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**THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND
PRACTICES OF THE
VIETNAMESE COMMUNITY IN
BRITAIN**

JUDITH LAW, 1991

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Religion In Vietnam	3
The Development of Buddhism	7
The Influence of Confucianism	11
Taoism in Vietnam	13
Popular Indigenous Beliefs	15
New Religious Movements in Vietnam	16
The Introduction of Christianity to Vietnam	17
Vietnamese Syncretism	18
The Refugee Experience	20
Political Upheaval in South East Asia	20
Reasons for Leaving	22
Diversity And Division Amongst The Vietnamese Community In Britain	26
Vietnamese Roman Catholics in Britain	29
Vietnamese Buddhism in Britain	36
Ancestor Worship Amongst the Vietnamese	45
Popular Vietnamese Religious Expression in Britain	48
Religion And The Vietnamese Character	51
Religion And The Refugee Experience	55
Conclusion	58
Bibliography	60

INTRODUCTION

Refugees from Vietnam in Britain are heirs to an ancient culture originating at a crossroads of trade and pilgrimage routes in South East Asia. This geographical position helped to form a rich and varied pattern of religious beliefs and practices which, despite a long history of colonisation, decades of bitter warfare, and, more recently, transplantation to the opposite side of the world, retains its distinctly Vietnamese character, and which the Vietnamese in Britain are endeavouring to uphold today.

The Vietnamese community in Britain is a diverse group. 70% are not ethnic Vietnamese but are of Chinese ancestry (Jones, 1982). The vast majority are from the North, which, through its long history and more recent political division, developed a quite distinct character from the South. Only a small proportion are Roman Catholics but they are well-organised and have a high profile. The rest, if they are religious at all, follow, in a distinctly Vietnamese way, some aspect of the Triple Way (Tam giao) of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. Virtually everyone from Vietnam, regardless of religious affiliation, and even those who engage in no other religious practice, consider ancestor worship or remembrance to be very important. There are also a very few adherents in Britain of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao new religious movements which are indigenous to Vietnam.

What is striking, is the degree to which religion has permeated the lifestyle and character of the Vietnamese, so that even those who profess the newer,

Western Christian religion, and those who profess none at all, are imbued with a deep sense of ancestry and qualities springing from their eastern religious heritage. Eastern religions are not always expressed in an organised, outward manner, but it can be argued that the teachings of these religions, affecting the character and daily life of refugees recently arrived from Vietnam, have been a major factor in enabling the Vietnamese to survive through decades of turmoil and upheaval.

This study presents a general overview of religion amongst the Vietnamese community in Britain. A more detailed analysis at this stage is not possible because of the limited amount of research which has been carried out on the subject. The literature on the Vietnamese community in Britain has been concerned mainly with social policy and health and other problems they encounter. Only passing reference has been made to religion.

Besides casual conversations with Vietnamese at places of worship and festival celebrations, I have interviewed 22 people from Vietnam and 5 British people who have worked closely with the Vietnamese. There was no questionnaire but the conversations were guided around certain key areas. They lasted between 1 and 3 hours.

Since I was only able to interview people who spoke reasonably good English, they were almost all from the educated, urban elite of South Vietnam. Only one was from the North, with a few who moved from the North to South in 1954. This means that the majority of refugees from Vietnam in Britain, ethnic Chinese from the rural North, are not

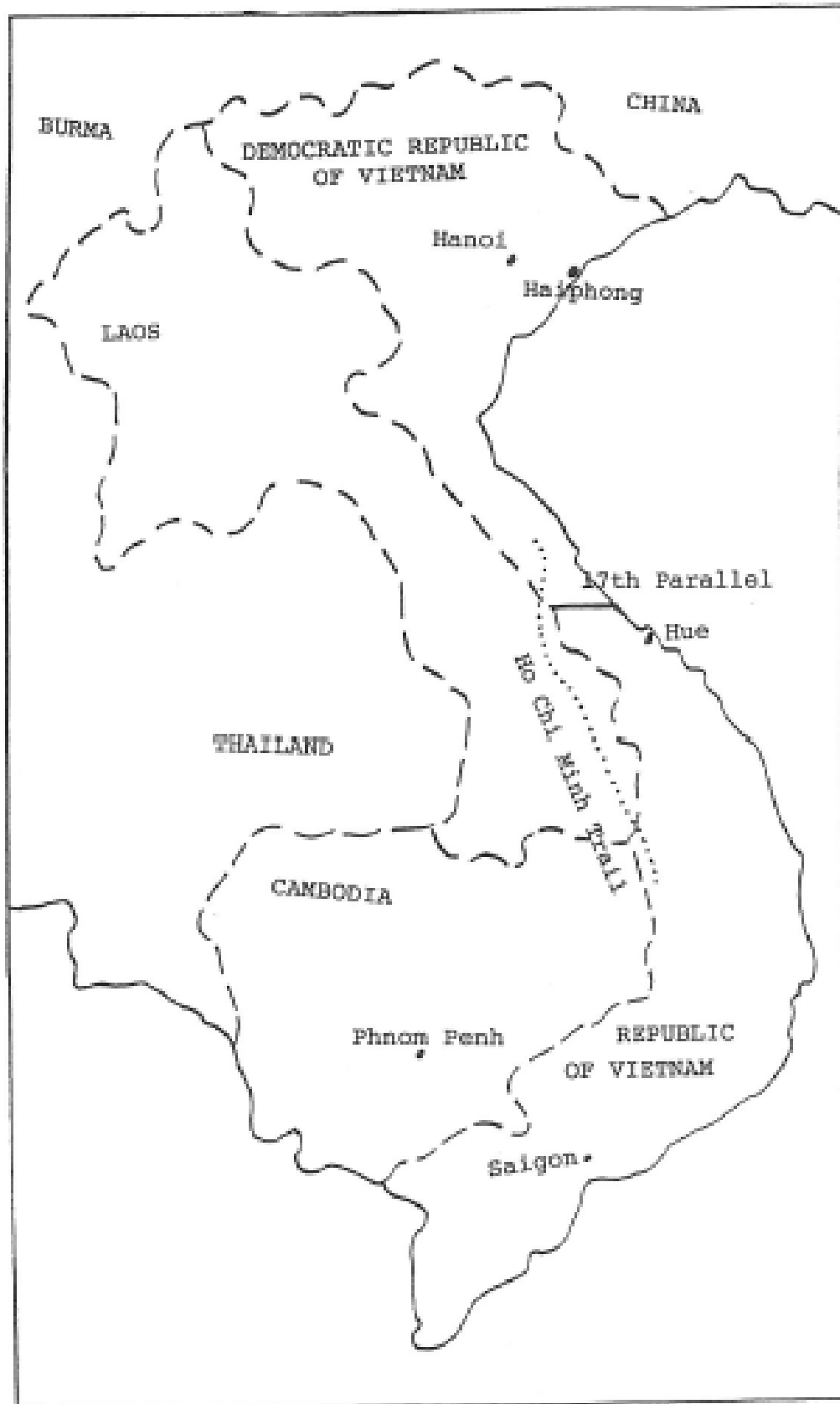
represented. However, most of the interviewees are, in one way or another, community leaders and have been able to give some impression of the overall community. Most of the sample followed Buddhism, Confucianism and/or Taoism (14) and were ethnic Vietnamese (17). They were not, therefore representative of the community at large, but nevertheless, were able to give a valuable insight as an introduction to this complex subject. There is obviously scope for much more research.

This study will explore the development of religion in Vietnam and its transplantation to Britain. It will focus on the expression of Vietnamese religion in this country, both in its organised and more subtle forms. It will then consider how far religion has helped these people to survive, how far it has changed and how their deeply ingrained religious traditions still have an impact on their character.

RELIGION IN VIETNAM

Vietnam is a long narrow tropical country about twice the size of England and Wales together (see Map I). About half the country is in its natural jungle state, with two lush rice lands around the Mekong Delta in the South and the Red River Delta in the north. Because of its position in relation to China, India and the South China Sea, Vietnam has always been a crossroads of trade and ethnic migrations, a meeting place of the great traditions (see Map II).

MAPI
VIETNAM, 1965



MAP II
SOUTH EAST ASIA



The development of religion is intimately bound up with Vietnam's political history which is briefly characterised by its origins (the subject of much legend) in the first millenium BCE by Viets who emigrated from Central China, roughly 900 years of Chinese domination, a further 900 years of independence and great national dynasties, followed by French and American involvement and intense warfare.

It is significant that although most countries in South East Asia have been more affected by Indian civilization, Vietnam has been particularly affected by Chinese civilization. The name, Vietnam, literally means "southern people" which can only be in relation to China. The whole social structure of ancient Vietnam was patterned after that of ancient China, especially the triple view of the family, village and government systems which followed the Confucian ideal. The Chinese also brought Buddhism, Taoism and greatly influenced the arts and literature. Indian influence was felt directly **before** Chinese culture and was also introduced indirectly through the ancient Hindu kingdom of Champa, but Vietnam never took on such fundamental Indian concepts as purity or the caste-system. It was, however, influenced by the Hinayana branch of Buddhism from India which, in Vietnam, met with the Mahayana branch brought in from China.

Despite these influences, Vietnam always maintained a distinctive character. The Vietnamese absorbed Chinese cultural tradition while rebelling against China whenever possible throughout its 900 year occupation. Resistance to China is a recurrent theme even to this day.

Contrary to popular belief, their language is not part of the Chinese family of languages (although it has many Chinese loan words).

The Vietnamese believe that their villages are their greatest strength. No invader could claim to have conquered the country without entering the villages, and no foreigner ever did. Even the hated Chinese could not rule the villages. The old proverb "phep vua thug le lang" (the laws of the emperor yield to the customs of the village) is known by all Vietnamese, who have jealously guarded their way of life, including their own religious practices. Religion in Vietnam is therefore a rich tapestry of foreign and indigenous elements.

The Development Of Buddhism

Mahayana Buddhism predominates in Vietnam but because of its historical connections, Hinayana Buddhism deeply influences the meditation practices. According to Thien-an (1975:24) 'most Buddhist monks and laymen in Vietnam traditionally obey the disciplines of Hinayana'. Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese monk well-known amongst Westerners, who now lives in France, said 'Vietnam is the only country where Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism flourished side by side in tolerance and mutual understanding' (1980:1). Vietnamese Buddhism is a synthesis of traditions rather than being divided and sectarian.

The Hinayana (Theravada) or "lesser vehicle" school is the older. It is closer to the teachings of the Buddha and considers the only Buddha to be the historical Buddha. The Mahayana or "greater vehicle" school is newer,

more adaptable and considers that the historical Buddha is just one amongst many Buddha manifestations. The various Buddhas have different teachings and this leads to a variety of Mahayana denominations.

Of these, Zen (Thien) predominates in Vietnam today, particularly the Lam Te (Rinzai in Japanese) school which is combined with Pure Land Buddhism into a synthesis very popular with the masses. A purer form of Hinayana Buddhism is found to a limited extent in the South.

Zen was traditionally introduced to China from India by Bodhidharma (520 CE) and to Vietnam from China by Ven. Ty-Ni-Da-Lu'u-Chi in 580 CE. This was Vietnam's first major contact with Buddhism. In 820 CE, Ven. Vo-ngon-thong, a Chinese monk, introduced another Zen sect. Buddhism flourished under a series of dynasties favourable to the doctrine. Some kings even abdicated to end their days in monasteries. The Ly dynasty (1010-1225) was particularly sympathetic to Buddhism and it was during this period that Ven Thab-Dong, a Chinese monk, brought Pure Land Buddhism to Vietnam.

Buddhism also flourished under the Tran dynasty (1225-1414). Tran-Nhan-ton (1258-1308) founded the indigenous Truc Lam sect and was regarded by the Vietnamese with comparable esteem to the Indian Emperor Asoka.

After this there was a period of decay as the influence of Confucianism and Taoism grew and the original purity of Buddhism degenerated.

In the late 17th century Chinese monks seeking asylum from the Manchu invaders introduced the Lam Te (Rinzai) sect which rekindled the spirit of Vietnamese Zen and brought new life to the Vietnamese Buddhist community. Ven. Lieu-Quan, the chief disciple of Ven. Nguyen-Thieu (who had originally brought the Lam Te sect to Vietnam) adapted the teachings to merge with local practices and traditions and founded the indigenous Lieu-Quan Zen school which is the predominant Zen sect in Vietnam today.

Thien-an (1975:274) noted that 'popular Buddhism in Vietnam is a mixture of some basic Zen elements and many practices of the Pure Land (Amidist) sect'. Apart from pure Zen monasteries, this combined Zen-Pure Land doctrine is evident in almost every pagoda in Vietnam. In Mahayana Buddhism, a "Pure Land" is a purified land where Buddhas and bodhisattvas live. No two Buddhas can rule over the same land and so there are lands separate from that of Sakyamuni. The most famous of these is that of Amitabha which can be regarded as symbolic of Mahayana Buddhist enlightenment. Those who surrender to Amitabha's saving power are reborn in his Pure Land until they reach nirvana. It has great popular appeal and, combined with Zen, is the dominant form of devotion amongst the Vietnamese.

The basic expression of faith involves mental concentration on Amitabha's saving power and on the mercy of the bodhisattva Quan-Am who became almost as prominent as the Buddha himself and is extremely popular amongst Vietnamese today.

Quan-Am (Kuan-Yin in Chinese), the goddess of mercy, is a vital factor in current Vietnamese religious thought and worship. She is the female form of Avalokitesvara, who is one of the principal assistants to Amitabha (the other being Mahasthamaprapta) and represents compassion. The Lotus Sutra notes Avalokitesvara's ability to protect those lost at sea, which is particularly relevant in view of the plight of many "boat people". Kuan-Yin is translated as the "manifested voice" of Amitabha. It is not known exactly how the male Avalokitesvara came to be worshipped as the female Kuan-Yin (the female form is simply one of many into which Avalokitesvara can transmute himself) but Day (1975:87) suggested that 'the need for a figure to love and more especially for women and children to adore may be the fundamental contributing cause of the raising of Kuan-Yin, as symbolic of motherly compassion (an essential womanly quality) to her present unrivalled place in peasant religious devotion'. Vietnamese women ask her especially for sons, healing and other blessings.

Despite 900 years of Chinese domination, Vietnam retained its own cultural identity, including its own language, in which was written the national poem, Kim Van Kieu which is recognized as the centrepiece of Vietnamese literature and is believed to portray the very soul of the Vietnamese people. It is loved and memorised by Vietnamese everywhere and is regarded as an inspiration of Vietnamese Buddhist thought.

Today, Buddhism is one of the most important influences amongst the Vietnamese. 90% of the total population of Vietnam is said to be Buddhist

(Nguyen Van Canh, 1983:164), although many of these would be "lukewarm" Buddhists and many would also be guided by other doctrines.

The Influence Of Confucianism

Confucianism began in China in the sixth century BCE and in 58 CE it was made the state cult in China. The Red River Delta, at this time part of China, also felt the impact of Confucianism. After the second century CE, there was a perpetual struggle between Buddhism and Confucianism to dominate religious life in Vietnam.

As we have seen, the Ly and Tran dynasties supported Buddhism but the Le dynasty (1428-1788) was the era of Confucian ideology. Society was constructed on clear classical lines. Confucian social and political morality was supported.

The introduction of Catholicism led to clashes with Confucian rulers. More recently, Ho Chi Minh's Communist state attempted to obliterate Confucian influence and traditional morality, whilst in the South, President Diem actively re-affirmed Confucian values and proclaimed the anniversary of Confucius to be an official holiday in 1956 for the first time in the modern period. In following years anniversary observances became larger. In 1957, a Vietnam Confucian Association was organized claiming that Confucianism was relevant even in the atomic age and calling for people to support a purely Vietnamese culture using Confucianism as the foundation.

Since Confucianism is not an organized religion, there are no figures for the numbers of followers in Vietnam, but its impact on Vietnamese life is of fundamental importance. It is not so much a religion as a code of social behaviour.

Confucius taught that people are basically social beings formed by society. He drew up an ethical code grounded on social virtue. He prescribed regulations involving three important relationships - between ruler and subject, father and son, and husband and wife. He believed that harmony could only be achieved by obeying these laws and that only through harmony could tranquillity of the soul be achieved. The emphasis was on duty and hierarchy and respect for authority, especially for the emperor, teacher and father, in that order.

One of the most important features is the family, which is ruled by the father whilst the rest of the family practice filial piety, and is still the pivot of interpersonal relationships amongst Vietnamese today. Ancestor worship is regarded as part of this filial piety and functions to uphold the authority of elders, support social control and encourage traditionalist attitudes. It is believed that deceased ancestors can continue to play a role in their families' lives if particular rites are performed on the anniversary of their death, Tet (New Year), Vu Lan (All Souls Day, a Buddhist celebration) and at certain other times. In addition to home altars, family clans often have ancestral halls in their villages where tablets containing the names of old ancestors are kept. Thuy (1976:19) said that the Vietnamese are 'strongly attached to their land, native village, ancestors' tombs etc.' and

that this is 'one of the main reasons why immobility is a Vietnamese characteristic'.

In view of the importance of maintaining ties with deceased members of one's family, it can be understood how difficult it must have been for refugees to leave their ancestral homes and burial places of their dead relatives. Almost everyone from Vietnam in Britain considers ancestor veneration important and this theme will be explored in the British context later.

Perry (nd:21) said that 'Confucianism did not invent Chinese ethics and manners, it merely formalised and qualified existing social patterns'. He argued that these social traditions arose out of the practical necessity to survive and they date back before Chinese influence.

Confucianism is not expressed in temples and rituals (although there are Confucian temples in Vietnam) so much as in deeply ingrained behaviour and cultural heritage. It has been described as the cement which has held Vietnam together (Hammer, 1966:102).

Taoism In Vietnam

Together with Confucianism, Taoism was introduced to Vietnam from China before Buddhism when the Chinese first dominated Vietnam. Taoist philosophy centres on the idea of human beings' oneness with the universe as taught by Lao Tzu in the 6th century BCE. One should try to live in harmony with the Tao, the natural way, the eternal mystical principle which

lies behind the universe and not try to change this natural way through rules and regulations made by society.

Gradually, from the end of the Tran dynasty (1225-1400), Taoism began to degenerate into a form of polytheism with many gods, the most important of which is Ngoc hoang (the Emperor of Jade). Among these gods, Tao quan (the kitchen god or hearth deity) has special place and is still popular amongst Vietnamese today. Tao quan reports on the deeds of everyone at the end of the year during the Tet celebrations. In Vietnam Tao quan is actually three people in one - a woman and her two husbands about whom there are many legends.

Vietnamese popular cults have also been assimilated into Taoism. For example, certain national heroes, such as the Trung sisters who headed an uprising against the Chinese in 39 CE, and Tran Hung Dao who won many victories over the Mongols, are worshipped, have temples built for them and can be contacted, it is believed, through a medium called an Ong-dong (man) or Ba-dong (woman). The cult of heroes and heroines (Noi-dao) is peculiarly Vietnamese.

Sorcery, horoscopy and geomancy (positioning of buildings according to lines of energy in the earth) are all still practised today amongst the Vietnamese and are derived from Taoism. Taoism in Vietnam has been greatly moulded by local superstitions and beliefs and it is often difficult to distinguish them.

The Vietnamese view of medicine is also derived from Taoism. There are differences between southern (Vietnamese) and northern (Chinese) medicine. Southern medicine bases its explanation of disease on gods and demons and relies on sorcery as a cure. Northern medicine attempts to harmonize currents of energy in the body (which parallel those in the universe which geomancy is concerned with). It believes that disease is caused by an imbalance of am (yin) and duong (yang) and of the five elements in the body. It may use acupuncture or moxibustion to do this. Both these forms of medicine are very much in evidence amongst the Vietnamese today.

Popular Indigenous Beliefs

In a population which was mainly rural, local superstitions and beliefs which were passed on orally, maintained a strong hold. The Vietnamese still believe in the existence of spirits, or animism, and may worship the spirit of a tree, stone or mountain. Many Vietnamese customs, such as not touching another person's head or shoulder, stem from the belief that spirits reside there.

In Vietnam each small village has its own guardian spirit (thanh-hoang) which is worshipped in the dinh. The dinh is the most important public building in the village and is used for social as well as religious purposes.

It is important to note that religion in Vietnam is not just a carbon copy of Chinese religion but that popular indigenous beliefs have played a

significant role in giving it a distinctive character still evident amongst people from Vietnam in Britain today.

New Religious Movements In Vietnam

The Cao Dai religion, which was established in 1926, is 'an exceptionally eclectic faith even in this eclectic land' (Hammer, 1966:47). It draws together Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity and elements of hero worship. God is worshipped as a symbolic eye.

It grew rapidly in popularity and within a few years had 3 million followers but was confined to very limited regions in the South. It had an army of its own, became very politically involved and wielded much power. However, there are only a few followers of this religion in Britain and no organised groups here (although there are groups of Cao Dai followers in the USA). The religion is discussed in detail in Oliver (1976).

The Hoa Hao religion has been described as 'a new native variant of Buddhism' (Fishel, 1961:30). It does not combine various religions into one as does the Cao Dai religion. It is known as Buddhism for the poor because it does not require costly rituals. Founded in 1930 it grew rapidly until it had 2 million followers. It was strongly nationalistic and also politically involved, but again it was confined to a small part of the South and there are very few followers in Britain.

However, it is mentioned along with Cao Dai to demonstrate the dynamic nature of Vietnamese religion, which is not totally grounded in tradition,

but is capable of moving forward and evolving new forms. There is no reason to believe that Vietnamese religion should not continue to develop in the new countries of asylum.

The Introduction Of Christianity To Vietnam

There have been Catholics in Vietnam for well over 300 years. Catholicism was first introduced in the late 16th century by Jesuit missionaries who were important in developing quoc gnu, a Romanized Vietnamese alphabet. This enabled the Catholics to spread their religion, as well as helping distinguish the Vietnamese from the Chinese, who had dominated culturally for so long, and easing the spread of education. During the era of French Administration (1883-1954), many more converts were made.

The characteristic Vietnamese openness to new religions and ideas led them to be highly receptive to Catholicism although the hostile position of the Vatican to ancestor worship and intolerance of polygamy limited the number of conversions. Clashes with the Confucian rulers of Vietnam resulted in many Catholics being killed. 117 of these were canonised in 1988 and are remembered by Vietnamese Catholics in Britain today.

At the time of division of Vietnam in 1954, most of the 860,000 refugees who fled to the South were Catholics, especially from the dioceses of Phat Diem and Bui Chu, led by their two bishops and their priests. In the South, entire new Catholic villages were established.

The most recent figures (Nguyen Van Canh, 1983:164) suggest that 7% of the total population of Vietnam (between 3 and 4 million) are Catholic, and the Catholic population in the South is nearly double that of the north. Although Catholics represent a small proportion of the total population they are one of the best organized religious forces in Vietnam, and this is also evident in Britain. The influence of Protestantism has been very limited, although American missionaries have made an estimated 100,000 conversions (Crawford, 1966:89) in various denominations. Perhaps the Roman Catholic hierarchy and style of worship appeals more to the Vietnamese sense of status and love of ritual.

Vietnamese Syncretism

How is it that such apparently contrasting religious beliefs can co-exist in such a deep-rooted way amongst the Vietnamese? For example, ancestor worship presupposes that there is an eternal soul resting in an ancestral tablet or inhabiting the world of the dead, whereas one of the key concepts in early Indian Buddhism was that of no-soul (anatman). In Vietnamese Buddhism, however, it is believed that the soul can be transported to Amitabha's Pure Land and perhaps this is more easily reconcilable with ancestor worship.

There are obvious contrasts between the regulations determining social relationships of Confucianism and the natural harmony without artificial rules which Taoism teaches. There are also apparent contradictions between the importance attached to the family by Confucius, and the Buddhist view that family ties are transient and a source of suffering.

Rutledge (1985:23-27) discusses many differences between the basic Western and Eastern outlooks on life.

There are then, to our Western eyes, many inconsistencies. However, 'the teaching that one religion exclusively owns the "truth" is a foreign and generally unacceptable concept to the Vietnamese' (Oliver, 1976:25). Hickey (1964:276) talked about a 'homogeneity' in the beliefs of villagers and said 'they share a cosmological view deeply rooted in the Buddhist-Taoist-Confucian ideology of the Chinese Great Tradition, with Vietnamese alterations and additions, which underlies the amalgam of beliefs and practices that make up village religions'.

An educated Vietnamese will generally claim to be Buddhist. However, at a civic or family level Confucian values would be more likely to be held, and much personal behaviour and beliefs about the natural world would be influenced by Taoism. Buddhism deals with remote ends, but not with everyday social conduct. Amongst the rural population (which accounts for many in Britain today), there would be less concern with correct rules of government and social behaviour, and more emphasis on superstition and local deities.

There is a tendency for Vietnamese to follow the practical philosophy of Confucius while young and turn to Taoism or Buddhism for spiritual truth in old age. Even Catholicism, which is probably the least altered of the foreign religions, is practised by people who also worship their ancestors and believe in spirits and geomancy.

The ability of the Vietnamese to assimilate various religions into their own can be demonstrated through the Zen Buddhist sect of Truc Lam which fused elements of Taoism and Confucianism so as to serve people's inner needs as well as external state affairs. The Cao Dal religion also reflects this ability.

Vietnamese religion is characterised then by its openness, its profusive tendencies and its ability to move forward as well as remain rooted in ancient tradition. We shall see that these are important qualities in enabling the refugees from Vietnam and their religion to survive in far- off lands.

THE REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

Political Upheaval In South East Asia

Vietnam and the surrounding countries have suffered from the effects of war for over 40 years and it is primarily the war and its aftermath which have forced the vast majority of refugees to leave. It is important to have some idea of the enormous hardship most refugees suffered in order to understand the role played by religion amongst the Vietnamese in Britain, and to analyse whether and how religion has helped them cope.

The first war was that against the French colonial power. In 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam's independence but this was not recognized by the French and war followed, finally resulting in the partitioning of the country

between the communist North and non-communist South in 1954. 860,000 refugees, most of them Catholic, fled to the South.

Following this there was the long and bitter civil war between North and South, with the USA supporting President Diem in the South. Diem was a Catholic and tended to favour his fellow Catholics. This caused great concern amongst the Buddhists and there were violent clashes between Catholics and Buddhists. In 1963 a number of Buddhists set fire to themselves in protest and Buddhists were then treated better, but Diem's unpopularity led to his overthrow and assassination in 1963. US involvement reached its peak in 1967 with 540,000 troops in the country. However, the Viet Cong's Tet offensive in 1968, lack of American success and mounting US public pressure to withdraw led to the last American troops leaving Vietnam in 1973. Saigon eventually fell to the communists on 30 April 1975. It was then that people started to leave Vietnam in large numbers.

The war left Vietnam an economically, socially and environmentally devastated country. It is still one of the ten poorest nations in the world. Immediately after the war there were 700,000 unemployed in Saigon and many people, even those with businesses, were forced to go to New Economic Zones in barren areas of the countryside and re-education camps which were, in effect, harsh prisons.

In 1978, fearing an attempt by Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge to take control of the Mekong Delta, Vietnam invaded Kampuchea and this led to further

suffering. In 1979 China invaded Vietnam's northern border which led to further heavy fighting and strong suspicion and discrimination against the ethnic Chinese living in Vietnam.

Reasons For Leaving

People left for a number of reasons. First they saw no future under communism. In the last few days before the fall of Saigon, 150,000 left Vietnam. They were mainly people who had been closely associated with the Americans or the non-communist regime and therefore risked being sent to re-education camp, separated from their families, where conditions were extremely harsh. Others felt they could not live under communism because of human rights abuses. Some of those interviewed mentioned the recent killings in Peking as evidence of what they had feared the communists would do in Vietnam. Many feared being sent to New Economic Zones which were like forced labour camps. One man I interviewed had been sent to one and said there had been many suicides and deaths every day. He had become ill and was sent home to die, but recovered and escaped from Vietnam. There are reports (Masty, 1982) of Vietnamese being sent to work in Siberia.

Nearly half those interviewed mentioned the communists' oppression of religion as a reason for leaving. Two (both Catholics) had fled from the North in 1954. Another wanted to become a monk which, he said, was not possible in Vietnam. He is now a monk at Ampleforth. One man from North Vietnam explained how the communists taught that only science was

reliable and that religion was only for the uneducated and backward. He had been surprised in Britain to see educated doctors going to church.

According to Nguyen Van Canh (1983:177), under communism 'all religious activities are subject to censorship and restriction by the Secret Police; the giving of sermons is strictly controlled'. He also claimed that whilst the communist regime does not dare to be officially anti-religious, it has also taken measures against the Buddhists, stripping about 80% of monks and nuns of their religious status. The communists' attack on the Catholic Church is part of their attack on the bourgeoisie, but any religion that organizes people into groups is a potential threat to the communists' domination. A significant proportion of refugees left, then, at least partly to ensure religious freedom.

Another major reason for leaving was discrimination against ethnic Chinese. As a direct result of the war with China, ethnic Chinese were regarded as potential enemies. In March 1978 businesses and houses were confiscated and there was active persecution and racism to encourage them to leave. Later they were forced out. 65% of the 163,000 who left Vietnam from March 1978 to mid 1979 were Hoa (overseas Chinese). About 250,000 went to China during the same period (Grant, 1979:82).

Most had come from southern China in the 19th and 20th centuries, although some came earlier to escape famine and civil war. In the South there had been about 1-4 million and they had been very successful in trade and business (as in the rest of South East Asia). In the North, there had

been about 300,000 and they were mainly from a rural, uneducated background. On the whole they have retained their native Chinese language and identify themselves as Chinese rather than Vietnamese. The ethnic Chinese I interviewed said that they would not go back to Vietnam even if they could, whereas the ethnic Vietnamese regarded Vietnam as their homeland, the land where their ancestors were, and **would** return if they could.

People also left Vietnam to avoid compulsory conscription to fight in Kampuchea. A further reason for escape was the confiscation of businesses following a sweeping programme of nationalisation. Lastly, there were those who left to join family abroad.

Between 1974 and 1979 at least 290,000 had reached other countries after escaping by sea (Grant, 1979:80) and nearly a million left overland and by air. Refugees are still leaving in their thousands. On 4th May 1989, The Times reported that 1,447 boat people had arrived in Hong Kong in only 4 days and since then there has been much reported in the media about large numbers arriving in Hong Kong.

Over 150,000 died at sea (Robinson, 1989:2) and people I interviewed had horrific tales to tell about pirates, storms and leaky boats. The terrible conditions and dangers of escape are well-documented (Grant, 1979). The refugees then had to suffer often prison-like conditions in camps, mainly in Hong Kong, Thailand and Malaysia, and great uncertainty as to whether and where they would be resettled.

In 1979, Britain agreed to take 10,000 refugees, and in 1989 agreed to take a further 2,000. Others were rescued at sea or joined family here under the Orderly Departure Programme. There are now about 22,000 in Britain.

They were sent initially to reception centres and then allocated housing in a deliberate policy of dispersal in scattered clusters of 4 to 10 families all over the country. Many refugees felt isolated and unable to cope without the support of their community and many moved as soon as they could to larger centres, especially London and Birmingham (Robinson, 1989). Problems faced by refugees from Vietnam in Britain were (and are) enormous. The language barrier not only cuts people off socially but is a major obstacle to employment. Unemployment amongst the Vietnamese is as high as 90% in the North West. In the South of England it is 30% but the overall average remains around 80% (Nettleton, 1987:5). Many of those who had well-paid professional jobs in Vietnam have had to suffer a severe drop in status (87% have had to accept work of a lower category - Home Office, 1982:20). There are special problems associated with the elderly (Refugee Action, 1987) and young single people (Mougne, 1986). Most suffered severe culture shock and found everything extraordinary. The cold weather has also led to stress.

People often turn to religion in times of stress. On the other hand, the severe hardships suffered by many refugees may have led them to abandon their religion, or their religion may have changed to adapt to new circumstances. It is with these questions in mind that a picture of Vietnamese religious expression in Britain can now be drawn.

DIVERSITY AND DIVISION AMONGST THE VIETNAMESE COMMUNITY IN BRITAIN

Approximately 10% of the 22,000 refugees from Vietnam in Britain are Catholics, according to their own priests. The rest, if they are religious, follow some combination of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and indigenous Vietnamese beliefs.

Virtually all the Catholics are ethnic Vietnamese. If there are any Chinese, they speak Vietnamese and adopt Vietnamese cultural patterns.

It seems likely that the Vietnamese openness to new ideas makes them more receptive to foreign influences, first to Chinese (and originally Indian) religions and then to Western religions. The Chinese, on the other hand, have tended to maintain their traditional beliefs throughout and have not, therefore, been so influenced by Christianity.

However, only about half those who attend the Vietnamese Buddhist Temple in London are Chinese. The monk is ethnic Vietnamese, the Vietnamese language is used and a significant number of ethnic Vietnamese in Britain are Buddhist. It is not possible then to observe religious differences coinciding with ethnic differences.

Although ethnic Chinese make up only about 2% of the population of Vietnam, they form about 70% (Jones, 1982) of the Vietnamese

community in Britain (Refugee Action workers put the figure closer to 80%).

From this it can be seen that a very large number of Chinese are unaccounted for regarding attendance at places of worship. It is likely that this significant group of Chinese who do not attend the temple or Catholic churches are from North Vietnam. According to Jones (1982:13) 62% of the Vietnamese refugees in Britain are from North Vietnam. Almost all the Catholics are from South Vietnam, many having left the North in 1954. All but one of the Buddhists interviewed were from South Vietnam. The literature suggests that refugees from the North tend to be from a rural, uneducated background whilst those from the South are mainly professionals and many have been exposed to Western influences (Home Office, 1982; Robinson, 1989).

There are therefore fewer refugees from the North who speak good English. (The main Chinese dialect spoken is Cantonese and most also speak Vietnamese.) Because of the language barrier, they have not been covered in detail by this study.

There may be important differences in religious belief and practice between North and South but no-one was able to confirm or deny this. Chinese from the North do not have their own places of worship or community centres. The National Indo-Chinese Association is supposed to represent all the Chinese from Vietnam but in practice tends to be confined to the better educated.

The Chinese themselves are not a homogeneous group. Most speak Cantonese, like the more established community of Chinese from Hong Kong in Britain, but the two groups rarely mix. The Hong Kong Chinese tend to look down on this newer influx of poorer and less well-educated Chinese, and the Vietnamese Chinese do not want to be dominated by the more strongly organized Hong Kong Chinese.

Rutledge (1985) does not discuss differences between ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese but this is probably because a far higher proportion of refugees to America are ethnic Vietnamese. This is reflected in his finding that 38% in Oklahoma were Catholic (much higher than in Britain). In Britain, however, ethnic diversity is an important feature of the community.

On the whole, refugees of both Vietnamese and Chinese ancestry try to get on well but there are traces of resentment resulting from the policy of racism against the Chinese in Vietnam. One ethnic Chinese told me very strongly "We are NOT Vietnamese, we are Chinese from Vietnam", but most refugees do get on well together. Vietnamese girls often marry Chinese men (the Chinese consider it to be a step up for the girl) but not often the other way round (the Chinese would consider it a fall in status for the girl).

There does not seem to be any antagonism between Buddhists and Catholics in this country, despite their clashes in Vietnam which are now regarded as political, not religious and Father Peter, a Vietnamese priest in Britain, is knowledgeable about Buddhism.

Rutledge (1985:56) found that in Oklahoma 'one institution where common ground may be found is religion'. This is not the case in Britain however. Although there is no conflict, there seems to be very little contact or co-ordination either.

The Vietnamese community in Britain then, is very diverse. The Vietnam Refugee National Council is supposed to represent all ethnic Vietnamese but there have been many problems in its development. On 20 August 1989, a large festival was held in London to celebrate 10 years in this country, which brought all the different groups together, but other than this there is almost no co-ordination between the different groups and no overall community leader. This may be because they are not yet well established, secondary migration is still taking place, and many do not yet feel settled.

Vietnamese Roman Catholics In Britain

Roman Catholics from Vietnam are, of course, able to go to any Catholic church in Britain, and in this respect they are more fortunate than the Buddhists who only have one Vietnamese temple. However, one particular Vietnamese priest has worked tirelessly to arrange worship and activities in the Vietnamese language at particular churches, to bring the Vietnamese Catholic community together, and in the words of a British priest "help them start celebrating their lives again".

Father Peter Dao Duc Diem was born in North Vietnam and started studying for the priesthood in 1952. In 1954, he left to live in South Vietnam where he continued his studies and was ordained in 1969. In 1979

he escaped by boat and was rescued by a British ship. He arrived in Britain in 1980. At that time there was a Vietnamese nun in London, Sister Bac, but her convent was not suitable to become a centre for Vietnamese Catholics. Father Peter spent the early days travelling to all the reception centres to encourage the refugees. He found it difficult to establish himself in London but after several months he moved to Birmingham where Msgr Fallon, based at St. Francis Church in Handsworth, gave him financial assistance and accommodation. At that time there were 600 Vietnamese Catholics in Birmingham and Father Peter also travelled to London for Mass once a month.

In 1982, the Vietnamese Pastoral Centre was opened. This was a house which had been left to the parish in a will in 1978 with the intention that it should be used for training priests. At that time there was very little likelihood of it being used for training, but now there are three Vietnamese studying there for the priesthood.

During 1982-3 Father Peter travelled to London twice a month for Mass, and in 1985 he arranged for St. James in Peckham to be used by the Vietnamese on Sunday afternoons. Also in 1985, a Vietnamese, Father Michael, was ordained. He was also based in Birmingham and he and Father Peter took it in turns each week to travel to London for Mass. They tried to buy their own church but without success.

Father Peter's untiring efforts have been praised by all. He is an excellent organizer and the entire Catholic community look to him for spiritual and

practical guidance. He has liaised with schools, doctors etc., helping new settlers with DHSS claims and finding housing. His early attempts to bring the Vietnamese Catholics to Birmingham seem to have conflicted with the Government's original dispersal policy (but that policy was later abandoned).

There are now four ordained Vietnamese priests in Britain, four more training in Birmingham, one of whom has recently been ordained a deacon, and a monk at Ampleforth who is training to be a priest.

Father Michael Ho Huu Nghia is now based in Wolverhampton, Father Joseph Vu Due Yen is based in Leamington Spa and Father John Tran is based in Birmingham. The largest numbers of Vietnamese Catholics are found in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Nottingham, Northampton and Essex but no reason was given why the priests are not based in these places. Father Peter says that 95% of Vietnamese Catholics are practising their faith. Each time I have been to St. James Church in Peckham there have been between 300 and 500 Vietnamese there. At St. Francis in Birmingham, between 250 and 400 Vietnamese attend each week. In Birmingham every Thursday evening about 100 Vietnamese attend Novena. There are 20 members of the Legion of Mary in Birmingham, 25 in London, 25 members of the Union of Catholic Mothers in London and a thriving Catholic Women's League. The choirs in Birmingham and London are both renowned for their high quality. In Birmingham, 50 young people attend classes in catechism and Vietnamese language and culture every Thursday evening. 100 children receive classes every Saturday in Vietnamese

language and culture and catechism. Father Peter wants them to be Vietnamese by culture and British by nationality. He fears that Western values will weaken their religion and works hard against this. There is tremendous pressure to get children into Catholic schools.

Since arriving in the UK, he has baptised 250 Vietnamese. Every Sunday 25 people who want to be baptised attend classes. These mainly seem to be nominal Buddhists who may be attracted as much by the strong community life in an alien land, as by the faith itself. Vietnamese community workers have also suggested that some Vietnamese may become Catholics because of the help with family reunions and material benefits which the Catholic church gives. Father Peter says that many prayed to Our Lady for her help in escaping from Vietnam with the promise that they would become Catholics if their prayers were answered. At the same time there can be no doubt that many go to church to meet each other. In particular it is one of the few places for teenagers to meet people of the opposite sex. After Mass the congregation linger behind for nearly an hour of animated conversation and socialising outside the church or in the church hall over tea and Vietnamese cakes.

There are good relations with the neighbours who have not complained about these social gatherings outside the church after Mass. In Birmingham, the local British community get on very well with the Vietnamese and they both attend Novena together which is held partly in English and partly in Vietnamese. Churches are shared with the local British community in London and Birmingham and the only time this

causes any problems is at Christmas when both the Vietnamese and English want to hold their own Midnight Mass. Otherwise the Vietnamese have Mass every Sunday afternoon and the church is not used for anything else at this time. Father Peter hopes the Vietnamese will be able to have their own churches, perhaps a disused Anglican one, but so far nothing has become available.

It is important for the Vietnamese to have their own worship, not simply because of language problems and the opportunity to meet other members of their community. There are other important differences with English Roman Catholic practices.

In particular extra prayers are held before and after Mass and there is far more chanting. After the consecration of the bread and wine, prayers continue for some considerable time. As Msgr Fallon said, 'their extra-liturgical community prayer life is very strong'. Prayers are often sung and the chanting resembles Buddhist chanting in style. Especially on Good Friday, people wear mourning clothes, and chant in a style similar to Buddhists. This is apparently a particularly northern custom. Catholics from the North also brought with them the symbol of the lotus. During Holy Week there is a special prayer relating to the Stations of the Cross which is learnt off by heart. It lasts two to three hours and is chanted, unaccompanied. To Westerners it has a distinctly oriental sound.

According to Msgr Fallon, their style of worship is very old-fashioned. He says they are also very status-oriented, "they love bishops and dressing up".



AFTER MASS AT ST. JAMES CHURCH, PECKHAM

They have great difficulty calling Brother Bernard Elliot, "brother", preferring "father" which has higher status. This reflects their own status-oriented society. For example there are many Vietnamese words for "I" and "You" depending on the status of the people involved.

The fact that at the peace they just nod at each other rather than shake hands or even hug, also reflects their own society where physical contact is minimal. Another important distinction is the role of the priest who, in Vietnam, is far more of a community leader not only in the religious sphere.

Other distinctive Vietnamese features include an offertory flower dance which is usually performed by young girls at the front of the church. And

the women, who normally wear Western dress, wear their ao dai to church. The ao dai is the traditional Vietnamese dress with slits up the sides to the waist and baggy trousers. Some of the men also wear national dress.

In addition to festivals celebrated by British Catholics, Vietnamese Catholics have a special Mass for Tet at which fruit is offered to God. On 24 November the 117 martyrs (96 Vietnamese and 11 French and Spanish) who were canonised on 19 June 1988, are remembered.

Roman Catholics also practice a form of ancestor worship, but they are keen to point out that they **remember** their ancestors rather than **worship** them. It is not clear whether there is a distinction between these two words in Vietnamese, or indeed whether there is a difference in practice since for all the Vietnamese I spoke to (not only Catholics), ancestor worship seemed to mean considering one's dead relatives to be still close at hand, in a reverential way. According to Msgr Fallon, there is no conflict between this and the established Catholic tradition of remembering and praying for the dead. He thinks it is "wonderful that they can Christianise something which is part of their own culture". Most have an ancestor shelf at home and perform the usual traditional rites for ancestors. Before the Second Vatican Council this would not have been allowed, but since 1963 it has also been permitted to use incense, red candles and other typically Vietnamese features.

In this way, whilst following the Christian religion of the host community, the Vietnamese are able to maintain their ethnic identity. The Vietnamese

Catholic churches can act as a bridge between traditional Vietnamese values and Western culture and can be an important mediating institution. Catholics are, then, highly organized with strong participation and outward expression in their religion. This reflects the situation in Vietnam where, to Western eyes, the Catholics are better organized but Buddhists are more widespread.

Vietnamese Buddhism In Britain

Luce and Sommer (1969:113) said 'the strength of Buddhism does not lie in organization, but in the deep roots of the psychological and moral values held by people'. Some of the comments of those interviewed were "people don't say 'I'm Buddhist' but we strongly believe it inside", "the rituals may be out-of-date and irrelevant but we still believe it inside", "What's in the heart is most important", "It is not important to go to the temple to be a Buddhist".

Nevertheless, there is a Vietnamese Buddhist temple in London and attempts are being made to establish one in Cambridge. The temple is in Catford and its full name is the Linh Son Buddhist Temple. Linh Son literally means "magic mountain" and refers to a mountain in India where the Buddha used to teach. There are Linh Son temples in various parts of Europe and America and they are under the spiritual guidance of Thich Huyen Vi who lives in France (Thich means Venerable). The Catford temple is under the guidance of Thich Tri Canh who is the only Vietnamese monk in Britain. He became a monk at the age of 12, 20 years ago. He sometimes travels around the country to visit Vietnamese Buddhists

elsewhere. There is also a nun at the temple who cooks and cleans. She is over 60 with grown up children and has only recently become a nun. There is a committee of two men and two women who deal with finance, paperwork, etc. but the monk has overall authority.

The first temple was just a room in an old Vietnamese woman's house during 1980-1. In 1982 enough money had been raised within the community to buy a small house in Peckham and it was then that Thich Tri Canh came over from France (where he had been sent after escaping from Vietnam). A black American monk (who had been a US soldier in Vietnam and had later become a Buddhist) was sent over for a few months to help establish the temple. But the house was too small and in 1985 a larger house was bought in Catford and opened in 1986.



OUTSIDE THE LINH SON TEMPLE, LONDON

On the outside, there is nothing to distinguish the temple from the other attractive detached houses in this leafy residential suburb. Inside, however, it has all the symbols and imagery of a typical Vietnamese temple in the Zen-Pure Land tradition. Downstairs is an office and an area for everyone to eat before Sunday afternoon worship (they are not all vegetarians but only vegetarian food is allowed in the temple). Shoes are removed at the bottom of the stairs. At the top of the stairs is a picture of Bodhidharma who introduced Zen to China. He looks very menacing and this, I was told, is because he lets go of all bad things but inside he is very good. Every temple in Vietnam has his picture and it is customary to bow in front of it before going into the meditation room. On the altar there is fruit brought as offerings, incense, candles, flowers and, of course, a large Buddha image.

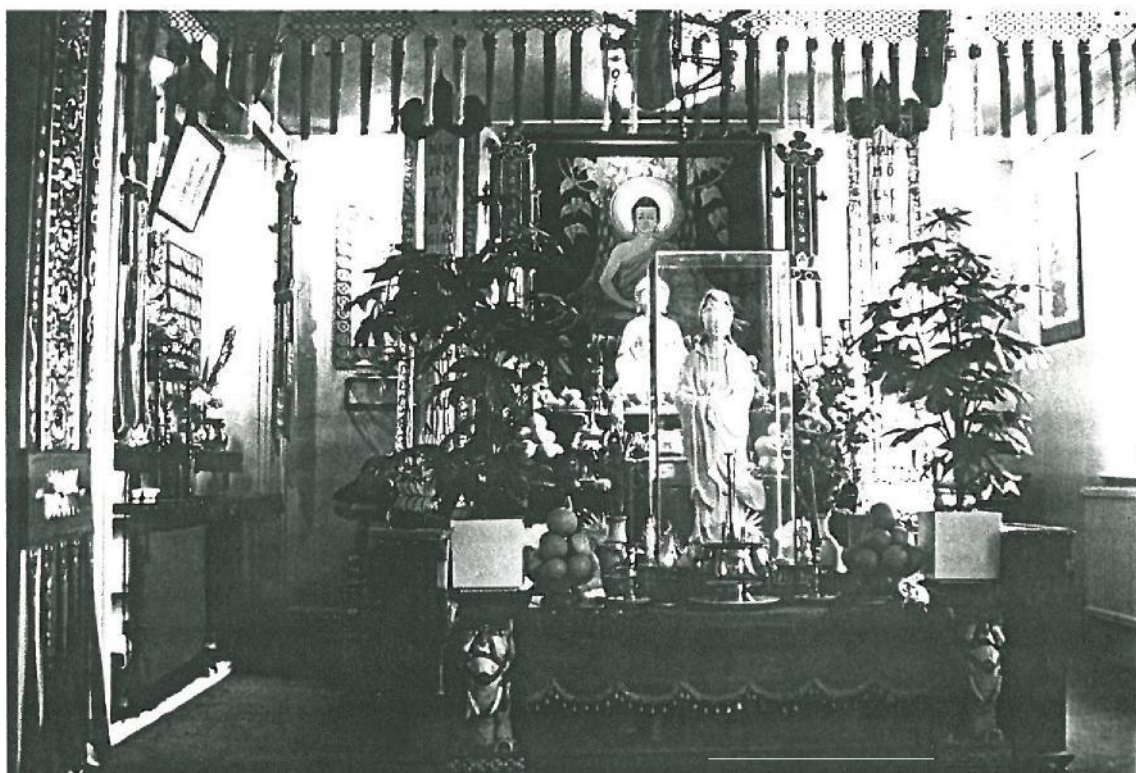
**ALTAR OF BODHIDHARMA AT ENTRANCE OF MEDITATION ROOM,
LINH SON TEMPLE, LONDON**



**ALTAR FOR ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN MEDITATION ROOM
LINH SON TEMPLE, LONDON**



**MAIN ALTAR, BUDDHA AND QUAN-AM, IN MEDITATION ROOM
LINH SON TEMPLE, LONDON**



MAIN ALTAR IN MEDITATION ROOM
LINH SON TEMPLE, LONDON



To the left of the main altar is an ancestor shelf with photographs of dead relatives and an image of Dia Tang whose duty is to teach spirits of the dead to become good. Elsewhere there are pictures of Amitabha and in front of the main Buddha image is a prominent statue of Quan-Am who is found in almost every Vietnamese temple. Every Buddhist woman I met prayed to her for health and blessings. Only the monk was able to tell me that she is the female form of Avalokitesvara.

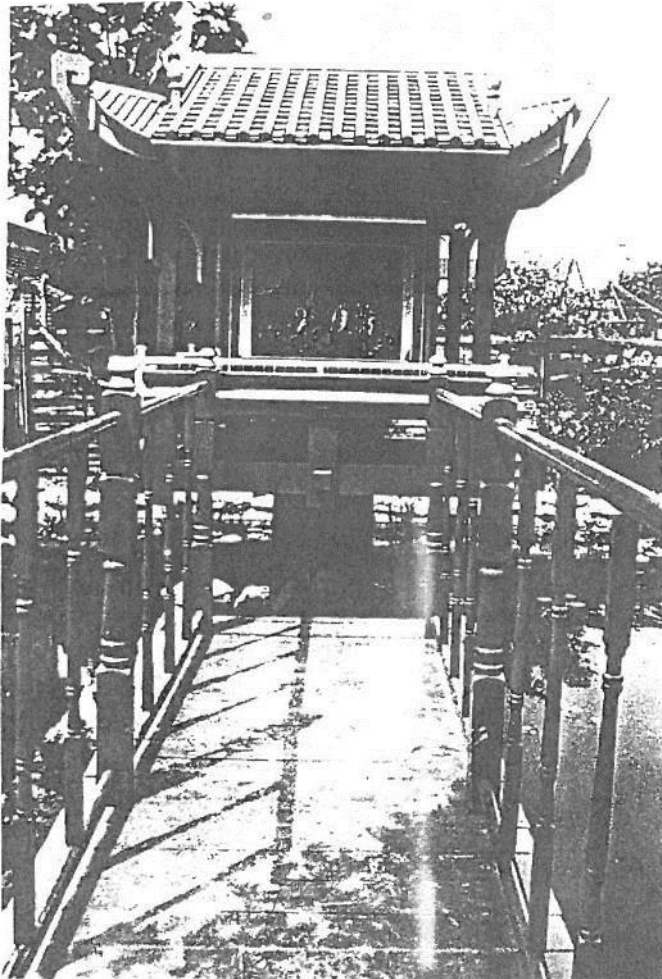
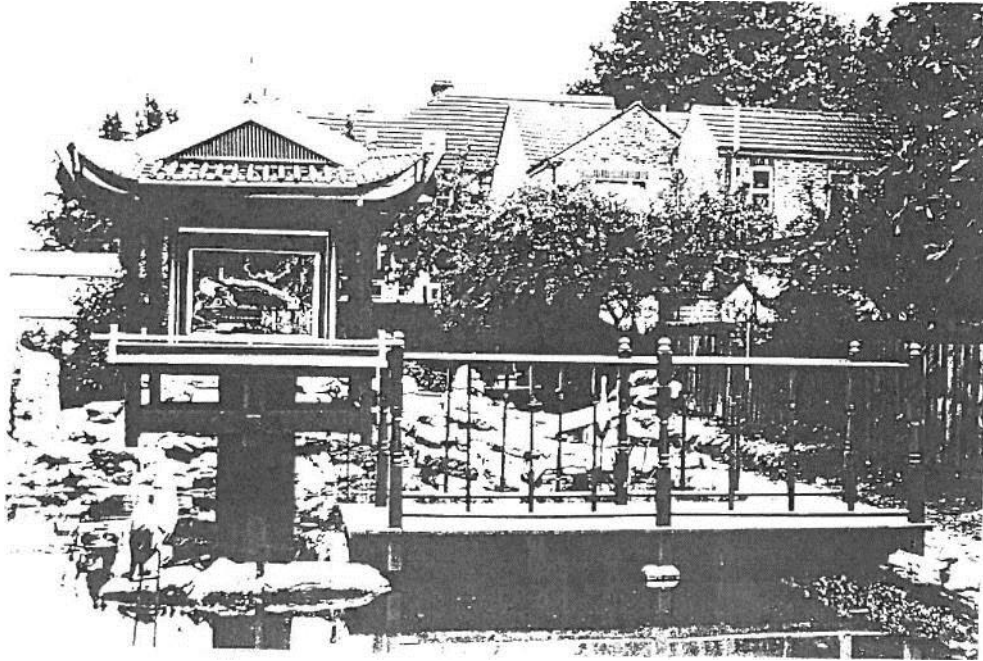
However, several people told me a popular legend according to which a young woman named Thi Kinh was treated very badly and unfairly by her husband. So she fled to a monastery, but since only men could enter the

monastery she pretended to be a man. A young unmarried pregnant girl came to the monastery and claimed that Thi Kinh, disguised as a man, was the father. Thi Kinh did not reveal her true identity and was tortured. On her death, her true identity was revealed. Impressed by her compassion she was venerated as a bodhisattva. Because the most commonly known female bodhisattva was Quan-Am, she became known as Quan-Am Thi Kinh. This story of Thi Kinh is believed to demonstrate how Quan-Am takes on other people's troubles, especially those of women. Quan-Am is obviously of great importance, especially amongst women, her image in the temple being almost as prominent as that of Buddha.

In the back garden is a large pond and a beautiful pagoda which is a scale model of the Chua Mot Cot (literally, one pillar pagoda) built in 1049 in Hanoi by the King, Ly Thai Ton in honour of Quan-Am who appeared to him in a vision. There is one picture on each of four sides of the pagoda and they depict the Buddha, his enlightenment, teaching and entering Parinirvana. There is also a statue of Quan-Am. The pagoda and pond were designed by the monk and were entirely built by the Vietnamese Buddhists.

Worship is held every Sunday at 2 pm although people come and go all day for individual worship. The day has no special significance but is convenient. Everyone wears a grey robe (au tang) over their normal clothes to symbolize cleanliness. Over 100 may enter the temple at some stage on a Sunday, but at afternoon worship there are usually 30-40, mostly women (some go every day). The room is packed. The air is thick with

REPLICA OF CHUA MOT COT (ONE COLUMN PAGODA) IN BACK GARDEN OF
LINH SON TEMPLE, LONDON



In the beauty of the citadel one pagoda stands
Known as Dien-Huu, bequeathed by Ly dynasty
The king dreamed he would have one prince,
How wonderful Quan-The-Arn Bo-Tat
responded!

Poem by Tran-Ba-Lam

burning incense and candles are lit. Worship consists of chanting by the entire congregation who read the words from small booklets. It is all in Vietnamese. Two women beat a wooden drum and the monk leads the chanting which normally lasts about half an hour. During the month following Vu Lan (Parents' Day) which is observed on the full moon day of the eighth lunar month, the chanting lasts for over an hour.

The two main Buddhist festivals celebrated at the temple are the Buddha's birthday (Wesak) and Vu Lan. Vu Lan is when people pray for the longevity of their parents, or if their parents are dead, for their rebirth in the Pure Land. Special sutras are recited and rites are offered to the ancestors. In this way the ancestor worship of Confucianism and the beliefs and rites of Buddhism come together.

The time of year when Vu Lan is celebrated also marks the end of An Cu the three month rains retreat observed throughout South East Asia. During this time the monk is not supposed to go out but since he is the only monk in Britain, if there is a death in the Vietnamese Buddhist community, or other emergency, then he must go out.

Other activities at the temple include weekly meditation classes attended by 30-40 Vietnamese, and classes in Vietnamese language and culture for children in the converted garage. For large celebrations a nearby hall is hired. Sometimes a monk from France is invited.

A major problem for the Vietnamese Buddhist community is that there is only one temple, and most people are too far away to attend regularly. As mentioned earlier, most Buddhists consider that inner experience is more important than attendance at temple, but for older people especially, the temple reminds them of their homeland. To quote one old lady "the temple for us is like a parents' home where we can meet together" and another who lived far from the temple "there is no temple to go to, to soothe your soul". Vietnamese communities in various parts of the country hire minibuses to bring people, especially the elderly, to the temple for special occasions. There are other Buddhist temples in the country but because they are not Vietnamese, they are rarely visited by people from Vietnam.

In Birmingham, Buddhists from Vietnam meet for meditation and worship in a family house in Handsworth. In Cambridge, Dr. Phuoc is trying to raise money for a temple there but for the time being Buddhists meet at his house. There is an English nun in Cambridge following the Vietnamese tradition. Dr. Phuoc attends retreats led by Thich Nhat Hanh who lives in France and is very well known amongst Western Buddhists. Thich Nhat Hanh has been unable to return to Vietnam since he left in 1966 because his work for peace aroused the suspicions of the Vietnamese government. He now has a significant following amongst Westerners and a few educated Vietnamese, and many of his books on meditation have been translated into European languages.

Many Vietnamese worship at home and have an altar which should normally be in the highest room of the house as a mark of respect. The

altar used for Buddhist worship is usually also used for ancestor worship (see drawing). The au trang is worn during worship at home as well as in the temple. There are also many Buddhists who perform no rituals at all. However, virtually everyone remembers their ancestors in some way even if nothing more than a special meal is held.

Ancestor Worship Amongst The Vietnamese

Ancestor worship represents an expression of filial piety, a virtue which is fundamental to Vietnamese relationships. Human life is not only the link between heaven and earth, it is also the link between past and future. In the words of one Vietnamese "Life is a current which originated at the beginning of time and continues through the generations. Our mission is to continue this life force and remember our ancestors. The most impious thing you can do is not to have children". The Vietnamese feel that their ancestors are not far away. Death is no real departure from the family - the dead join other ancestors as unseen but present members. Their presence is felt and it is important to be worthy of them. One Vietnamese told me "It is most important not to do anything which would offend them because the effect would be felt on you and your family". In this way, the Confucian idea of the soul interacts with a belief in Buddhist karma.

Those interviewed did not regard their ancestors as supernatural beings with power over them but said that the poorly educated might believe that. Some of those interviewed said they asked their ancestors to help them when they were in dangerous situations on the boats. Despite using the

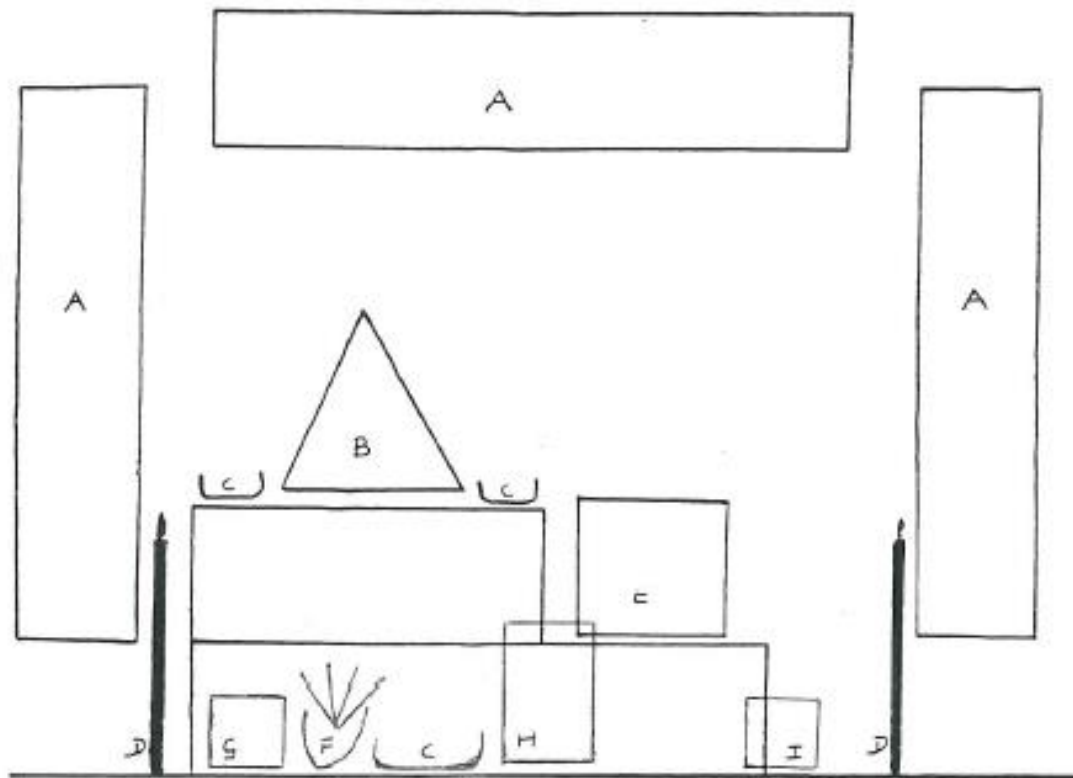
term "ancestor worship" all of those interviewed gave the impression of **remembering** that their ancestors were present and not of **worshipping** them as one worships God or Buddha. In this way then, it is entirely compatible with Roman Catholic beliefs. It also fits in well with the Buddhist Vu Lan celebrations.

Ancestor worship is a religious practice, not a religion itself. Rituals are carried out soon after death, 100 days after death and then at least three times each year - on the anniversary of death, at Tet and at Vu Lan (even for some non-Buddhists). These rituals must be carried out by a son (not daughter). A photograph of the deceased person is placed on the ancestor shelf (see drawing). Some families have three altars - one for ancestors who have been dead a long time, one for recent ancestors and one for distant relatives. At the appropriate times, incense and candles are lit and food offered to the ancestors. The food is then eaten at a family party. When it is time to remember one ancestor, they are all remembered. Birthdays are not traditionally celebrated amongst the Vietnamese.

In Vietnam the middle of the house is reserved for ancestors but the design of accommodation in Britain makes this difficult so most people have an ancestor shelf wherever it is most convenient, but preferably high up as a mark of respect.

The importance of ancestor worship to the Vietnamese in Britain cannot be stressed enough. One woman told me how her brother had become a Catholic and her mother was distraught because he was the only son and

DIAGRAM OF ALTAR IN A VIETNAMESE HOME



- A Traditional Vietnamese panels - lacquer and inlaid mother of pearl
- B Buddha statue
- C Dishes for offerings
- D Candles
- E Picture of Quan-Am
- F Joss sticks in dish
- G Picture of husband's father (who is now dead)
- H Picture of wife's father (who is now dead)
- I Picture of first wife (who is now dead)

she believed he would not perform the necessary rituals. In the end he became a Buddhist again. Many Vietnamese are now trying to re-establish their gia pha (family registers) including kin thousands of miles away. In the words of one Vietnamese, "remembering our ancestors gives us a sense of continuity and identity".

This also underlines some of the most fundamental values for the Vietnamese - filial piety, submission of the individual to the common good, and the importance of the family. The Vietnamese family 'is an extremely large unit, able to provide a welfare service, health care, education and a reservoir of funds' (Pearson, 1982:429) and it can act as 'a maternity unit, adoption agency or courtroom'. The family also conducts its own religious life. It is considered to be vital in Britain as a means of perpetuating religious values. It is given a religious foundation by Confucian doctrine, is actively encouraged by Catholics, and is just as strong amongst Buddhists (although traditionally Buddhism has regarded family ties as a source of suffering). There are many young refugees who have no family in Britain and the Vietnamese community feels an obligation to fulfil that role, to provide moral support and guidance.

Popular Vietnamese Religious Expression In Britain

For every Vietnamese, regardless of religion or ethnic origin, Tet, the lunar New Year (which may fall in January or February) is the most important festival. The family altar is laden with fruit and offerings are made to the ancestors who are invited to join the family for three days of celebrations. It is at this time that the Kitchen God (Tao-quan) reports on the behaviour of

family members. But Tet transcends religious differences. It is celebrated in a special Mass by Catholics, and in large gatherings in hired halls by people of all faiths. Celebrations include dragon and lion dances, fire-crackers, and the giving of gifts. It is a time for family gatherings, happiness and forgiveness.

The second most important festival (although not strictly a religious one) is Trung Thu, the Autumn Moon Festival, a children's festival where "moon cakes" are handed round while special lanterns made by the children are lit up and judged. Again, in Britain, halls are hired and large celebrations held.

These two festivals draw hundreds of Vietnamese in Britain to large organized celebrations. Less obvious, but by no means less important, are a whole range of beliefs in spirits and supernatural forces which are evident amongst the Vietnamese in Britain today.

For example, one Vietnamese community worker had recently been asked to find a sorcerer. A woman had been suffering from headaches and her family believed it was caused by a bad spirit and wanted to exorcise it.

Other people told me that a mirror above the door would reflect bad spirits away from the house (a custom also found in other parts of East Asia). There are many such beliefs among the Vietnamese. For example, if an owl stands on the roof of a house, it is a symbol of illness or death in that house, the colour red brings good luck, etc. Some of these beliefs stem from popular Vietnamese spirit worship, others from Chinese customs and

Taoism, others have become superstitions without any religious significance (like not walking under a ladder in Western culture). They are difficult to distinguish at times, but these beliefs are still extremely strong amongst the Vietnamese in Britain, even amongst the highly educated.

For example, one couple, both with post-graduate degrees, both devout Catholics, told me that they would not consider living in a house with a big front garden and a narrow back garden, or one which overlooked a 'T' junction. These preferences probably stem from geomancy and are common amongst most Vietnamese.

A belief in the principles of acupuncture is also widespread. One man I interviewed is a qualified and practising acupuncturist. He explained in great detail how Taoist practice improves and balances the flow of energy in the body and how such practices are important for an acupuncturist in order to heal effectively. There are no organized Vietnamese Taoist groups in Britain but it nevertheless has a strong hold over the Vietnamese way of life. However, whilst he linked acupuncture to Taoism, he said he was also a Buddhist.

It has already been observed that the Vietnamese have a history of blending together various religious influences with their own indigenous beliefs to form a distinctly Vietnamese pattern of religious belief. This pattern is evident in Britain by such comments as "our religion is like a big tree with many branches", "I go to church because I like the music and the feeling, but really I'm a Buddhist although I don't go to the temple",

"Catholics' cultural identity is still strongly linked to traditional philosophical beliefs". Father Peter himself said that Buddhism and Christianity are "not far apart". A Vietnamese family, clearly identified as Buddhist, was visited by a British volunteer around Christmas time. The volunteer was clearly confused that they could have a huge Christmas tree with all the trimmings and also be Buddhist, but the Vietnamese see nothing inconsistent in this.

RELIGION AND THE VIETNAMESE CHARACTER

The ability to reconcile a variety of apparently contrasting religious beliefs has been attributed by the Vietnamese to their desire for harmony derived from Taoism. An important Vietnamese concept is trung dung or the "middle path", avoidance of excess. Confucianism also prescribes moderation and compromise. This has led to refugee children in Britain refraining from asking questions of their teachers, even when they do not understand, so as not to confront the teacher with an unpleasant fact and disturb harmonious relationships. If a frank "no" disturbs the peace or jars the inner harmony, then a Vietnamese might answer "yes". A Westerner might condemn this as dishonest, but both Vietnamese and Westerner are prisoners of their own culture, both influenced by values originating in or affirmed by religion - honesty in the West, harmony in the East. The Vietnamese say that this desire for harmony and moderation enables them to hold various different religious beliefs at the same time. But this raises another paradox - how can a people who are so harmony-oriented also have become involved in so many wars?

One possibility is that the importance of the extended family to the Vietnamese means that they have a low sense of community outside their family. It is the family which provides many of their needs. According to Thuy (1976:35) the Vietnamese 'do not seem to have a strong sense of responsibility for people who are not related either by blood or marriage'. A low sense of public consciousness is also reflected in the lack of overall co-ordination and awareness of the Vietnamese community as a whole in Britain.

There is a contrast between the Western view of life which holds that if one thing is right, then the others must be wrong, and the Vietnamese view which can hold a number of alternatives at once including a number of different religious beliefs. In the Western view, something is either legal, or it is illegal; it is successful, or it is a failure; clean or dirty; moral or immoral. It cannot be both, it is one or the other. The difference with a culture like the Vietnamese is that although they also have dualisms, there seems to be more willingness to accept a range of relative values rather than adopt one extreme or the other. To Westerners, Vietnamese attitudes contain many paradoxes. Westerners may also consider the Vietnamese attitude to be unscrupulous or unethical. To the Westerner, there is good and evil, and good must win. To the Vietnamese, both good and evil are present in life and our task is to learn how to survive with that reality.

This reflects the practical attitude towards religion held by the Vietnamese who believe that the purpose of religion is to help us cope with the reality of the world. It is only the elderly who may have more mystical concerns.

Vietnamese often proudly describe their culture as nhân bản or "rooted in man" as opposed to other-worldly concerns. When asked whether their religion had helped them through the refugee experience, replies included "yes, because of my prayers we were saved by a passing ship" and "I prayed and then I got a job". They looked for practical results from their prayers. Emotional support was not talked about. This may be because they view religion only in practical terms, or it may be because they tend not to express their emotions, a characteristic which derives from Confucian values of moderation and restraint. Buddhism and Taoism have also created 'an outwardly sober restraint among the people' (Thuy, 1976:27).

Westerners notice how much the Vietnamese smile, and this can be a useful tool to cover up (or express) feelings whilst also deriving from Taoist principles of harmony. Truong (1982:24) noted that 'refugees remain generally reticent about their feelings, choosing rather to draw attention to what physical ailments they may have'. In talking about religion also, they emphasize the practical benefits rather than emotional ones. This pragmatic attitude, which itself has roots in religious values (Confucianism teaches us how to live in society), may have helped them to cope with the refugee experience.

The Taoist belief that the laws of the universe cannot be changed and so one should not try to change them but to live with them in the best way possible, is also very popular amongst Vietnamese and may also partly account for the Vietnamese ability to endure so much.

When asked whether religion has helped them cope with the refugee experience, one of the commonest responses was that Confucianism encourages them to get a good education and to work hard. Many young Vietnamese do well at school, partly because of what the Vietnamese call Tanh hieu hoc (love of learning) and partly because of filial piety and a sense of obligation to do well because of all the hardships their parents suffered in escaping.

The ability to work hard, tanh can cu, is identified by the Vietnamese as one of their major characteristics. Tanh can cu seems to be a combination of thrift, diligence, patience, endurance and a quiet determination to survive, and is seen by the Vietnamese as a source of strength.

The importance of the Triple Way (Tam Giao) of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism lies then, not so much in outward expression and temple rituals as in the character and everyday life of the people. Some of those interviewed maintained that they held no religious beliefs, but in the course of the interview it became clear that their values strongly reflected religious values.

The influence of much of Vietnamese religion is deeply rooted but subtle and therefore difficult to study. It is ingrained in the character of the people, whether or not they are outwardly religious. They maintain that their religious tradition has made them harmony-oriented, very practical, somewhat fatalistic, eager to achieve academic success, hard-working and

resilient, and that in this way their religion has given them the inner strength to survive their experiences as refugees.

RELIGION AND THE REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

James Cameron (Ashworth, 1979:15) wrote that 'By definition, refugees seek refuge; they are fugitives; they go because rightly or wrongly, they cannot stay'. This highlights something of the refugee experience and emphasizes the fact that unlike some ethnic minorities in Britain, the Vietnamese have little prospect of return, even for a holiday. There is therefore a tremendous sense of cultural loss, of being cut adrift. Many Vietnamese have horrific tales to tell of war, persecution, danger at sea and squalid refugee camps. In Britain they have suffered culture shock and depression caused by unemployment, the break up of families caused by death and separation, and many other problems. Lewis, Fraser and Pecoray (1988:272) reported that 'a disproportionately high incidence of mental health problems - depression, anxiety, or other stress-related illnesses - and disproportionately high rates of suicide have been reported among refugees'.

Has religion helped to deal with this? The impact of religion on character traits which have helped the Vietnamese to cope has already been discussed. In addition, I heard many accounts of Vietnamese who had turned to religion in times of stress. For example one young man said that there had been over 100 people on his boat. When they ran out of drinking water another man, a Catholic, had urged them all to pray at the same time.

The next day they all prayed at the same time again, and soon after, they were rescued by a British ship. As a result, the young man became a Christian. This again reflects the Vietnamese need for tangible results from religion rather than emotional support.

Another account, which is well-known within the Vietnamese community, is that of a woman who committed suicide whilst escaping in a boat with over 100 people on board. They were lost in the South China Sea and the boat was drifting aimlessly. She felt called to commit suicide, believing that this would save the others on board. Despite efforts to prevent her, she jumped into the sea and drowned. That night her brother-in-law dreamt that her spirit was telling them to go in a certain direction. They went in that direction and next day they were rescued. This had a profound effect on many people on the boat and has made them more religious. Her death anniversary is now a special day and to some she has become an object of veneration.

Many believe that their ancestors have followed them and will look after them. Others believe that their suffering is a result of karma. Avalokitesvara was mentioned as a protector in times of life-threatening danger, especially at sea, and in the words of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk "Buddhism has consoled people". Most of those I interviewed had, in one way or another, turned to religion in times of stress. As Nguyen Van Canh (1983:186) wrote 'it is in times of distress that people turn most often to their religion for comfort'. Rutledge (1985) found that religion was a

most important aspect in the lives of Vietnamese refugees in Oklahoma and this situation seems to be similar in Britain.

However, there was a general feeling amongst refugees that they have been so concerned with practical issues such as finding a job and housing that organized religion has been neglected. As one Buddhist said "practical survival has to come first. Later we will build more temples". Pearson (1982:480) also made this point when she wrote 'practical issues concerning their future resettlement have forced some religious feelings to become dormant'. This also affirms the fact that amongst most Vietnamese (especially non-Catholics) it is the inner experience rather than outward expression which is helping them to cope.

The social function of religion was mentioned by many Vietnamese as important. At the temple or church they find support and a sense of identity. Rutledge (1985:76) found that 'religions are employed in an ever increasing strategy to define and re-define ethnic self-identity in a society much different from the Vietnamese homeland'. In Britain too, religion helps the Vietnamese to re-affirm their ethnic identity. Those who practice Christianity, the religion of the majority of the host population, do so in a distinctly Vietnamese way. The Buddhist temple, whilst appearing to be a normal English home on the outside, is distinctly Vietnamese inside. As in Rutledge's study, the Vietnamese in Britain seem to have used religion as a means to maintain their ethnic identity whilst also being acceptable to the host community. As Lewis, Fraser and Pecora (1988:281) noted 'religion

appears to be a major mediating institution to assist refugees with their social and economic adjustment to their new environs'.

CONCLUSION

Almost no research has been carried out into the religious beliefs and practices of the Vietnamese in Britain and there is a scarcity of written material on the subject. It has therefore been necessary in this study to present a general introduction and there are many areas which warrant further research and more detailed analysis.

For example, the religious beliefs and practices of refugees of Chinese origin, especially from North Vietnam, have not been explored in depth and neither has the relationship between the various ethnic and religious groups. Religious practice in the home could be more fully explored, especially in relation to indigenous Vietnamese religious beliefs. In particular, the role of religion in shaping ethnic identity in a foreign land (the theme taken up by Rutledge, 1985, in relation to the Oklahoma situation) is an important area for further research, as is the question of how Vietnamese religious beliefs and practices have changed since arriving in Britain. Vietnamese religion has been shown to be adaptable and capable of change and there is no reason to believe that this will not continue to be the case in Britain.

From ancient times, different religious traditions have met and blended together in Vietnam to form a rich and distinctly Vietnamese religious

pattern. This heritage has been faithfully brought to Britain where it is a deep source of comfort and identity to many. It is rooted in Vietnam's long history, but is dynamic and capable of adapting to new circumstances. Whilst the traditions are deeply ingrained in the Vietnamese character, they have undoubtedly helped the Vietnamese to endure their refugee experiences and we are likely to see them expressed more fully as the Vietnamese community becomes more established.

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