Allan E. Goodman, *Politics in War: The Bases of Political Community in South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 61.

47 Ibid., 61. See also Herring, 132–3.

48 Confidential US State Department Central Files (hereafter SDCF), reel 26, 2pp, Melvin Levine, Embassy Officer, Memorandum of Conversation with Hoang Ngoc Khan, Saigon, 22 April 1965.

49 Ibid.

50 Hansen, 290–2.

TOOLS OF EMPIRE?
VIETNAMESE CATHOLICS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

ern migrant.⁵¹ This suggests that even within the northern migrant population there were divergent political views. Tran Thi Lien also reinforces this point in one of her articles where she provides a brief discussion of prominent Catholics who opposed Ngo Dinh Diem and his policies.⁵² These Catholic opponents of Diem were mainly intellectuals associated with Nguyen Manh Ha, the former minister of the economy for Ho Chi Minh's provisional government in 1945. Many had studied together in Paris and Louvain and they included Nguyen Dinh Dau, one of the founders of the journal *Song Dao* (Living Faith). These Catholic intellectuals advocated a neutralist solution to end the war and promoted a more conciliatory stance toward the Buddhists.

As a consequence of Vietnamese Catholics' active political roles, the American government made a conscious effort to know their views and to court their support. In State Department Central Files there are numerous records of communications between Catholic leaders, particularly the right-wing anti-communist priests, and various embassy officials. The conversations were sometimes initiated by American officials, who wanted to survey the political views of the Catholic population. While American officials sought the views of high ranking priests such as Father Hoang Quynh, they also talked to less influential priests in an attempt to understand "ordinary" Catholics.⁵³ Sometimes these *tête-à-têtes* occurred at the behest of Vietnamese Catholic priests themselves, who sought American support on various political issues. An instance of this occurred in December 1964, shortly after the military's arrest of some members of the High National Councillors, a group of distinguished civilian leaders whose job was to help Vietnam move toward civilian rule.⁵⁴ Father Mai Ngoc Khue, Vice President of the Association for Catholic Struggle, and Father Vu Duc Trinh visited embassy official Melvin Levine to get a sense of the United State's position regarding this attack and to ascertain the level of American involvement. While there, they also tried to convince Levine that the Buddhist Institute for the Propagation of Faith (*Vien Hoa Dao*) was a front for communists.⁵⁵

There were also instances when various priests would call on American officials at their homes to voice concerns or even to vent their frustration. For example, Father Nguyen Quang Lam, publisher of *Xay Dung* newspaper, went

51 Nguyen Thi Oanh, "Hoi ky cong tac xa hoi" [memoir of social work], Ho Chi Minh City, unpublished, 2003, 20–1. I would like to thank Ann Marie Leshkowich for sharing this valuable memoir with me.

52 Tran Thi Lien, "Les Catholiques Vietnamiens dans la République du Vietnam," 65–9.

53 In a recorded conversation with Father Doan Thanh Dien, Lundy noted that while Dien was just a parish priest with little influence, he might be more representative of the Catholic population. SDCF, reel 14, 2pp, W. A. Lundy, Memorandum of Conversation with Father Doan Thanh Dien, Honai, Bien Hoa, 29 October 1964.

54 Topmiller, 24–6.

55 SDCF, reel 44, 4pp, Melvin Levine, Memorandum of Conversation with Fathers Mai Ngoc Khue and Vu Duc Trinh, Saigon, 22 December 1964.

to embassy official David Engel's apartment to express his displeasure about the reappointment of Henry Cabot Lodge as American ambassador to Vietnam.⁵⁶ These examples suggest that rather than being mere objects of manipulation for the United States, anti-communist Catholic leaders actively sought to win American political support on issues that they felt affected Vietnamese Catholics, such as a reappointment of an ambassador whom they believed had a role in Diem's overthrow and death.

Quiet diplomacy was not the only avenue of action taken by Vietnamese Catholics. Vietnamese Catholics also effectively exploited the public sphere. Catholic newspapers and journals flourished in South Vietnam. In 1954, there were already 13 major Catholic newspapers in Vietnam. Some did not survive beyond a few years, and new publications quickly sprang into existence.⁵⁷ Between 1954 and 1963, there were 17 Catholic publications that came in and out of existence in South Vietnam.⁵⁸ A number of these publications had a large readership. *Xay Dung*, for example, had a daily circulation of 30,000 in 1967. Of the 27 dailies in South Vietnam at the time, only a few had a higher circulation.⁵⁹ Another Catholic daily, *Hoa Binh*, had a circulation of 20,000. Both Catholic dailies provided political news from a Catholic perspective. For example, in the summer of 1964, *Xay Dung* commemorated the tenth anniversary of the northern migration. The paper published essays and photos reflecting on the 1954 migration and the meaning of the event that changed the lives of nearly one million northerners.

In addition to effectively employing the print media, Vietnamese Catholics also acted through voluntary associations, such as youth and women's groups. The Catholic youth groups were active in both relief activities and in political agitation. They were often called upon to help with emergency relief for flood victims or for war refugees, as discussed above. The origins of these Catholic associations lay in the French colonial period under the influence of Bishop Ho Ngoc Can. Ordained in 1935, Can was the second Vietnamese bishop of Vietnam. He was a strong promoter of Catholic lay associations, such as the Catholic Boy Scouts, Ecclesiastical Volunteers, Valliant Hearts and Valliant Souls, Catholic Agricultural Youth, Rural Catholic Youth, and Catholic Youth Workers.⁶⁰

56 Ibid., reel 55, 2pp, Memorandum of Conversation with Father Nguyen Quang Lam, publisher of *Xay Dung*, 19 July 1965.

57 Hansen, fn. 26, 9.

58 Duong Kieu Linh, "Bao chi Sai Gon thoi ky 1954–1963," (Ph.D. diss., The University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, 1999), 223–4. In this dissertation the author listed 18 Catholic dailies, but one of them is actually a Buddhist monthly entitled *Vietnamese Buddhism*. A special thanks to Nu-Anh Tran for sending me a copy of this dissertation.

59 Huynh Kim Thoi, "Hien trang bao chi Viet Nam" [The Situation of Vietnamese Newspapers and Journals], (M.A. thesis, National Institute of Administration, Saigon, 1967), 147.

60 Charles Keith, "Annam Uplifted: The First Vietnamese Catholic Bishops and the Birth of a National Church, 1919–1945," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3, no. 2, (2008): 149.

TOOLS OF EMPIRE?
VIETNAMESE CATHOLICS IN SOUTH VIETNAM



"The people who were determined to leave in order to find a new life with religious freedom." Xay Dung, 19-20 July 1964.

Another promoter of Catholic lay associations was Bishop Le Huu Tu, who was ordained in 1945. Like the associations promoted by Bishop Can, Tu's associations were wide-ranging in scope. Some of these associations were focused on spiritual matters, while others were socio-political in nature.⁶¹ In fact, as the Bishop of Phat Diem, Tu took on the role of a civil leader as well as the tasks of a spiritual leader. He was famous for establishing a self-defence militia in Phat Diem to defend this diocese from Viet Minh aggression during the First Indochina War. While the Catholic Church of Vietnam at first sup-

⁶¹ Hansen, 70.

ported Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh, by 1946 the relationship between the Viet Minh and the Catholic Church deteriorated as mutual distrust and tension arose.⁶² Feeling threatened, the Vietnamese Catholic hierarchy took an anti-communist stance and encouraged Vietnamese Catholics to fight against communism. Therefore during the First Indochina War, the Catholic Church in Phat Diem took on the role of government and looked after the social and welfare needs of the people, providing them with health care, education, and social activities.⁶³ This tendency of the Catholic clergy to become involved in civic and social matters continued in South Vietnam in the 1960s.

By the mid-1960s, there were a number of Catholic youth groups, many of which were based around the universities. The Catholic Student Federation (CSF) was among the more influential of the associations. Its president was a militant anti-communist university student, Tran Ngoc Bau. The federation was composed of three smaller organizations: the Young Catholic Students, the Legion of Mary, and the Congregation of Mary. The CSF also included about 500 university students from Saigon.⁶⁴ There were also associations affiliated with international Catholic movements, such as the Young Christian Workers Association.⁶⁵

In 1974, the Tong Lien Doan Sinh Vien Cong Giao Viet Nam (the General League of Catholic University Students) was founded with Nguyen Van Cuong as the general secretary. The goal of this league was to coordinate the many Catholic youth organizations and to promote the expansion of their activities. The opening ceremony saw the attendance of many government officials as well as church leaders, including the Archbishop of Saigon, Nguyen Van Binh.⁶⁶ Associated branches of this organization were founded in Hue, Nha Trang, and Dalat. Their activities included social events and charity work; for example, the Dalat group organized a work project at the Tieu Khu hospital in Dalat. The members helped to clean and make repairs at the hospital. In Saigon they organized lectures and social events.⁶⁷

Some of the youth associations published their own journals, such as *Thong Cam* and *Hien Dien*. Established in 1956, *Thong Cam* was edited by CSF president Tran Ngoc Bau. *Thong Cam* focused on more socio-political than spiritual issues. While there were announcements about Catholic religious and lay activities, the journal aspired to be the voice of students in general.

62 Chu, 158.

63 Ibid.

64 SDCF, reel 29, 3pp, Barney Taylor (First Secretary of Embassy) to the US Ambassador in VN, "Catholic Student Leader's Activities and Views on Neutralism," Saigon, 15 January 1964.

65 Nguyen Tran Quy, "Hien trang cac tap the thanh nien Viet Nam" [The situation of youth associations in Vietnam], (M.A. thesis, National Institute of Administration, Saigon, 1969), 15.

66 *Bản Tin* [Bulletin of the General League of Catholic University Students] 2 (1974): 1.

67 Ibid., 5.

TOOLS OF EMPIRE?
VIETNAMESE CATHOLICS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

Edited by Nguyen Tran Quy, *Hien Dien* was published jointly by four university Catholic associations: those from the universities of Hue, Dalat, Saigon and Can Tho from 1970–1971. Articles in *Hien Dien* discussed education, the role of students in society, student movements in Vietnam and around the world, as well as presenting a forum for poetry and prose. The journal clearly held a politically conservative viewpoint, distancing itself from the more radical student groups, particularly the General Association of University Students. In one issue, *Hien Dien* featured an interview with a delegation of American Youth for Just Peace, a group based in Washington, D.C., who wanted “real” peace for Vietnam, but not peace at any price. In other words, American Youth for Just Peace was not supporting a peace that would mean a communist-controlled South Vietnam. Significantly, the General Association of University Students of Saigon did not meet with this group.⁶⁸

Despite the journal’s conservative stance, it was not an organ of the South Vietnamese government. In fact, in 1971 *Hien Dien* was fined for contravening censorship laws and was temporarily closed.⁶⁹ The offending article was a philosophical discussion written by Father Nguyen Van Thanh of Hue, discussing whether or not Vietnamese should oppose communism. Father Thanh’s article probably crossed the line of acceptability when he suggested that Marx had some valuable insights and that fighting communism with guns and bullets was not effective. Moreover, Thanh argued that the choices between pro and anti-communism were too narrow and not realistic.⁷⁰ This critical and open-minded view was clearly not tolerated by the government censor.

In addition to print media and voluntary associations, Vietnamese Catholics at times also took to the streets. Not to be outdone by their religious rivals, the Buddhists, Catholics organized many political rallies and demonstrations in the mid-1960s. In January 1964, the CSF organized two rallies to protest against France’s advocacy of neutralism as a way to stop the civil war. In 1963, French President Charles de Gaulle proposed a peace settlement in Vietnam that would begin with the withdrawal of American forces from South Vietnam. The issue of neutralism emerged again in January 1964, when rumour swirled that members of General Minh’s government were contemplating seriously de Gaulle’s peace proposal.⁷¹ To the CSF, neutralism was a euphemism for a communist takeover. The president of CSF, Tran Ngoc Bau, stated in a conversation with first secretary of the American embassy that many Catholics felt that General Duong Van Minh and his gov-

68 *Hien Dien* 3 (15 September 1970): 6–8.

69 “Hien Dien bi bat” [Hien Dien was caught], *ibid.*, 11 (June 1971): 6–11.

70 Nguyen Van Thanh, “Chong cong hay khong?” [To oppose or not to oppose communism?], *ibid.*, 10 (May 1971): 17–23.

71 Herring, 121 and 133.

ernment were weak and ineffectual and would not be able to stand up to North Vietnam.⁷²

South Vietnam was a tinder box in 1964–1965 when military coups and counter-coups saw governments come and go in a matter of months. The many street protests and demonstrations that took place in major cities are evidence of people's frustrations with the political instability. After General Minh's government was overthrown in January 1964, General Nguyen Khanh came to power. In an attempt to appease the disgruntled Buddhist leaders who accused Khanh of still harbouring Diem supporters in his government and of discriminatory policies against Buddhists, Khanh took some actions which in turn angered the Catholic population.⁷³ The first was to execute Ngo Dinh Can, one of Diem's brothers, for acting as a virtual warlord of Hue. Khanh also prosecuted Major Dang Sy, who gave the order to South Vietnamese troops to open fire on Buddhist demonstrators in May 1963. As Major Sy was a Catholic, this upset the Catholic population and the Catholic press harshly criticized the government for pandering to the militant Buddhists. The newspaper *Xay Dung* accused the government of using Sy as a scapegoat and suggested that this was analogous to the Dreyfus Affair in France.⁷⁴ Provoking Vietnamese Catholics further was Khanh's decision to repeal Decree 10 which classified Buddhism as an association and not a religion, a law which Buddhists rightly felt was discriminatory against them.

In response to Khanh's concessions to the Buddhists and with the encouragement of the Catholic hierarchy, an estimated 35,000 Catholics took part in the demonstration on 7 June 1964, in Saigon.⁷⁵ According to an American embassy report, demonstrators carried both English and Vietnamese banners with slogans such as: Opposition to Neutralism and Communism; Readiness to Fight for Nation and Church; Requests that the GVN and US be Resolute in Anti-Communist Effort.⁷⁶ There were also anti-Lodge banners, but American officials attributed these to "agitators."⁷⁷ These demonstrations and protests from the Catholic community produced some results; in particular, the South Vietnamese government quietly promised Catholics that Sy would be pardoned after a suitable amount of time had passed.⁷⁸

72 SDCF, reel 29, 3pp, Barney Taylor (First Secretary) of the US Ambassador in Vietnam, "Catholic Student Leader's Activities and Views on Neutralism," Saigon, 15 January 1964.

73 Topmiller, 17–18.

74 *Xay Dung* (2 June 1964), 1 and 4; (4 June 1964), 1 and 4.

75 Topmiller, 18.

76 SDCF, reel 36, 1p, US Embassy Telegram, 7 June 1964. The telegram also reported that 50,000 protesters took part.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid., reel 36, 2pp, Melvin Manfull, Counselor of Embassy for Political Affairs, conversation with Father Hoang Quynh, Saigon, 17 July 1964.

June 7th Catholic Demonstration. *Xay Dung*, 9 June 1964, 1.

By late summer of 1964, more demonstrations erupted in South Vietnam as Khanh attempted to use the Gulf of Tonkin incident to move toward authoritarian rule. On 17 August, Khanh promulgated a new constitution that would make him the president of South Vietnam. This resulted in massive protests; this time Buddhists and students took the lead. At this point, many Catholic leaders supported Khanh's new constitution.⁷⁹ Father Vu Duc Trinh applauded Khanh's attempt to secure more power and urged the government and the United States to use the Gulf of Tonkin incident to take a hard line against North Vietnam.⁸⁰

The new wave of Buddhist-led protests also inflamed tension between the two religious communities, resulting in violence in August between Buddhist and Catholic students. On 21 August, Catholic youths burned down the headquarters of a Buddhist student association. In retaliation, on 24 August, a group of 10,000 Buddhists attacked and burned down a Catholic village outside of Danang.⁸¹ To quell the anger, Khanh resigned, but he remained influential, contributing to the direction of the new government under Tran Van Huong.

Huong's tenure lasted until January 1965, and Phan Huy Quat became the new civilian Prime Minister in February. With Quat's proposed plan to open talks with the NLF, Catholic leaders along with other anti-communist proponents once again launched attacks on this government. Catholic leaders also charged that Quat was anti-Catholic for some of his decisions. For example, Quat dismissed the pro-Catholic governor of Saigon, the Catholic commander of the navy, and a number of Catholic army officers. Quat also made some cabinet appointments of which Catholics disapproved.⁸² By the summer of 1965, militant Catholics, led by Fathers Hoang Quynh and Ho Van Vui, were mobilizing against Prime Minister Quat.⁸³ Father Mai Ngoc Khue told embassy officials that Catholics would not accept anything less than the removal of Quat from office.⁸⁴ Father Vu Duc Trinh was quoted as saying: "Catholic hostility to Quat is beyond reconciliation; Quat has to go."⁸⁵ Apparently, the Catholic leaders set up a special fund to help with expenses associated with casualties for the upcoming struggle. A violent confrontation was avoided with Quat's overthrow by Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky in June.⁸⁶

79 See "Y kien chung toi," *Xay Dung* editorial (20 August 1964), 1.

80 SDCF, reel 30, 3pp, Charles Floweree, Embassy Officer, Memorandum of Conversation with Father Vu Duc Trinh, Northern Refugee Catholic priest and author. Saigon, 19 August 1964.

81 Hansen, 291; Topmiller, 19.

82 Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 343–5.

83 Thanh V. Nguyen, "Vietnamese Buddhist Movements for Peace and Social Transformations, 1963–66," (Ph.D. diss., Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center, San Francisco, 2006).

84 SDCF, reel 29, 2pp, Telegram from Embassy in Saigon to the State Dept., 5 June 1965, #4069.

85 Ibid., Telegram from Embassy in Saigon to the State Dept., 5 June 1965, #4071.

86 Ibid.

Catholic political agitation would continue whenever Catholics felt their interests were threatened. In the summer of 1965, Catholics organized demonstrations against Lodge, who had been re-appointed as American ambassador to Vietnam.⁸⁷ In the spring of 1966, Catholics again organized mass demonstrations against what they believed was the government's "capitulation to Buddhist ultimatums."⁸⁸ Catholic leaders were cognizant of their ability to destabilize governments when they mobilized themselves, using all the resources they had at hand, including access to American officials and support from American Catholic organizations and hierarchy.

After 1966, the political situation appeared relatively less volatile. Nguyen Cao Ky's brutal repression of the Buddhist demonstrations in Hue and Danang in the spring of 1966 succeeded in quelling the Buddhist protest movement. While this did not extinguish Buddhist opposition,⁸⁹ it brought some of the dramatic street demonstrations of the previous year to an end for the time being. The level of Catholic public demonstrations also seemed to subside. The subsequent elections and the formation of the Second Republic (1967–1975) provided some avenues for political opposition. In the fall of 1966, elections were held to establish the Constituent Assembly and in the following year, elections for the upper and lower houses, and the presidency took place.⁹⁰ While these elections were fraught with problems and it is debatable whether or not the legislature actually had any real power, the elections did put an end to the series of military coups which plagued the period of 1963–1965.

Catholic politicians certainly took the opportunities offered by these elections to assert themselves by running their own candidates. As mentioned earlier, Catholics were by no means unified in their political views. By 1967, there were two competing national Catholic political parties: the Greater Solidarity Force and the Catholic Citizens' Bloc.⁹¹ These two parties were successful in electing 13 deputies to the lower house in 1967.⁹² In addition, 17 other Catholic representatives had been elected to the lower house through local, rather than national, Catholic organizations. In the lower house, Catholic representatives tended to form coalitions with conservative blocs. The *Doc Lap* or Independence Bloc, described by Goodman as "the most conservative and the most stable" faction, was composed mainly of northern Catholics of the Greater Solidarity Force and the Catholic Citizens' Bloc.⁹³ Highly influential in 1965, the Independence Bloc was virulently anti-communist and opposed any

87 Ibid., reel 26, 3pp, Melvin Levine, Memorandum of Conversation with Father Vu Duc Trinh, 20 July 1965.

88 Topmiller, 62.

89 Ibid., 147–50.

90 Goodman, 38–47.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid., 153.

TOOLS OF EMPIRE?
VIETNAMESE CATHOLICS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

attempts at negotiating with the NLF and North Vietnam. The Bloc was also strongly opposed to any attempt at rapprochement with Buddhists.⁹⁴

While the political conservatives and moderates could vie to effect change through the electoral process, the more radical activists still tried to voice their concerns through various means. Oppositional papers from both Catholics and non-Catholics continued to dodge censors and government harassment. By the early 1970s, some of the Catholic papers were adopting a more critical stance regarding the war and American policies.⁹⁵ While anti-Americanism sentiments began emerging among non-communists in the late 1960s, by 1970 it became more prevalent. The American use of herbicides in South Vietnam became a hot issue in the Vietnamese press. Catholic papers such as *Tin Sang* and *Hoa Binh*, along with secular papers, began to focus on this issue in order to express more general objections against the United States.⁹⁶

The American government was not the only subject of criticism in the 1970s. The government of Nguyen Van Thieu, which was in power from 1967–1975, also received media scrutiny. Some of this came from Catholic papers. One prominent oppositional Catholic journal, *Doi Dien*, established in 1970, was highly critical of Thieu. Published by a Redemptorist priest Father Chan Tin and philosophy professor Nguyen Ngoc Lan, *Doi Dien* called for peace and focused on issues such as human-rights abuses in the state prisons, government corruption, and drug trafficking among military leaders.⁹⁷ By 1972, *Doi Dien* was shut down by the government and Father Chan Tin had been arrested many times. Despite this harassment, Chan Tin continued to call attention to the abuses in the prison system by spearheading the “Committee for Prison Reform in South Vietnam.”⁹⁸

In 1974, Thieu faced more opposition from another Redemptorist Catholic priest, Father Tran Huu Thanh, who led an anti-corruption campaign against Thieu.⁹⁹ Father Thanh accused Thieu of “perverting anti-communism for personal and corrupt purposes.”¹⁰⁰ He accused Thieu’s wife, Nguyen Thi Mai Anh Khue, who headed her own women’s charitable organization, of misusing char-

94 Ibid., 155.

95 Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 338–44.

96 Ibid.

97 Ton That Manh Tuong, “Chan Tin: A Non-Violent Struggle for Human Rights in Vietnam,” *Viet Nam Generation Journal* Online, 5 (March 1994): 1–4, <http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Texts/Scholarly/Tuong_Chan_Tin_bio.html>(viewed 26 January 2010).

98 Ibid; William Turley, *The Second Indochina War: A Short Political and Military History, 1954–1975* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986), 168.

99 Phillip Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946–1975* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 751.

100 Dennis Duncanson, *Government and Revolution in Vietnam* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 167.

ity funds. Thieu responded to these accusations by shutting down the three newspapers that carried Father Thanh's indictments. As Thanh was a staunch anti-communist with connections to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam's military academy, his challenge to Thieu was formidable — Thieu could not simply dismiss him as someone misguided by communist propaganda. Thanh's campaign, along with Thieu's own actions, and the desperate situation of the war, contributed to Thieu's loss of Catholic support by 1974. However, this loss of support mattered little at this point in time, as South Vietnam was unraveling quickly and the communist victory was just a matter of time.

Conclusion

This brief survey of some of the social and political activities of Vietnamese Catholics in South Vietnam suggests that Vietnamese Catholics were highly organized and proactive in trying to influence the social and political events of their time. Many Catholic orders and lay volunteers worked quietly to provide humanitarian relief during the war; in this endeavour they worked enthusiastically with foreign government agencies and NGOs in order to obtain funds and organizational support. These religious organizations also worked closely with the South Vietnamese state to provide aid to orphans and refugees. In their reliance on the state and on foreign governments and agencies, Vietnamese Catholics were not unaware of the negative political implications of their relationships. Like many non-communist Vietnamese, however, Catholic relief organizations saw few options but to accept foreign and state aid. In fact, Vietnamese Catholic charities did their best to attract state and foreign aid, as war relief was considered important in building and maintaining a non-communist South Vietnam. Consequently, the Catholic Church of Vietnam encouraged humanitarian work among parishioners and framed it not only as religious duty, but also as a patriotic responsibility of citizens.

Vietnamese Catholics and clergy also did not shy away from participating in politics. Catholic leaders used the press, voluntary associations, and public demonstrations to assert themselves in the public sphere. In 1964–1966, Catholics took to the streets to voice their concerns regarding ineffective governance, the state's supposedly anti-Catholic policies, and soft stance on communism. In the 1966–1967 period, Catholics became heavily involved with electoral politics, making sure that Catholics were well represented in the upper and lower houses. They continued to work behind the scenes and in the spotlight to protect what they deemed were Catholic interests. Since many of the more vocal and active Catholic leaders were militantly anti-communists and supporters of the war, Catholics as a group appeared as mere puppets of the United States and South Vietnamese governments. However, as this paper argues, many different perspectives existed among Catholics, including those who supported a political and neutralist solution to end the war. This paper also

TOOLS OF EMPIRE?
VIETNAMESE CATHOLICS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

shows that despite sharing similar goals and political views with the United States government, the strongly anti-communist Catholic leaders and movements were not passive tools to be manipulated by foreign governments. On the contrary, they were dynamic activists and politicians who went to great lengths to forge strategic alliances to achieve political goals that they themselves had identified: to maintain a non-communist South Vietnam and not to create a dependency for American neo-colonial power.

* * *

VAN NGUYEN-MARSHALL is an Associate Professor in History at Trent University. She has published on charity and philanthropy in colonial Vietnam and is currently working on middle-class identity and associational life in South Vietnam during the 1960s-1970s.

VAN NGUYEN-MARSHALL est professeure agrégée d'histoire à l'Université Trent. Elle a publié des études sur la charité et la philanthropie dans le Vietnam colonial et travaille actuellement sur l'identité de la classe moyenne et la vie associative dans le sud du Vietnam au cours des années 1960 et 1970.