

January 2019

The Impact of State Religious Policies on Christian Women's Leadership Status in Vietnam: The Case of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam Since 1975

Le Ngoc Bich Ly

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ly, Le Ngoc Bich (2019). The Impact of State Religious Policies on Christian Women's Leadership Status in Vietnam: The Case of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam Since 1975. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 20(2), 106-119.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol20/iss2/8>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

The Impact of State Religious Policies on Christian Women's Leadership Status in Vietnam: The Case of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam Since 1975

By Le Ngoc Bich Ly¹

Abstract

This paper contributes to a feminist critique of multiculturalism by presenting the complexity of the relationship among the state, religion and women in the context of Vietnam. By taking the Evangelical Church of Vietnam—South as a case study, and based on both primary and secondary data obtained from in-depth interviews with 38 Vietnamese female and male church leaders in 2014–2016, and four months of fieldwork in southern Vietnam between February and May 2016, the paper argues that the assumption of equal rights and citizenship status for all women in the wider society according to the liberal model of multiculturalism cannot be directly applied in Vietnam. State religious policies in this country play a significant role in the double reduction of Christian women's and status in terms of leadership first in the wider society and second in the religious community itself despite the existence of national advanced gender law and the government's tight control of religious groups. The failure of both this church and the government in upholding the governmental gender policies within this religious organization has complex causes rights embedded in the context of Vietnam. This paper looks into the government's political concern rather than gender one in its management of religion and the ECVN's theological, political and social stance as main causes of the gender problem.

Keywords: Women in Leadership, State Religious Policies, Multiculturalism, Evangelical Church of Vietnam

Introduction

Feminist scholars, such as Susan Moller Okin and Ayelet Sachar, have shown that liberal theories on separation of state and religion have ignored the gender dimension. The non-interference of the state into cultural and religious groups has left the internal gender problems, especially family affairs, within the cultural and religious community untouched. Liberal democracy on cultural and religious rights fails to protect women's welfare, because it is viewed as private for each cultural or religious community (Okin 1999; Sachar 2000). Though Vietnam's model of managing diversity is authoritarianism, in which the state tightly controls religious structures, its treatment of women's issues within religious groups is similar to that of the liberal model, i.e. women's issues are treated as private for religious communities. However, the feminist critique of the liberal model cannot be directly applied to the case of Christian women in Vietnam since the assumption behind the liberal model is based on equal citizenship status and rights for

¹ Dr. Le Ngoc Bich Ly received her PhD degree in Inter-Religious Studies from the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies, Gadjah Mada University in Indonesia in 2017. Since then, she has been working as a faculty member of the International PhD program in Peacebuilding at Payap University, Chiang Mai, Thailand. Her research focuses on Gender Issues in Religion, Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding.

all women in the wider society. However, this is not the case in Vietnam. This is because religious policies in Vietnam have played a significant role in restricting the rights of religious groups in the wider society.

By taking the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-South (ECVN-S) as a case study and using both primary and secondary data from in-depth interviews with 38 Vietnamese female and male church leaders during 2014—2016 and four months of fieldwork in the southern part of Vietnam from February to May 2016, this paper shows that, through its religious policies, the Vietnamese government has directly and indirectly contributed to the double reduction of the status and rights of Christian women in terms of their participation in public and religious leadership. The failure of the church to uphold governmental policies on gender equality and the paradox between the government's tight control of the church and its failure to intervene on behalf of women within this religious organization, have complex causes. This paper finds the main causes in the government's political concerns instead of gender ones in its religious policies and in the church's theological, political and social stance that leads to the concern for gender problems.

Background: Women in the Evangelical Church of Vietnam

The ECVN was established by the work of Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) missionaries from North America in 1911. It is now the biggest and oldest Protestant church in Vietnam. The total number of Protestants from all denominations is 1.5 million out of the total national population of 90 million in 2013 (United Nation Human Rights 2015). As for the ECVN particularly, its estimated membership in 2005 is 455,748 (Truong 2009, 54-55), split since 1954 between two regional synods, the Northern ECVN and the Southern ECVN. For more than a hundred years, women have been discriminated against and subordinated to their male counterparts in education and access to religious career.

For instance, the Constitution requires women to be single to enter the clerical order without ordination, which is not required of men (The Evangelical Church of Vietnam 2002, 36). Women have been restricted from entering the seminary. Though the ECVN seminary in Vietnam was reopened in 2003, after being closed for 27 years by the Communist government, women were not allowed to enter the seminary until 2009. Though being a pastor's wife is the most accepted position for women in the ECVN's view, those in this position are expected to work hard without extra pay (see footnote Truong 2009, 60). These are but a few examples of the unequal treatment of men and women in the ECVN. The present situation of women's subordinate status in church leadership cannot be fully explained without a good understanding of how state religious policies, religion and gender intersect to shape it.

Religious Policies and Christian Women as Second-Class Citizens in the Wider Society

After the whole country was unified under the Communist government in 1975, two of the major plans executed by the government were a gender equality program and religious management policies. While the gender framework has been evaluated by international organizations as one of most advanced systems in the world, especially in terms of women's leadership in the public sphere (Wells 2005, ii), Christian women have been excluded in practice from such benefits. In fact, they are subjected to a religious framework which treats them as "second-class citizens".

The Communist government's gender equality policies regarding women's participation in education and leadership were already developed as early as the Communist government was established in the North in 1945 and have been in a process of development. For example, women occupied 4% of the seats in the First National Assembly on November 8, 1946. In the Second National Assembly on May 8, 1960, this percentage increased to 10.8% (Ginsburgs 1975, 614, 625). The 1960 Constitution stated that:

[t]hose who have reached the age of 18 have the right to vote and those who have reached the age of 21 have the right to stand for election, whatever their nationality, race, sex, social origin, religious belief, property status, education, occupation, or length of residence, except insane persons and persons deprived by a tribunal or the law of the right to vote or stand for election (Ginsburgs 1975, 627).

Women were also given equal rights with men in all aspects of life: political, economic, cultural, social and familial in article 24 (*Ibid.*). This principle of non-discrimination between men and women was affirmed in the 1992 Constitution and in its amendment in 2002. For example, the laws on educational and political participation (articles 54 and 63) assure equal rights for boys and girls in education and women's equal rights with men in voting, standing for election, and participating in State management. The law also regulates the proportion of women in elected positions and agencies of State management. It strictly prohibits any act of discrimination against women and any act "damaging their dignity" (Wells 2005, 45). This commitment of the government can be seen in the fact that since 1992 the position of national Vice President has been occupied by women. Though the percentage of women's seats in the national parliament has dropped from 27% in 2006 to 24% in 2011 and remained the same until 2013, according to the latest statistics by the World Bank, Vietnam still has the second highest percentage of women's representation in parliament in Asia. Only Laos (25% in 2013) is higher (The World Bank Group 2014).

However, at the same time as it demonstrated its commitment to gender equality, the Communist government applied religious policies which have treated religious people, especially Christians, as targets of repression before the Renovation Period in 1986 and as "second-class citizens" to be strictly controlled since. Before 1986, the Communist government viewed traditional rituals and religious activities as "backward superstitions, wasteful of resources, antithetical to national construction, and incompatible with Marxist-Leninist ideology" (Luong 2007, 440-441; Nguyen 2014). Being religious, for the government, was being superstitious and needed to be eradicated. Hence, the government started to impose anti-religious (especially anti-Christian) policies (Sunquist 2001, 882). For the Catholic Church, repression spread from north to south as the state confiscated church property, closed religious schools, arrested priests and sent them to re-education camps (Chu 2008, 163). For the ECVN, the state expelled all missionaries, sent 90 pastors to reeducation camp, and closed all theological schools and ninety-nine percent of churches of ethnic Vietnamese origin (Sunquist 2001, 879-880).

Although the state's attitude toward religion has been more relaxed since 1986, it has maintained strict control of religious activities through the mechanisms of privatization and registration of religious activities. For example, Resolution No. 25 in 2003, regulated that "each follower has the right to practice religion at home within the family and at legitimate places of worship as stipulated by the law." This law assumes that religion is a private matter. The second

mechanism that the government uses to control religion is the “ask-permit” mechanism. Religious institutions must ask permission for their operation; but the permission depends absolutely on the power of the local authorities (Chu 2008, 179). Consequently many growing Christian churches have been targets of the state’s repression and strict control (U.S. Department of State 2006). In other words, as the international Christian website OMF rightly remarks, Vietnamese Christians “tend to be treated as second-class citizens” (OMF International 2012).

Within this context, according to the 1992 Constitution, Christian women are deemed beneficiaries of gender equality laws, but they are also subjected to religious policies at the same time. In fact, Christian women have generally been excluded from some of the basic rights declared by articles 54 and 63 of the 1992 Constitution due to their Christian identity. For example, article 54 assures the equality of all in political participation regardless of their religious background. It reads,

[a]ll citizens regardless of their ethnic origin, sex, social status, belief, religion, educational level, occupation and term of residence have the right to vote upon reaching the age of eighteen and stand for election to the National Assembly and the People's Councils upon attaining the age of twenty one as provided by law.

However, article 4 of the same Constitution seems to state the opposite:

The Communist Party of Vietnam, the vanguard of the Vietnamese working class and loyal representative of the interests of the working class, the working people and the whole nation, who adheres to Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh's thought, is the force assuming leadership of the State and society.

In practice, article 4 takes priority over article 54. That means strategic leadership in state sanctioned organizations at all levels from government to civil society have often been exclusively occupied by members of the Communist Party. Professor Nguyen from Hanoi National University observes that Christians are ranked the lowest in the relationship fluency with the government (Nguyen 2014). Therefore, Christian women, as well as Christian men, are automatically unqualified for the position since they cannot accept Marxist ideology. According to Prof. Nguyen, most state officials are non-Christian but often followers of Buddhism and traditional religions, and hence more syncretistic in their faith. He also notices that three fourths of Vietnamese population today state they have “no religion” stated in their curriculum vitae. This is the result of the State’s denial of the role of religion before the 1990s (Nguyen 2014). Though the government’s attitude toward religion has changed after 1990s, Christians still face many barriers when seeking political and social advancement. This can be seen in the fact that entrance to certain fields such as police and government service requires strict profile scrutiny. For example, entrance to the police field of study requires that a person have a “clean” profile. This person and his or her family up to three generations must not have violated the law or done any harm to the Revolution and to the nation (Nhom PV 2014). It is hard for Christians, women included, to demonstrate their profile is clean back three generations when Christianity was closely associated with both French colonial rule and the anti-Communist government in the South from 1954 to 1975 (Nguyen 2009, 5-10; Truong 2009, 3-4).

Therefore, though the Communist government has repeatedly declared its commitment to gender equality and non-Christian women have generally benefited with opportunities to advance themselves in political and social participation, Christian women from the ECVN have shown to be alienated to such benefits because of their Christian identity. Their exclusion from political and social leadership is one of the obvious consequences as non-Christian women and Christian women have many different abilities to exercise their inalienable rights proclaimed in the 1992 Constitution. If compared with the liberal model of multiculturalism as being criticized by Susan Moller Okin and Ayelet Sachar, the intersection between state religious policies and religion in Vietnam is an additional element for feminist criticism. While equal citizenship rights for public leadership participation for all individuals regardless of religious backgrounds are protected in the Western liberal model of democracy, it has shown not to be the case in Vietnam.

Religious Policies and Women's Subordinate Status to Men in Church Leadership in the ECVN

Under the impact of the state religious policies, not only are women in the ECVN disadvantaged in political and social leadership participation in the wider society due to their Christian identity as mentioned above, but they also endure discrimination in access to religious education and profession due to their gender within their own religious community. The state religious policies contribute to the latter disadvantage of these women by impoverishing the church leadership and ignoring gender discrimination and violation of women's rights to education and profession in religious life while the state tightly controls the church structure and legally claims it protects women's dignity and equality in all aspects of life.

First of all, the government's anti-religious activities before 1990s have led to the impoverishment of the ECVN's church leadership by causing a drain of leadership and a lack of theological opportunities. Due to the fear of the Communist government, many pastors and laity from the ECVN migrated to the U.S. as "boat people" after 1975 (Truong 2012, 95; Sunquist 2001, 882). Beside this loss of religious leaders, the ECVN was also deprived of opportunities for theological education since the government closed its only seminary in Nha Trang and isolated it from the outside world. The ECVN's seminary had been established in Da Nang in 1921 by the (CMA) missionaries to train local pastors for church planting, and later was moved to Nha Trang in 1959. By 1975, this seminary had equipped the church leadership with more than 500 pastors, 276 Bible students in Nha Trang and over 900 laypeople trained by theological training by extension (Sunquist 2001, 879-880). However, the Communist government closed this seminary in 1975 and forbade theological education until 2003 (Truong 2012, 96). Furthermore, the government also closed the country from the outside world until the 1990s. Hence theological education abroad for church members was not possible.

However, since 1990s, Vietnam changed its policy on domestic and international issues. Vietnam normalized its relationship with China in 1991 (after the war in 1979). In 1994, the US lifted its embargo on trade against Vietnam and normalized its diplomatic relations with Vietnam a year later. Vietnam became a member of ASEAN in 1995 and a member of World Trade Organization in 2008. This integration of Vietnam into the world started to open opportunities for international travel, work, and education. As a result, only after 1990s was overseas theological education possible for Christians from Vietnam. For example, the Union University of California (UCC), established by overseas Vietnamese evangelicals living in the U.S. has offered theological education both bachelor and master levels for Vietnamese students in Vietnam by distant training

or sending them to other countries such as Cambodia and Thailand since 1991 (Truong 2012, 95-96). Though women have been able to access theological education since the 1990s, it is hard for them to improve their status within a short time period after being deprived of educational access for 27 years.

Beside the direct deprivation of theological opportunity as mentioned above, the religious leadership that survived after 1975 has created obstacles regarding improving women's access to theological education and leadership in the church, when the church was officially recognized in 2001 and theological education was allowed in 2003. This can be seen in the church's reluctance and even refusal to accept church members with higher theological training from outside the country and its unchanged attitude toward women's subordinate roles in its Constitution and practices. As a result, women's inferior status has been maintained.

According to my informants in Vietnam, students who graduated abroad must go through a process of re-indoctrination of the church's theological stance and policies. For men, they have to wait for a long time to be recognized as pastors, and no one knows how long this process is. For example, Ms. Lan (a pseudonym), who earned two theological Master's degrees abroad, told me in an interview:

I am old and I need immediate employment. If I apply, I don't know how long it will take [for the seminary to accept me]. Do you know, Dr. A. He has a Ph.D. and applied, but for many years he has not been recognized. He has just been a teaching assistant for the seminary. He has a Ph.D. but he had to sit and was taught by those who even do not have a Master's degree. Do you understand what I mean? I don't know how long I have to wait. I am 53 now. I want to teach now. (Interview 2014).

Perhaps this unwelcoming attitude of the ECVN towards those trained from outside the country is best understood through Dr. Truong's remarks about the weaknesses of theological education in Vietnam. For him, this attitude is nothing but the fear that originates from the ECVN's anti-intellectual spirit. This anti-intellectual attitude originated from the CMA missionaries' fear of heresy and losing faith in the face of science and rationality. He says,

...the anti-intellectual spirit that came from the fear of the CMA's missionaries that in pursuing reason and rationality one could lose faith in God. Vietnamese Protestants were taught to be careful with knowledge and science. Many Vietnamese Protestants became literalists, and they found that many scientific claims went against their beliefs. With this kind of fear transmitted from the CMA's missionaries, theological education in Vietnam underestimates intellect and knowledge; this has caused many negative impacts for the Protestant churches in Vietnam to this day (Truong 2012, 100).

Beside this fear, this attitude seems to relate to the fact that the ECVN's leaders are left behind in their intellectual qualifications compared to the younger intellects. As college level was the highest level offered before 1975, most of them are unqualified to direct and teach at the seminary which was reopened in 2003. According to Dr. Truong,

Often the heads of the churches serve as the heads and deans of the schools, the vice presidents of the churches as the vice presidents of the schools, although many are not qualified to serve as deans of theological schools. Besides, many of these church leaders hold many other official positions. Faculty members in many schools are unqualified. A number of teachers for bachelor programs did not even have a bachelor degree. Some schools do not have a sufficient number of qualified teachers for bachelor programmes but still offer master programmes (Truong 2012, 97-98).

Though Dr. Truong is critical about the leadership of the ECVN, he ignores the gender dimension of the ECVN's attitude toward women who get higher theological education from outside the country. My interviews with five of these women show that they bear a double discrimination burden. One is the above legacy. The other is their gender. Most of them find no reason to wait while the church constitution does not recognize women for ordination. The church situation makes it unthinkable for them to become pastors in their lifetimes. For example, Ms. Lan said in an interview:

They [the ECVN] make some changes like recruiting women to the seminary but these women never get ordained. I don't dare to raise any opinion and I know well that it is impossible to enter it. Look at what happened to people before us. If we talk, no one listens.

Similarly Ms. Hue (a pseudonym), another female informant who graduated from a seminary in Thailand, says,

I will watch the situation. I want to do things like women's training, helping them study the Bible, rethink and reinterpret the Bible to see their role and how God really view women. I think we need to help men understand it too. I see that what the church teaches makes women dare not receive leadership position. Situation like this, it is needless to talk about thinking of becoming a female pastor. Most of my friends, who study in the seminary in Vietnam, no one dares think of becoming pastor... because they never think it is their job but men's job (Interview 2014).

This shows that the ECVN's conservative gender perspective makes it unthinkable for these women who graduated from outside the country to pursue the path of leadership as their male counterparts who are in the same situation. The situation is no different regarding women who get theological training inside the country. Despite the ECVN's openness to female students since 2009, this religious institution has discouraged women to pursue theological education and leadership roles through various ways.

Firstly the ECVN still reinforces women's traditional role model as seen before 1975, which means that women are to be best supporters behind men in church work. Some pastors' wives only started to learn how to read and write in order to join the Bible School after marrying their husbands. The ECVN's Bible School regulated that male seminarians had to marry at least a year before graduation so that their wives could be trained to be "able to fulfill their duty

as wife of a church minister” (*Tuyen Tap Tieu Su Ngươi Phuc Vu Chua [Collection of autobiographies of God’s servants]* 2011, 48, 105, 237). The ECVN prescribed women the role of a nurturer and supporter of men. Within the ECVN before 1975, men were given priority to get a theological education while single women were barred or discouraged from pursuing it (Pham 1995, 15, 28-29). For example, one of the female informants, who is now 61 years old, told me her own life story:

My parents are servants of God. When 18 years old, after finishing high school, I had a desire to learn God’s Word and wanted to enter the seminary in Nha Trang; however, my father disagreed. He said, “though the seminary does not forbid girls to enroll (in 1970), any girl, who enters the seminary there, is stereotyped as seeking husband as the only purpose for women there, and if she does not have any engagement with a “minister-to-be” at the same seminary, after graduation, she returns home and becomes an “ordinary church member” which she was before entering the seminary.” Then my father pointed to me, three or four women in the church who graduated from the Nha Trang seminary. After coming home, they could not do anything else but “teach children” which anyone without a seminary degree can do (Email 2014).

Since 1975, the ECVN has continued to apply this model of roles for women in the church. In 2009, during the fourth batch, the seminary recruited girls for the first time after it was reopened in 2003. There were 20 girls out of 155 students. In fact, though women were barred to enter the seminary before 2009, those who are wives and fiancées of male seminarians were encouraged and even required to enter the seminary. The ECVN requires them to join the seminary in the last year of their husbands’ training so that they could support their husbands better. For example, the second batch (2005-2009) had 89 female students who were wives of male students and pastors in Ho Chi Minh City (Ngọc Tuấn 2009). For the third batch (2007-2011), there were 48 female students all of whom were wives of male students (Trần 2011). This shows that the church’s gender model has not changed since its establishment.

Secondly the church has still maintained the Constitution which mandates gender discrimination in ordination and leadership positions even though there are more and more female students who have theological and leadership qualifications. Article 48 of the 2002 Constitution states that “The Executive Board of the General Assembly of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam will consider the recognition of the status of female preacher (*Nữ Truyền đạo*) and assignment for *single* female students graduated from theological seminary” (my emphasis). In contrast, article 49 addressing male students’ states, “The Executive Board of the General Assembly of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam will consider the recognition of the status of minor pastor and assignment for students graduated from the theological seminary.” According to the ECVN’s tradition, “junior pastor” or “*Mục Sư Nhiệm Chức*” is candidate for ordination, while the title “female preacher” is permanent for a woman. Ms. Huong (a pseudonym), who works for the ECVN seminary, shared with me a story about the first batch of girls who graduated from this seminary. She said that these girls were required to sign a contract of celibacy for good if they want to be accepted as female preachers in the church. Several cried and did not want to sign it. This also means that their theological degree after five years’ education has been a waste of time

in terms of professional advancement. Such a strategy from the ECVN is another way to discourage women from taking leadership positions.

My field work and interviews with pastors' wives of the ECVN reveal that another mechanism to discourage women from leadership positions is the practice of forbidding women from participating the church's decision-making process and blaming women for failures of the church. This practice was revealed throughout interviews with several pastors' wives. When I asked about the role of women in the church and why women have such a position, several of them seemed reluctant and simply answered my question by saying "I don't know." Some others, who know me personally, were more open. They admitted that they were not allowed to participate in church management or to acquire information beyond what they were told to do. For instance, when I asked about women's role in the church, a pastor's wife told me:

The pastor's wife was not allowed to sit and discuss anything regarding church life. Now it is still the same. When any male or female deacon in the church needs me to help anything in the church, they themselves must come and talk to me personally. For example, today I need your help to lead the choir or share the word, then I am allowed to do it... You can meet the pastors and ask anything you want because this thing is men's thing. This has formed a habit in me. Men have their own organization to do things. For example, in the church, women are not successful in their ministry because they interfere the church's internal issues. For me, I don't do that because they already have their own groups. When they can't do it and they ask for my help, I will do it. No interference, no overhearing, and no need to ask. (Interview, 2014).

Another pastor's wife even told me that any pastor's wife who tries to learn about church issues will be kicked out. This practice has created fear in these women. They are fearful of being ostracized if they act differently from what they are told. They are even more fearful of being blamed as the destroyer of their husbands' religious profession. Such a fear has been propagated by the church and internalized by the women. My interviews with a few pastors' wives also show that they believe that women should be responsible for the success or failure of the church. For instance, a pastor's wife said, "In my opinion, a woman of God do 70% of the work of the church. Men only do 30%. The man is God's servant, but he is only responsible for preparing sermons to preach. The wives must care for general things. Today many churches have failed because of the women." Through the practice of prohibiting women from taking part in the church affairs and blaming women for failures of the church, women become the object of men's domination and scapegoat for men's failure. This has created fear and lack of confidence among women to take leadership position.

These have shown that women have been discouraged from obtaining a theological education and take leadership positions whether through the church constitution or gender-discriminating practices since 1975 as far as this paper is concerned. For the church, women's role is limited to being exemplary partners and supporters of their husbands in serving the church. Their education is to benefit their husband not themselves. As women are to follow men's lead, women's autonomy and equal leadership have been discouraged. This can be credited to the conservative leaders of the ECVN who survived the repressive religious policies by the Communist government. By excluding women who are empowered through theological

qualifications from inside and outside the country from leadership positions, the church has maintained the status quo.

The discriminatory treatment of women in the ECVN is a violation of the governmental law on gender equality stated in the country's 1992 Constitution. While the Government has strictly controlled the religious leadership structure of Christian churches such as ordination, recruitment of students for the seminary, and assignment of pastors to local churches (Hansen, 2009: 321-2), the government has failed to recognize the violation of women's rights in this church according to the 1992 Constitution. In this respect, the state's religious policies can be said to indirectly contribute to the reduction of this women group's rights and status the second time.

Causes of the Failure to Uphold Governmental Gender Policies from Both Government and the ECVN

This paper argues that the failure of both the government and the ECVN to uphold the governmental policies on gender equality has its causes in the government's political concern rather than gender one in its management of religion and the ECVN's theological, political and social stance as main causes of the gender problem.

Since the beginning, the communist government's concern about religious groups has been primarily political. Nowhere is gender aspect found in the government's religious framework. The government's political focus in its religious policies can be explained through the colonial legacy of Christianity in Vietnam. The government has perceived Protestantism as a threat to the state's power (Woods 2002, 155). For example, many articles on *Dai Doan Ket* government magazine during 1977 described the ECVN as an "institution of the American government to train Vietnamese to serve the imperialist America" (quoted by Truong 2009, 53). Hiebert also found a 1998 document from the government's Bureau of Minority and Religious Affairs in Lao Cai province, stating:

"The U.S. imperialists still maneuver various foreign Protestant denominations to provide financial aid for their related churches to multiply believers and expand their area of influence... The Americans hope that someday there will be a conflict between the local government authorities and the new followers of the evangelical faith." (Woods 2002, 156-7).

Perhaps because of this historical reason, the government has invested its energy on the political aspect of its management of religions in Vietnam.

For the government's side, the gender dimension has been solely dealt with by the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU) which was established in 1930 and has been the primary vehicle for both the development and implementation of gender equality policies in Vietnam. To receive support, a woman must become member of this organization. (Vietnam Women's Union 2017). There has been a lack of cooperation between the VWU and religious women groups. For this reason, gender equality advocacy from the national women body has not entered into religious women groups such as the ECVN.

Regarding the ECVN, its indifference to governmental gender policies can be attributed to its theological, political and social stance. Theologically the ECVN has inherited a conservative patriarchal gender perspective from the C&MA missionaries from North America. Until now the

mother church of the ECVN in the United States has still excluded women from leadership positions that involve authority such as elders and pastors. (“Women in Ministry” 2016). The ECVN has still viewed women as inferior to men and submitted to male leadership (Le 2016). Politically and socially the ECVN has maintained a perspective of non-interference and disengagement.

The ECVN has maintained a non-political stance and discouraged its members from becoming involved in social-humanitarian works. For example, according to Sunquist, during the War of Independence from French colonialism (1945-1954) and the war against the Americans (1959-1975), the Protestant Church adopted a policy of noninterference in politics, because it believed that the spiritual task of preaching the Good News is more important than the task of serving the country (Sunquist 2001, 879). However, Truong said that despite this policy, a majority of church members and leaders had close relationships and collaboration with foreign powers especially missionaries from North America and the South government. After liberation, the church quoted this policy as an excuse for non-collaboration with the new communist government (Truong 2009, 3-4). There were times the EVCN felt the need of materializing the gospel by providing medical and educational assistance to Vietnamese people during the wars. However, the C&MA, the mother church and financial supporter of the EVCN, was greatly concerned because it was afraid that these activities would cause a decline in the spiritual and evangelistic zeal (Sunquist 2001, 879).

Woods (2002) and Truong (2009) find in the Vietnamese Protestant theology a justification for this practice. Woods describes: “Vietnamese pastors tell their followers that though every true believer must wear the badge of an anti-social religious fanatic, this brief humiliation will result in eternal rewards” (Woods 2002, 155). For Truong, the Protestants believe that the world has been lost to Satan and Christians should not participate in any worldly affairs “even when such work brings justice and welfare to their society” (Truong 2009, 2). This perspective has been maintained until now and it has justified the irresponsibility of Christians toward social injustices and national construction (Truong 2009, 290). The disengagement of the ECVN in politics and society also means that this church has closed itself off from all progress including gender equality issues, unfolding in Vietnamese society and also in the world. This self-isolation, together with the inherited missionary patriarchal gender structure are major factors that have made this church indifferent to the governmental gender policies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by analyzing the Communist government’s inconsistency in its application of its gender equality framework and religious policies in the case of women in the ECVN, the paper has shown that this inconsistency has resulted in the double reduction of this women group’s status regarding public leadership participation both in the wider society and in the religious community itself. Christian women generally have been excluded from political and social participation since religious policies place them in the status of second-class citizens. This has created an unequal status between non-Christian women and Christian women in Vietnamese society. Within the ECVN, the state’s religious policies have resulted in women’s lack of access to theological education before 1990s. Though tightly controlling the ECVN, the government has failed to acknowledge the discrimination and violation of women’s rights in this church, which have been practiced and maintained by the ECVN’s conservative male leaders.

Hence the religious policies have indirectly contributed to the second reduction of these women's status by leaving the gender problem untouched in this religious group.

There are causal factors from both the government and the ECVN in their failure to uphold governmental gender policies, despite the tight control and interference of the government into religious groups. This paper found the main causes in the government's lack of gender concern in its religious policies since its primary concern is political. The government's concerns for gender equality have been left solely to the responsibility of the Vietnam Women's Union while cooperation between this Union and religious women's groups has not existed. If such a cooperation exists, the issue of women's discrimination within religious groups and gender equality advocacy could be mutually learned and reinforced. On the ECVN's side, the inherited missionary patriarchal gender perspective has been shielded by this church's self-isolation from the wider society and disengagement in politics. The above characteristics of both parties can explain why the model of Vietnam is no different from the liberal model of multiculturalism regarding gender problems within religious groups, even though it is supposed to be different. Hence, the critique of the liberal model of multiculturalism by Susan Moller Okin and Ayelet Sachar cannot be directly applied to Vietnam. It requires attention to particular mechanisms that are at work to shape the relationship among state, religion, and gender in Vietnam.

References

- Chu, Lan T. "Catholicism vs. Communism, Continued: The Catholic Church in Vietnam." *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3, no. 1 (2008): 151–92.
- Ginsburgs, George. "The Role of Law in the Emancipation of Women in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam." *The American Journal of Comparative Law* 23, no. 4 (Autumn, 1975): 613–52.
- Le, Ngoc Bich Ly. "Women-Inclusive Leadership in Toraja Church and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam: Agency and Structural Change." A doctoral dissertation. Gadjah Mada University, 2016.
- Luong, Hy V. "The Restructuring of Vietnamese Nationalism, 1954-2006." *Pacific Affairs* 80, no. 3 (2007): 439–53.
- Nguyen, Quang Hung. "The Relationship between Vietnamese Communists and Christians during the Vietnam War." *종교와 문화* 16 (2009): 1–20.
- . "Vietnam Policy on Religious Affairs Since 1990 Seen From a Cultural-Religious Viewpoint," 22. Yogyakarta, 2014.
- Okin, Susan Moller. *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Pham, Van Nam (Mrs.). *Dang Tron Cuoc Doi: Hoi Ky 55 Nam Phuc Vu Chua cua Muc Su Pham Van Nam (Life Dedication: Rev. Pham Van Nam's Diary of 55-Year-Ministry)*. California: Nha Xuat Ban Phuong Dong, 1995.
- Sachar, Ayelet. "Should Church and State Be Joined at the Altar? Women's Rights and the Multicultural Dilemma." In *Citizenship in Diverse Societies*, edited by Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman, 199–233. Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Sunquist, Scott W., ed. "Vietnam." In *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity*, 878–82. Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001.
- The Evangelical Church of Vietnam. "Hien Chuong Tin Lanh (The Constitution of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam)." Nha Xuat Ban Ton Giao, 2002.
- The World Bank Group. "Proportion of Seats Held by Women in National Parliaments (%)." *The World Bank: Working for a World Free of Poverty*, 2014.
- Truong, Van Thien Tu. "Menh Troi: Toward a Vietnamese Theology of Mission." Doctoral dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, 2009.
- . "Vietnam: The Emergence of Protestant Churches and Theological Education." *World Council of Churches, The Ecumenical Review*, 64, no. 2 (July 2012): 94–103. doi:10.1111/j.1758-6623.2012.00152.x.
- Tuyen Tap Tieu Su Nguoi Phuc Vu Chua (Collection of autobiographies of God's servants)*. Uy Ban Van Hoa Giao Duc – Tong Lien Hoi - Hoi Thanh Tin Lanh Viet Nam (MN): Nha Xuat Ban Phuong Dong, 2011.
- Woods, L. Shelton. *Vietnam: A Global Studies Handbook*. California: ABC-CLIO, 2002.

Websites:

- Ngọc Tuấn. 2009. Hàng Ngàn Tín Hữu Tham Dự Lễ Tốt Nghiệp Thần Học Khóa II Tại Sài Gòn [Thousands of believers attended the graduation ceremony of the theological students, second batch, in Saigon].” Hoithanh.com: Vietnamese Global Christian Network, November 07, 2009, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://hoithanh.com/Home/tin-tuc/242-le-tot-nghiep-khoa-2-cua-thanh-kinh-than-hoc-vien-viet-nam.html#.UvPBURv50Y>
- Nhom PV. 2014. Tư Vấn 24/7: Muốn Thi Vào Ngành Công an Cần Tiêu Chuẩn Gì? [Counseling 24/7: What Are the Requirements to Enter the Police Field of Study?]. *Tuoitre*, January 12, 2014, accessed May 25, 2014, <http://tuoitre.vn/Tuyen-sinh/589800/tu-van-24-7-muon-thi-vao-nganh-cong-an-can-tieu-chuan-gi.html>
- OMF International. 2014. Vietnam, October 2012, accessed May 25, 2014, http://www.omf.org/omf/us/peoples_and_places/countries/vietnam
- Phạm, Cường. Nd. Lễ Tốt Nghiệp Thánh Kinh Thần Học Khóa 4 Và Kỷ Niệm 10 Năm Tái Lập Viện Thánh Kinh Thần Học [Graduation Ceremony for Course IV and the Tenth Anniversary of the Re-Establishment of the Theological Seminary]. Hoithanh.com: Vietnamese Global Christian Network, accessed May 5, 2014, <http://hoithanh.com/Home/tin-tuc/4195-le-tot-nghiep-thanh-kinh-than-hoc-khoa-4-va-ky-niem-10-nam-tai-lap-vien-thanh-kinh-than-hoc.html#.UvOcbRv50Y>
- The World Bank. 2014. Proportion of Seats Held by Women in National Parliaments (%), accessed September 01, 2015, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS>
- Trần, Lê Vy. 2011. Lễ Tốt Nghiệp Khóa III - Viện Thánh Kinh Thần Học Và Khởi Công Xây Dựng Nhà Thờ [Graduation Ceremony for Course III at the Theological Seminary and Inauguration Ceremony of the Church Building Construction]. Hoithanh.com: Vietnamese Global Christian Network, November 9, 2011, accessed April 30, 2014, <http://hoithanh.com/Home/tin-tuc/2349-le-tot-nghiep-dau-tien-tai-vtkth.html#.UvO6ArRv50Y>
- United Nation Human Rights. 2015. Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, on his visit to Viet Nam (21 to 31 July 2014), Jan. 31, 2015, accessed March 20, 2015, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/Pages/Visits.asp>
- U.S. Department of State. 2006. Vietnam: International Religious Freedom Report 2006, accessed July 27, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2006/71363.htm>
- Wells, Melissa. 2005. Vietnam Gender Situation Analysis 2005. Asian Development Bank, accessed September 01, 2015, <http://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/32246/cga-viet-nam.pdf>
- Vietnam: 1992 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (As Amended 25 December 2001), accessed August 08, 2015, <http://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/asia/VN/vietnam-1992-constitution-of-the-socialist/view>
- Vietnam Women’s Union. 2017. <http://hoilhpn.org.vn/news.asp?CatId=128&lang=EN>
- “Women in Ministry.” 2016. The Alliance. <https://www.cmalliance.org/about/beliefs/perspectives/women-in-ministry>