

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

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Abstract

This paper contributes to feminist critique of multiculturalism by presenting the complexity of the relationship between the state and religion and women in the context of Vietnam. By taking the Evangelical Church of Vietnam as a case study, the paper argues that the assumption of equal rights and citizenship status of all women in the wider society according to the liberal model of multiculturalism cannot be applied in Vietnam since the state religious policies in this country play a significant role in the double reduction of Christian women's rights and status in terms of public leadership first in the wider society and second in the religious community itself.

Key terms: women leadership, state religious policies, multiculturalism, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam

Introduction

Feminist scholars, such as Susan Moller Okin and Ayelet Sachar, show 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 problem especially family affairs within the cultural and religious community untouched. The liberal democracy on cultural and religious rights fails to protect women's welfare because it is viewed as private to 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 to religious groups. However, the feminist critique

of the liberal model is misleading when applying to the case of Christian women in Vietnam. This is because the assumption behind the liberal model of multiculturalism assumes the equal citizenship status and rights of all women in the wider society. However, this is not the case in Vietnam.

By taking the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) as a case study, this paper will show that the Vietnamese government through its religious policies has directly and indirectly contributed to the double reduction of this women group's status and rights in terms of public leadership participation. In other words, while as a Communist country, Vietnam is proud of its gender equality framework and women's advancement in public sphere,¹ it has failed to acknowledge the inequality in women's rights between women groups, particularly between the non-Christian majority group and this Christian minority group. It has also failed to acknowledge gender discrimination and violation of women's rights in access to education and religious profession within this religious group while it tightly controls the leadership of this church and has claimed legally committed to women's rights protection. I chose the leadership aspect with a focus on women's access to theological education and religious profession for my analysis because these are the popular measures of women's welfare which are more easily seen and intervened than the private aspect such as family issues as reflected by the two feminists, Okin and Sachar.

The ECVN was established in 1911 by Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) missionaries from North America. It is the biggest and oldest Protestant church in Vietnam. Today the total membership of the church is believed to be about 1.5 million (Nguyen, 2014, p. 7; "Vietnam," 2012) with a growth rate of 900% since 1975 when the country was unified under the rule of the Communist Government (Lewis, 2012, p. 167). For more than a hundred years of the church history, women have been discriminated and subordinated to the male counterparts in education and religious profession. For

¹ According to the 2005 gender analysis of Vietnam by Asian Development Bank, Vietnam ranked 83 out of 140 countries on the Gender Development Index. It has the highest percentage of women in the National Assembly (27%) among East Asia and Pacific countries. It was ranked 18th in the world for its proportion of women in national parliament. (Wells, 2005, pp. 2, 53)

instance, the ECVN's 2002 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, p. 36). Christian women have been restricted to entering the seminary. Since the seminary in Vietnam was opened again in 2003, after being closed for 27 years by the Communist government, women were not allowed to enter the seminary until 2009, when it was only a very limited number were accepted compared to their male counterparts (Tuấn, 2013). After graduation, most male students are soon ordained and assigned to local churches while the women not only are refused ordination by the church but also have to find their own employment. Though being a pastor's wife is the most accepted position in the ECVN's view, those in this position are expected to work hard without salary.² These are just 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. Particularly this paper will attempt to answer the question:

How have the state religious policies influenced the leadership status of women from the ECVN since 1975?

While gender studies on Vietnam from both Vietnamese and foreign scholars appeal to economic, cultural, social, ethnic and geographical reasons for gender inequality between men and women in the wider society, no one has paid attention to the role of religious policy in creating the inequality between women groups and between men and women within a religious group itself. This paper will attempt to make the connection among these three.

Based on both secondary data or available writings and primary data obtained from interviews with five Vietnamese female leaders from February to April 2014, this paper will analyze and show how the state religious policies since 1975 have reduced women's status first in the wider society by treating them, including Christian men, as second-class citizens; consequently it has created the status gap between the non-

² See footnote, (V. T. T. Truong, 2009, p. 60)

Christian women group and this Christian women group. Moreover, by attempting to eliminate and control religion, particularly Christianity, the state has indirectly contributed to the second reduction of Christian women's leadership status by depriving them of theological opportunity and overlooking gender discrimination and violation of women's rights to education and religious profession in the church. This paper contributes to feminist critique of multiculturalism by presenting the complexity of the relationship between the state and religion and women in a different context.

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

In 1975 the Communists took control of the entire country of Vietnam. Two of the major plans executed by the Communist government after 1975 have been gender equality program and religious management policies. While the government's gender framework has been evaluated by international organizations as one of most advanced systems, especially in terms of women's leadership in public sphere (Wells, 2005, p. ii), practically Christian women have been excluded from such benefit. Instead, they are subjected to the religious framework which places Christians in the category to be eliminated and controlled. In other words, they are treated 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 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, pp. 614, 625). The Constitution in 1960 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, p. 627).

Women were also given equal rights with men in all aspects of life: political, economic, cultural, social and familial in article 24 (Ginsburgs, 1975, p. 627). 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) assured equal rights of boys and girls in education and women's equal right with men in voting and standing for election, and participating in State management. The law also regulated a proportion of women in elected positions and agencies of State management. It strictly prohibited any act of discrimination against women and any act of damaging their dignity (Robinson, n.d., pp. 10, 12; Wells, 2005, p. 45). This commitment of the government can be seen in the fact that since 1992 the National Vice President position has been occupied by women. Though the percentage of women's seats in national parliament drops from 27% in 2006 to 24% in 2011 and remains the same until 2013 in the latest statistics by the World Bank, Vietnam still has a high portion of women's representation after Laos (25% in 2013) in Asia (The World Bank Group, 2014).

However, at the same time with the gender equality commitment, the Vietnamese Communist government has also applied religious policies which treat religious people especially Christians as criminals before the Renovation Period in 1986 and as second-class citizens to be strictly controlled since 1986. Before this Renovation Period, the Communist government viewed traditional rituals and religious activities as backward superstition, wasteful of resources, antithetical to national construction, and incompatible with Marxist-Leninist ideology (Luong, 2007, pp. 440–1; Nguyen, 2014, p. 6). Being religious, for the government, was being superstitious and needed to be eliminated. Based on this understanding of religion, the Communist government started to “impose anti-religious (especially anti-Christian) policies” (Sunquist, 2001, p. 882). Chu describes that church (Catholic) repression spread from north to south. The state confiscated church property, closed religious schools, arrested priests and sent them to re-education camps (Chu, 2008b, p. 163). For the ECVN, the state dismissed all missionaries, sent 90 pastors to reeducation camp, and closed all theological schools and ninety-nine percent of churches of ethnic Vietnamese origin. The persecution became

severe when the state had their religious affiliation printed on their ID cards. This created in Christians fear of discrimination. The state also tried to control the leadership of the ECVN hoping that this would help it control the whole Protestant church in the south (Sunquist, 2001, pp. 879–80; Truong, 2009, p. 52).

Although the state's attitude toward religion is more relaxing after 1986, it has maintained a strict control of religious activities through the mechanisms of privatization and registration of religious activities. For example, the 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. Consequently many growing Christian churches have been targets of the state's repression, violence 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 2012).

Within this context, according to the 1992 Constitution, Christian women from the ECVN are deemed beneficiaries of gender equality laws, but they are also subjected to religious policies at the same time since they bear the Christian identity. 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 (Robinson, n.d., p. 10).

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 (Robinson, n.d., p. 2).

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 (2014) from Hanoi National University observes that Christians are ranked the lowest in the relationship fluency with the government (p.12). 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 because they are syncretistic in their faith (p.20). Though the government's attitude toward religion has changed after 1990s, Christians still face many barriers when climbing the political and social stairs. This can be seen in the fact that entrance to certain fields such as police and government service requires a strict profile scrutiny. For example, entrance to the police field of study require that a person have a "clean" profile; this person and his or her family up to three generations must not violate the law and have not done any harm to the Revolution and to the nation (Tuoitre January 12, 2014). It is hard for Christians, women included, up to three generations to keep their profile clean when Christianity was closely associated with colonial powers and the anti-Communist regime in the South from 1954 to 1975 during the Revolutionary period (Nguyen 2009, 5-10; Chu 2008, 158; Sunkuist 2001, 789; Truong 2009, 3-4).

Therefore, though the Communist government has committed to gender equality and non-Christian women have generally benefited to advance themselves in political and social participation, Christian women from the ECVN have shown to be alienated to such benefit because of their Christian identity. Being Christian, the state religious policies entitle them to be treated differently. The Christians were criminalized before 1986 and have been subjected to strict control by the state after 1986. The exclusion of this group from political and social leadership is one of the obvious consequences. Hence such policies have ended up creating different statuses between the non-Christian

women and Christian women in enjoying the unalienated rights proclaimed by the state in its 1992 Constitution.

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 institution as this part is going to demonstrate. 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 claims to protect women's dignity and equality in all aspects of life.

As mentioned in the previous part, the religious policies of the Communist government before 1990s denied any role of religion in the society and conducted anti-religious activities to eliminate religion from Vietnam. Such policies have led to the impoverishment of the ECVN's church leadership by causing the drain of leadership and the lack of theological opportunities. Due to the fear of the Communist government, many pastors and laity from the ECVN migrated to the U.S. by boat after 1975 (Sunquist, 2001, p. 882; Truong, 2012, p. 95). Many of the remaining pastors were jailed and later migrated to the West after having served their term in the prison. By 2005 the ECVN had only 345 pastors and preachers³ compared to a total of 500 pastors plus 276 Bible students in Nha Trang before 1975. Hence the church suffered the loss of prominent leaders.

Moreover, the state religious policies have also impoverished the ECVN's leadership by depriving its members of theological education opportunity through closing its only seminary in Nha Trang and isolating the church from the outside world.

³ From interview with a church leader in Tra On church, Vinh Long Province on May 25th, 2014.

The ECVN's only seminary was established in 1921 by the (CMA) missionaries to train local pastors for church planting, and later this Bible School was moved to Nha Trang in 1959. By 1975, this seminary had equipped the church leadership with 500 pastors, 276 Bible students in Nha Trang and 900 laypeople trained by theological training by extension (Sunquist, 2001, pp. 789–80). However, after 1975 the Communist government closed this seminary and forbade theological education until 2003 (Truong, 2012, p. 96). During this period, both men and women from this church were deprived of theological education which is important to provide leaders for the growing church. Furthermore, the government also closed the country from the outside world before 1990s. This means that theological education opportunity abroad for church members was not possible. Only after 1990s overseas theological education was possible for Christians from Vietnam. For example, the Union University of California (UCC), established by overseas Vietnamese evangelicals 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, pp. 95–6). From 2006 until 2014 there were totally 10 theological female students who graduated from Thailand. Though women could access theological education after 1990s, it is hard for women to improve their status within a short time period after being deprived of educational access for 27 years by the state.

Beside the direct deprivation of theological opportunity as mentioned above, the poor 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 its 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 graduated abroad must go through a process of redoctrination 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, a female informant, Ms. Lan (a pseudonym) who got two master's degrees from Thailand and Korea, lamented when she reflected on the situation:

I am old and I need an immediate employment. If I apply, I don't know how long it will take. Do you know, Dr. Le Tan. 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 meant? I don't know how long I have to wait. I am 53 now. I want to teach now.⁴

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. This attitude is nothing but the fear that originates from the ECVN's anti-intellectual spirit. 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, p. 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 intellectuals. As college level was the highest level offered before 1975 (Truong, 2002, p. 81), 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

⁴ Interview with my informant on February 23rd, 2014 via yahoo messenger.

schools do not have a sufficient number of qualified teachers for bachelor programmes but still offer master programmes. (Truong, 2012, pp. 97–8).

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 four of these women show that they bear doubly discriminating treatment. 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. Some have gotten married and become housewives to take care of their husbands and children; while some others work for different Christian ministries such as teaching online, translation, and social works like Ms. Lan. The church situation makes it unthinkable for them to become pastors in their lifetime. For example, Ms. Lan says,

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 the 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.⁵

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.

⁵ Interview with Ms. Hue on February 24, 2014 via facebook.

The situation is not different regarding women who get theological training inside the country. Despite the ECVN's openness to recruit female students in 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. For instance, though women were barred to enter the seminary before 2009, wives and fiancées of male seminarians were encouraged and even required to enter the seminary. They are required to join the seminary in the last year of their husbands' training so that they could support their husbands better.

Secondly the church has still maintained the Constitution which shows 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 (*nu truyen dao*) and assignation 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 assignation for students graduated from the theological seminary." According to the ECVN's tradition, "minor pastor" or "Muc su nhiem chuc" is candidate for ordination, while the title "female preacher" is permanent for a woman. Such a strategy from the ECVN is another way to discourage women from taking leadership positions.

These have shown that women have been discouraged to obtain 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 to be best 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 discriminating treatment of women in the ECVN is a violation of human rights, especially women's rights as stated in the country's 1992 Constitution. According to article 63, "[a]ll citizens regardless of their sex have equal rights in all respects, political, economic, cultural, social and in family life. Any discrimination against women and violation of women's dignity are strictly prohibited." (Robinson, n.d., p. 11). 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, pp. 321–2; Truong, 2012, p. 97), it 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.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by analyzing the Communist government's inconsistency in its application of gender equality framework and religious policies to the case of women in the Evangelical Church of Vietnam, the paper has shown that this inconsistency has resulted to the double reduction of this women group's status regarding public leadership participation both in the wider society and in the religious community itself. Women from this group have been excluded from some of the major rights regarding political and social participation since, as Christians, they are subjected to the religious policies which view Christians as second-class citizens. This has created an unequal status between non-Christian women and Christian women in Vietnamese society. Within the ECVN, the state religious policies have resulted in women's lack of access to theological education inside the country from 1975-2003 and outside the country 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 since the church's

establishment. 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.

The situation of the women in the ECVN has shown that the feminist critique of the liberal model of multiculturalism cannot be directly applied to Vietnam. This is because as Vietnamese citizens, Christian women practically do not enjoy the same rights especially the rights to political and social leadership participation as non-Christian women. Therefore, the solution to this case requires a change at two levels. At the first level, Christian women must not be treated as second-class citizens. They should be entitled to equal rights and status with other women regardless of religious and ideological background. At the second level, women's rights to religious education and profession must be protected and reinforced. This can be done through law reinforcement and government's intervention in the church's leadership structure in terms of gender equality.

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