

THE PROTESTANT PERVASIVENESS AND POLITICAL ENTANGLEMENT IN THE VIETNAMESE PERIPHERAL BORDERLANDS

Duong Van Bien

Institute of Anthropology and Religious Studies, Vietnam Academy of
Social Sciences (VASS), Hanoi, Vietnam
biendv.irs@vass.gov.vn

Ngo Quoc Dong

Institute of Anthropology and Religious Studies, Vietnam Academy of
Social Sciences (VASS), Hanoi, Vietnam
nguquocdongkt@gmail.com

Nguyen Thi Bich Ngoan

Institute of Anthropology and Religious Studies, Vietnam Academy of
Social Sciences (VASS), Hanoi, Vietnam
nguyenbichngoan@gmail.com

Vu Thi Thu Ha

Institute of Anthropology and Religious Studies, Vietnam Academy of
Social Sciences (VASS), Hanoi, Vietnam
vuthuhavtg@gmail.com

ABSTRAK

Protestantisme sering dicontohkan sebagai agama bagi orang-orang metropolitan; namun, menjadi lebih menonjol di antara penduduk dataran tinggi di daerah pinggiran seperti daerah perbatasan terpencil ketika diperkenalkan ke Vietnam. Umumnya, daerah pinggiran seperti itu menyebabkan lebih sedikit perhatian bagi Negara Vietnam di masa damai dan memiliki sedikit signifikansi dalam pembangunan nasional serta dalam lanskap agama dan budaya nasional. Meskipun demikian, munculnya Protestantisme di sana menyebabkan serangkaian masalah relevan yang tampaknya secara paksa memaksa perhatian Negara. Artikel ini mencoba untuk memberikan peta ekspansi Protestan di daerah perbatasan pinggiran Vietnam dari waktu ke waktu, dengan fokus pada periode dari tahun 1990-an dan seterusnya. Kemudian menekankan tantangan tertentu yang mungkin ditimbulkan oleh meluasnya Protestantisme di daerah pinggiran bagi Negara Vietnam selama proses pembaruan masyarakat. Penelitian ini lebih lanjut mengemukakan bahwa keterlibatan faktor-faktor yang berhubungan dengan Protestan dalam ranah budaya, ekonomi, dan politik di wilayah perbatasan pinggiran di Vietnam dapat menjadi titik bagi kekuatan geopolitik untuk mengeksploitasi

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dan mendorong bangkitnya nasionalisme pinggiran di sana, yang pada gilirannya akan menjadi ujian yang lebih besar bagi upaya negara-bangsa dalam mempertahankan kendali penuh atas wilayah dan masyarakatnya.

kata kunci: *Protestantisme, Daerah Perbatasan, Kekuatan Geopolitik, Nasionalisme, Negara Vietnam.*

ABSTRACT

Protestantism is often exemplified as a religion for metropolitans; however, gaining prominence among upland dwellers in peripheral areas like remote borderlands when it was introduced to Vietnam. Generally, such peripheral areas caused less concern for the State of Vietnam in peaceful times and held little significance in the national development as well as in the national religious and cultural landscape. Nevertheless, the emergence of Protestantism there led to a series of relevant issues that seemed to forcefully compel the State's concern. The article attempts to provide a map of the Protestant expansion in the Vietnamese peripheral borderlands over time, focusing on the period from the 1990s onward. It then emphasizes certain challenges that the pervasiveness of Protestantism in the peripheral areas may have posed to the State of Vietnam during the process of renovating society. The research further argues that the involvement of Protestant-related factors in cultural, economic, and political realms in the peripheral borderlands in Vietnam could be a point for geopolitical forces to exploit and foster the rise of peripheral nationalism there, which in turn would become greater testing to the nation-state's efforts in keeping total control over its territory and society.

Keywords: *Protestantism, Peripheral Borderland, Geopolitical forces, Nationalism, the State of Vietnam.*

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INTRODUCTION

Protestantism is one of the legal religions in Vietnam, with over 1 million Christians. This religion was formally introduced to the Vietnamese in 1911.¹ Over a century, Protestantism reached the position of the fifth-largest religion in Vietnam, with roughly 1.2

¹ Lê Hoàng Phu, *Lịch sử Hội thánh Tin Lành Việt Nam (1911-1965) Ghi dấu 100 năm Tin lành trên đất Việt (1911-2011)/ The History of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (1911-2011)* (Hanoi: Religious Publishing House, 2010).

million followers in December 2021.² It is noted that Protestantism prevailed within ethnic minorities and gained a reputation in the peripheral areas, mostly in the far-reaching borderland regions of Vietnam.³

Concerning such areas, the Social Republic of Vietnam (thereafter called the State of Vietnam) has made efforts to renovate. Unexpectedly, during the process of renovation of these areas including borderlands, the State of Vietnam faced tremendous challenges, including religious-related issues. Since 1986, Protestantism surprised the state of Vietnam with its sharp rise and extensive influence in peripheral areas, creating Protestant conversion movements that compelled the state to issue certain policies specifically targeting Protestantism.

Our study attempts to map out how Protestantism spread in the overall borderlands of Vietnam, one which was often neglected by previous studies. The research makes a bit further step in inquiring into what Protestant factors entangled with political issues in such peripheral areas could have posed certain challenges to the central state's power in Vietnam. It suggests that Protestant-related agents could be a source of rising peripheral nationalism there.

Oscar Saleminck significantly contributed to scholarship on Protestantism in the Central Highland of Vietnam, with notable works written in 2003, 2009, and 2015. He made efforts to demonstrate that Protestantism was a favorite option for highlanders on their path toward modernization and integration into the global world. Ngô Thị Tâm (2015, 2016), a scholar based in Germany, more directly researched the conversation of Hmong Protestants in the northern border region of Vietnam. In agreement with Saleminck, Ngô Thị Tâm also considered Protestantism as a new way for local people there.

² Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ, *Tôn giáo và Chính sách tôn giáo ở Việt Nam/ Religion and Policies on Religion in Vietnam* (Hanoi: Religious Publishing House, 2022).

³ Ủy ban Dân tộc, *Tổng hợp kết quả điều tra thực trạng kinh tế - xã hội 53 dân tộc thiểu số năm 2019/ The Summary of the survey results on the socio-economic situation of 53 ethnic minorities in 2019* (Hanoi: Văn hóa Dân tộc, 2019), p. 485.

Recently, Seb Rumsy (2019, 2023) focused on Hmong Protestant Christians in the northern part of Vietnam and delved into daily political issues. Vietnamese scholars like Nguyễn Văn Minh (2006), Nguyễn Văn Nam (2008), Hoàng Minh Đô (2013), Đoàn Đức Phương (2015), Trịnh Thị Lan (2022), and others, over the last decade, attempted to clarify the roles played by Protestant churches in shaping new cultural and social lives of local people in mountainous and borderland areas. They also particularly focused on the illicit activities of certain Protestant groups in such areas.

Generally, the above studies did not provide a map of Protestant emergence in the borderlands of Vietnam. Moreover, the issue of its political entanglement there, particularly the involvement in peripheral nationalism, is also not a main consideration of previous studies.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilizes the perspective on the complex relationship between the periphery and the center to shed new light on the entanglement of Protestantism with the political issues in the peripheral borderlands in Vietnam. Borderland areas are not always peripheral; however, in most cases, they are part of or concentrated in peripheral areas of a country.⁴ Such areas are often distant from the economic, cultural, and political centers of the state. Since the 1960s, the pair set “core”/“periphery” emerged and applied by certain scholars.⁵ The center and peripheral areas are often viewed as dichotomies, and feature certain distinctions, and sometimes even polarizations. While the center is perceived to be privileged, advanced, progressive, modern, and civilized, the periphery appears to be undeveloped,

⁴ Doris Wasti-Walter, *Borderlands* (2nd ed.) (International Encyclopedia of Human Geography, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-102295-5.10627-4>.

⁵ Petruszewicz, Martra., “Rethinking Centre and Periphery in Historical Analysis: Land-based Modernization as an Alternative Model from the Peripheries,” in Tessa Hauswedell, Axel Korner and Ulrich Tiedau (Eds.), *Re-Mapping Centre and Periphery: Asymmetrical Encounters in European and Global Contexts* (UCL Press, 2019), 19.

lagged, and the rest of the dichotomy.⁶ Likewise, “the dynamic center innovates, moving forward, and the periphery follows in an attempt to catch up”.⁷

However, certain conflicts arose among the dynamic relationships between the periphery and the center during the construction of the nation-state, particularly at the time when the nation-state sought ways to exert its direct rule over the peripheral areas. The conflicts took many forms such as violent conflicts, secessionist attempts, and, in some cases, demanding the establishment of independent states. That is known as a form of peripheral nationalism, in which ethnic communities attempt to build their self-determination by detaching their nation from the host state.⁸ Particularly, peripheral nationalism could be brought forth throughout this process by combining religious identification with territorial and ethnic identities.⁹

In terms of specific methods, the study relies mainly on Document analysis. The documents consist of both printed and electronic materials (Bowen, 2009). These materials involved certain sources such as some relevant reports from the central government and local government institutions, as well as a wealthy source of secondary documents produced by researchers and news reporters which are available for free access.

⁶ De Lima Grecco, G, Károly Halmos, K, and Ira, J., “Centres and Peripheries in Contemporary History (ca. 1900-2000),” in Jan Hansen, Jochen Hung, Jaroslav Ira, Judit Klement, Sylvain Lesage, Juan Luis Simal and Andrew Tompkins (Eds), *The European Experience A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe*. (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023).

⁷ Petr Kyloušek, “What Is the Center and What Is the Periphery?,” in Petr Kyloušek (Ed.), *Centers and Peripheries in Romance Language Literatures in the Americas and Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 19.

⁸ Hechter, Michael (2020). *Containing Nationalism* (Oxford University Press).

⁹ Wellhofer, E. Spencer, “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold: Cores, peripheries and peripheral nationalism at the core and periphery nationalism at the core and periphery of the world economy,” *Political Geography*, 14, No. 6&7 (1995): 503-520, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0962-6298\(95\)00052-C](https://doi.org/10.1016/0962-6298(95)00052-C).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Protestant Expansion in the Peripheral Borderlands of Vietnam

Vietnam has borderlands shared with China, Laos, and Cambodia. Vietnamese borderland areas are far from the main political and economic centers of the country. For many years, such areas of Vietnam have been places where Protestantism has spread strongly. *lainnya*.

Specifically, in the northern region, Vietnam shares borders with neighboring countries such as China and Laos, including the borderland provinces of Quảng Ninh, Lạng Sơn, Cao Bằng, Hà Giang, Lào Cai, Điện Biên, and Sơn La. Startingly, in the years 1986, 1987, and 1989, local people in the provinces Hà Giang, Điện Biên, and Lào Cai, respectively, listened to the radio program of Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC), which is a Christian radio network from Manila, the Philippines. The Hmong Christians occasionally referred to Protestantism as the phenomenon of Vàng Chúa (*uô Vangx Trurr*, which also means King or Lord of the Hmong).¹⁰

The turning point of Protestant proselytization in northern provinces occurred in the early 1990s. In 2015, the number of Protestant Christians increased by roughly 1.5 times to 53,017 followers, with 316 gathering groups.¹¹ In 2020, Điện Biên had 69,635 Protestant Christians.¹² As of June 2024, 19 of 29 communes across four border districts of this province – Mường Nhé, Nậm Pồ, Điện Biên, and Mường Chà – witnessed the existence of Protestantism, with 31,200 followers in 5,770 households, organized in 136 gathering

¹⁰ Vương Duy Quang, “Người Hmông và những hiện tượng tôn giáo liên quan đến sự phản ứng của họ ở Đông Nam Á: Quá khứ và hiện đại/ The Hmong people and their religious phenomena in relation with their responses in Southeast Asia: The Past and Present,” *Tạp chí Dân tộc học*, No. 6, (2004): 62.

¹¹ Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ, Bảng thống kê Tin lành các tỉnh thành/ The Statistic Table of Protestantism in Provinces (Hanoi: Unpublished document, 2015).

¹² Hương Giang. (2020, September 25), “Cấp phép cho nhiều nhóm Tin lành, đẩy lùi tà đạo ở Điện Biên/ Granting Permission to many Protestant Christian groups, Pushing back the Heretical Religions in Điện Biên”, Đài tiếng nói Việt Nam: <https://vov.vn/phap-luat/cap-pher-cho-nhieu-nhom-tin-lanh-day-lui-ta-dao-o-dien-bien-781108.vov>.

groups from seven Protestant denominations.¹³ Following Điện Biên, Lai Châu has the second-largest number of Protestants in northern Vietnam. By 2019, there were 237 gathering groups and 47,398 Protestants in Lai Châu. The bulk of Protestants reside in the border districts (Mường Tè, Nậm Nhùn, Phong Thổ, and Sìn Hồ) of Lai Châu, particularly Sìn Hồ, which had the highest number of Hmong Protestants in 2019, totaling 11,776 people.¹⁴

Lào Cai occupied the third-highest concentration of Protestant Christians in the northern borderland of Vietnam. In 2012, this province had around 19,824 Hmong people affiliated with Protestantism. Many of them lived in borderland districts, such as Bắc Hà, which had 5,315 Protestant Christians; Bảo Thắng with 3,263 Protestant Christians; and Bát Xát with 3,104 Protestant Christians.¹⁵ Meanwhile, in Hà Giang, by July 2023, there were 4,000 households with 22,000 Protestant Christians in 163 gathering groups belonging to eight denominations across 80 communes and towns.¹⁶ In Cao Bằng, by March 2015, there were 18,746 Protestants in 167 gathering groups, overseen by 2 pastors and 18 preachers, across 55 communes in eight districts in Cao Bằng.¹⁷ In 2022, Cao Bằng recorded around

¹³ Bích Nguyên. (2024, June 17), “Nỗ lực xóa bỏ tà đạo trên vùng biên Điện Biên/ The Efforts to eliminate heresy in the borderlands of Điện Biên Province”, Báo Biên Phòng: <https://www.bienphong.com.vn/no-luc-xoa-bo-ta-dao-tren-vung-bien-dien-bien-post477061.html>.

¹⁴ Phòng Tôn giáo tỉnh Lai Châu, Thống kê của Phòng Tôn giáo tỉnh Lai Châu/ The Statistic of the Department on Religion in Lai Châu Province (Lai Châu: Unpublished document, 2019).

¹⁵ Nguyễn Quỳnh Trâm, *Văn hóa của người Hmông theo đạo Tin lành ở tỉnh Lào Cai/ The Culture of the Hmong Protestant Christians in Lào Cai Province*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. (Học viện Khoa học Xã hội – Viện Hàn lâm Khoa học Xã hội Việt Nam, 2016), 41.

¹⁶ Cao Nguyên, *Đời sống xã hội của người Hmông theo đạo Tin lành ở miền núi phía Bắc hiện nay/ The social life of the Hmong Protestant Christians in the mountainous areas of the northern part of Vietnam at contemporary* [Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation], (Học viện Chính trị Quốc gia Hồ Chí Minh, 2020), 78-79.

¹⁷ Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ, Bảng thống kê Tin lành các tỉnh thành/ The Statistic Table of Protestantism in Provinces (Hanoi: Unpublished document, 2015).

21,000 Protestant Christians, most of whom were Hmong, with 10,683 individuals.¹⁸

In the Central Region, Vietnam shares a border with Laos to the west and it was the first region to receive Christian faith in 1911. However, this region has not emerged as a spotlight area of Protestant concentration. Except for Quảng Nam, the rest of the border provinces of the central region have had a very modest number of Protestant Christians. Meanwhile, Protestantism has flourished in the Central Highlands (Tây Nguyên), which shares borders with Laos and Cambodia. This region recorded the highest density of Protestant Christians in Vietnam. Protestant missionaries arrived in the Central Highlands in the late 1920s and the early 1930s. By December 2020, Protestants there reached 529,410 people, including 511,450 people from ethnic groups like Ede, Jrai, Bah Nar, K'ho, M'ngong, Xedang, and more. In the Central Highlands, Đắk Lắk is the province with the largest number of Protestants, followed by Gia Lai, Lâm Đồng, Đắk Nông, and Kon Tum.¹⁹

Finally, the southwestern and southeastern regions of Vietnam, which share a border with Cambodia, include provinces such as Long An, Đồng Tháp, An Giang, Kiên Giang, Tây Ninh, and Bình Phước. These provinces have significant Protestant populations. The Protestant faith was introduced to the southwestern region of Vietnam in 1919. Among the southwestern border provinces of Vietnam, Đồng Tháp had the highest concentration of Protestant Christians, with 9,280 followers in 2017. Kiên Giang followed with 6,349 Protestant believers, while Long

¹⁸ Ban Chỉ đạo Nhân quyền tỉnh Cao Bằng. (2024, May 30), “Sự đổi thay của đồng bào dân tộc Mông ở Cao Bằng/ The transformations of the Hmong compatriots in Cao Bằng Province”, *Tạp chí Xây Dựng Đảng*: <https://www.xaydungdang.org.vn/nhan-quyen-va-cuoc-song/su-doi-thay-cua-dong-bao-dan-toc-mong-o-cao-bang-20995>.

¹⁹ Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo – Viện Hàn lâm Khoa học Xã hội Việt Nam, *Tài liệu tôn giáo, tín ngưỡng ở khu vực miền núi phía Bắc Việt Nam (thuộc Đề án Hỗ trợ thông tin, tuyên truyền về dân tộc, tôn giáo theo Quyết định số 219-QĐ/TTg ngày 21 tháng 2 năm 2019)/ Documents on Religions and Beliefs in the mountainous areas of northern Vietnam (belonging to the Project of supporting the Information, Propagation on Ethnicity, Religion following the Decision number 219-QĐ/TTg on 21 February 2019)* (Hanoi: Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo, 2022).

An had 6,861 and An Giang had 2,261 Protestant followers.²⁰ Meanwhile, in the border provinces of the southeast, Tây Ninh has a very modest number of Protestants, although Protestantism was brought there in the 1930s. As of March 2015, Protestantism in Tây Ninh had eleven organizations and denominations, along with 1,201 followers and 47 gathering groups.²¹ Unlike Tây Ninh, Protestantism in Bình Phước has grown significantly during the years from 1960 to 1975 and the years between 1990 and 2014.²² To date, Bình Phước became a province with the second largest number of Protestant Christians in the southeast of Vietnam, after Ho Chi Minh City.

Competition in Gaining Political Prestige in the Peripheral Borderland Areas

As has been seen, Protestantism appeared in the borderland areas at different points of time in the twentieth century, eventually gaining a pivotal position within the country's Protestant Christian landscape. However, narratives related to Protestantism did not cause significant concern in the political sphere of Vietnam until the time following the renovation of the country in 1986. When attracting a large of followers, Protestantism in the Vietnamese peripheral borderland areas prevailed and generated significant human and social capital, which in turn played a substantial role in transforming the lives of local communities, creating competition with the State of Vietnam.

To the areas of the borderlands, the State of Vietnam has implemented many programs to advance its peripheral regions, including remote mountainous areas and borderlands, which have long been regarded as underdeveloped. Over the years, the State of Vietnam has collaborated with domestic and international partners, channeling

²⁰ Lê Hùng Yên, *Đạo Tin lành ở vùng Tây Nam Bộ hiện nay/ Protestantism in the Southwest at Contemporary time* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation] (Học viện Chính trị Quốc gia Hồ Chí Minh, 2020), 195-196.

²¹ Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ, *Bảng thống kê Tin lành các tỉnh thành/ The Statistic Table of Protestantism in Provinces* (Hanoi: Unpublished document, 2015).

²² Trần Phương Nguyên, Trần Khánh Hưng, "Việc sử dụng ngôn ngữ của người Xtiêng ở Bình Phước trong lĩnh vực tôn giáo, tín ngưỡng/ The Use of Language of Xtieng People in Bình Phước in the Realm of Religion, Belief", *Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo*, No. 4 (2018), 123.

financial sources into many projects aimed at boosting the economy in remote borderland areas. Beginning in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly following the unification of the country in 1975, the State launched migration programs that encouraged people from the lowlands – most of them belonging to Kinh, the major ethnic group in Vietnam – to migrate to the uplands for settlement and agricultural cultivation. These programs were implemented in the hope of bridging the development gap between the lowland and upland areas and promoting the process of industrialization and modernization of the periphery. This effort aligns with the slogan often cited by policymakers in Vietnam: “*For helping the upland areas catch up with the lowland ones*” (*Để miền ngược theo kịp miền xuôi*).²³ In essence, the investment in borderland areas primarily intends to integrate the peripheral areas into the broader development agenda under the nation-state’s leadership.

Nevertheless, the State of Vietnam has been unable to fully recognize or neutralize every side effect arising from the economic development of the periphery by mobilizing the migration of lowlanders to the uplands, proposing a modernization model based on industry, and providing paradigm references in terms of culture and education. At certain levels, these changes led to an ironic situation that has deepened gaps between indigenous residents and migrants, between peripheral people and residents in the core, hindering the ability of the State of Vietnam’s policies to achieve every result as desired. At the same time, when emerging in the borderlands of Vietnam, Protestantism also impacted significantly the cultural, economic, and societal transformations in local areas. In the borderlands, this religion has solely penetrated ethnic minorities.

²³ Ủy ban Dân tộc, Báo cáo số 111/BC-UBDT đánh giá hiệu quả, tác động của các dự án sử dụng vốn vay ODA và vốn vay ưu đãi, giai đoạn 1993-2017/ Report No. 111/BC-UBDT Assessing the Effectiveness and Impact of Projects Using ODA Loans and Concessional Loans, Period 1993-2017 (Hanoi: Ủy ban Dân tộc, 2018).

Surprisingly, Protestant teaching-based practices that came into existence among such ethnic communities could transform the lives of upland dwellers there in ways that they have never imagined. Though having been certainly facilitated by the government due to the renovation of religious policies, such a transformation with the involvement of Protestantism, intentionally or unintentionally, created competition between Protestant-related agents with the effectiveness of the government policies. The activities of evangelists have had significant effects in renovating the local communities. They provided local people with certain good knowledge of cultivation in the fields, guidelines for practicing a hygienic, healthy lifestyle, informal education to effectively improve literacy, and more. Particularly, the moral teachings of Protestantism promote gender equality, encouraging males to actively engage in labor and share responsibilities with females in family life. Men have given up drinking alcohol, smoking, and using opium.²⁴ When men did so, women were more inclined to follow Protestantism.

Moreover, Protestant pastors and preachers helped local inhabitants obtain new working skills and modern knowledge. If any of the Protestant Christians feel sick, their pastors will advise them to seek medical care at hospitals or medical aid posts, rather than being treated through the involvement of praying folk deities for spiritual healing. Additionally, the old customs related to marriage and funerals, which often heavily burden the finances, have been alleviated among Protestant communities.²⁵ Within this context, Protestantism appears among ethnic minorities in borderlands as a new choice to make their lives better. Many of them saw this religion as a “new way” to follow in

²⁴ Rumsby, Seb. (2023). *Development in Spirit Religious Transformation and Everyday Politics in Vietnam's Central Highlands*. (The University of Wisconsin Press, 2023), 3.

²⁵ Nguyễn Văn Minh, “Một số vấn đề đạo Tin lành của người dân tộc thiểu số tại chỗ Tây Nguyên hiện nay/ Some issues concerning Protestantism of the Indigenous ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands at present”, *Tạp chí Dân tộc học*, No. 4 (2006): 58; Nguyễn Thanh Xuân, *Tôn giáo và chính sách tôn giáo ở Việt Nam/ Religions and Religious Policies in Vietnam* (Hanoi: Religious Publishing House, 2015), 130-131.

renovating their society, and Christian conversion became a strategy for them to be modernized and integrated into the global world.²⁶

The changes as mentioned, influenced by Protestant principle-based teachings, have created certain competition with the Vietnam government – the agent also earnestly wishes to transform the society in peripheral areas. It should be noted that to some extent, the changes influenced by Protestantism have coincided with the spirit of renovation policies of the State of Vietnam, in which the state encourages the promotion of the values of religious ethics to contribute to constructing a new society, the socialist society.²⁷ In some cases like Sìn Suối Hồ village in the borderland district Phong Thổ of Lai Châu Province, the government even provided more support for economic activities led by Protestant pastors.²⁸

Protestant-related agents go further in transforming the lives of local communities in borderlands, not only in material aspects but also spiritual ones. As practitioners of a monotheistic religion, Protestant communities denied traditional beliefs and refused to partake in practices stemming from folk religions like shamanism and ancestor worship or traditional customs associated with these folk religions. For instance, in the Central Highlands, Protestant Christians do not use gongs, dance, and drink at festivals because these traditional practices are not aligned with the Protestant codes. Within Protestant Christian communities, the communal house (*nhà Rông*) for worshipping *Yàng-*

²⁶ Ngô, Tâm T. T., *The new way: Protestantism and the Hmong in Vietnam* (University of Washington Press, 2016); Saleminck, Oscar, “Revolutionary and Christian Ecumenes and Desire for Modernity in the Vietnamese Highlands”, *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 16 No. 4 (2015): 388-409.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2015.1054866>.

²⁷ Dương Văn Biên et al., “Engagement of Vietnamese Religious Communities in National Education: Resources, Challenges, and Opportunities”, in *Vietnamese Language, Education and Change In and Outside Vietnam*, eds. Phan Le Ha, Dat Bao, and Joel Windle (Singapore: Springer, 2024), 261-284.

²⁸ Nguyễn Oanh. (2023, May 28), “Mục sư Hằng A Xà, người tiên phong giúp người dân làm du lịch ở Sìn Suối Hồ/ Pastor Hằng A Xà, the pioneer helps the local people develop tourism in Sìn Suối Hồ village”, *Dân tộc miền núi*:

<https://dantocmiennui.vn/muc-su-hang-a-xa-nguoi-tien-phong-giup-nguoi-dan-lam-du-lich-o-sin-suoi-ho-post332982.html>.

a term that refers to the collection of traditional deities worshipped by indigenous ethnic communities—was also replaced by Christian churches.²⁹ Within the Christian communities, the role of elders in the traditional village structures was also replaced by the role of pastors. As such, after converting to Protestantism, they no longer executed many traditional rituals and customs. Instead, they adhere to Protestant cultural and religious norms.³⁰

From the practical effects, Protestantism sometimes emerged as an agent with a full reputation that could occupy a pivotal position in certain areas. This in turn created a kind of implicit political competition with the effectiveness and reputation of the government policies during the process of transforming people's lives there. If cases arise where the religious authority within Protestant communities does not cooperate with the state, it could become a source of concern for holding the power of official secular authorities. As a result, since Protestant agents were employed by geopolitical forces, they became catalysts for detaching their faithful communities from the orbit of the national trajectory.

Issues Related to Societal and National Security

The entanglement in peripheral nationalism of Protestant agents in Vietnamese borderlands was more explicitly demonstrated through revolts. Some official-state researchers like Đỗ Quang Hưng argue that the revolts related to Protestant Hmong in the northern part and the Central Highlands of Vietnam were to express an effort of deterritorialization when indigenous communities strove to confine them in their own spaces out of the nation-state.³¹ However, it could be another explanation that such revolts of certain Protestant Christians

²⁹ Vũ Dũng, "Vấn đề đạo Tin Lành ở Tây Nguyên hiện nay: Nhìn từ góc độ Tâm lý học/ The Issue of Protestantism in the Central Highlands at contemporary time: From the Psychological Perspective", *Tạp chí Tâm lý học* 74, No. 5 (2005): 16.

³⁰ Nguyễn Văn Nam, "Ảnh hưởng của đạo Tin lành với thiết chế xã hội truyền thống của đồng bào các dân tộc thiểu số ở Tây Nguyên/ The Influence of Protestantism on the Traditional Social Institutions of the Ethnic minority Communities in the Central Highlands", *Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo*, N.4 (2008): 39.

³¹ Đỗ Quang Hưng, *Nhà nước Tôn giáo Luật Pháp/ State, Religion, and Law* (Hanoi: Chính trị Quốc gia-Sự thật, 2014), 39.

in these areas are like a kind of strong reaction of the local peripheral people against the centralization of the state. In Vietnam, tribal minority groups in peripheral upland areas, for a long time in the past, primarily occupied autonomous zones and characterized by cultural dispersion, often beyond the reach of cultural paradigms and laws from the Central State. Once such minority ethnic people were “drawn into the orbit of national states”, it could result in certain conflicts or resistances.³²

Whatever the case was, as Protestantism prevailed and provided local peripheral people with a source of centralization, it fostered solidarity among them and became a source of power for the unification of local peripheral communities. Not only was it in Vietnam but in the broader context of Southeast Asia, Protestantism as a world religion could provide some groups of peripheral peoples a source of power greater than their animistic religions in building distinctiveness for them in the multicultural world.³³ Consequently, the religious cohesion from Protestantism contributed to propelling the emergence of peripheral nationalism among certain ethnic groups in peripheral areas. In addition, taking advantage of this religious network, some so-called opposing geopolitical forces towards the central state exacerbated contradictions between peripheral people and others, conspiring to promote what should be called “the fragmentation of the state”.³⁴

As the privileged social administration system, the State of Vietnam insists on integrating the peripheral areas into the national plans and extending its influence on subjects in these areas. This process was unable to avoid certain shortcomings. The geopolitical

³² Saleminck, Oscar, “Enclosing the Highlands: Socialist, Capitalist and Protestant Conversions of Vietnam’s Central Highlanders”, Dlc.dlib.indiana.edu:

<https://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/handle/10535/1787>.

³³ Keyes, Charles F. (1996). Being Protestant Christian in Southeast Asian Worlds. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 27, No. 2 (1996): 280-292.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463400021068>.

³⁴ Hechter, Michael., *Containing Nationalism* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 82.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/019924751X.001.0001>.

forces against the State of Vietnam saw and attempted to exploit existing issues to foster a resurgence of peripheral nationalism among certain ethnic groups, particularly focusing on the groups who were becoming “more aware of their subordination to the core”.³⁵ The resurgence of peripheral nationalism was testified through the movements that appeared under the guise of Protestantism in peripheral areas in Vietnam, entailing certain violent conflicts, or even political revolts against the state to demand secession and autonomy. Among them, revolts that emerged in the Central Highlands and the mountainous areas of the northern part of Vietnam, which will be presented in the following pages, were associated with the intervention of overseas geopolitical forces.

Moreover, foreign involvement as such exhibited a trend that is called “religious transnationalization” among Protestant agents.³⁶ It could raise concerns for the State of Vietnam on how to observe relationships between religious transnational activities and social and political issues. On the other hand, the geopolitical forces took advantage of Protestantism among ethnic minorities to promote peripheral nationalism to establish what is called independent states. This was demonstrated by the cases occurring in the borderland areas of the northern region and the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Along with exerting direct rule over the peripheral areas of ethnic minorities, the State of Vietnam, of course, did not favor the existence of so-called autonomy among different communities as the ways of the imperial rulers and the French colonial regime had in the past of Vietnam.³⁷

³⁵ Wellhofer, E. Spencer, “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold’: Cores, peripheries and peripheral nationalism at the core and periphery nationalism at the core and periphery of the world economy”, *Political Geography* 14, No. 6/7 (1995): 504.

³⁶ Saleminck, Oscar, “Is Protestant conversion a form of protest? Urban and upland Protestants in Southeast Asia”, in *Christianity and the State in Asia Complicity and Conflict*, eds. Julius Bautista and Francis Khek Gee Lim (Routledge, 2009), 51.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203883761>.

³⁷ Michaud, JP, “The Montagnards and the State in Northern Vietnam from 1802 to 1975: A Historical Overview”, *Ethnohistory* 47, No. 2 (2000): 333-368.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-47-2-333>.

In the Central Highlands of Vietnam, the emergence of certain Protestant-related political revolts challenged the administration of the central state. These revolts, led by some Protestantism-related figures with the support of the United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races (FULRO)—one which has harbored disagreements with the ethnic policies of the Vietnam government, broke out in the years 2001 and 2004, all with the same purpose of demanding the establishment of “the independent state of Degar”.³⁸ Recently, some organizations perceived to associate with FULRO have continued to exert their influence on ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands in support of the establishment of what is known as “the state of Degar.” These organizations are perceived as establishing groups that take the guise of Protestant Christianity, aiming to make the government more difficult to detect and mitigate their influences. They even advocated for ethnic minorities to pursue the creation of “an independent state with a distinct religious identity,” identified by Protestantism. According to the local authorities, some of the individuals following these groups penetrated the legal Protestant churches in the Central Highlands, establishing dozens of organizations of what are called “churches” there, having concerned the government in terms of social security.³⁹

In the northern part of Vietnam, the imagination of the Hmong people about the analogy of Christian God with their lord in the lost kingdom sometimes led to political issues when certain numbers of

³⁸ Lê Xuân Trinh. (2018, September 29), “Sự thật cái gọi là “Nhà nước Tin lành Đê Ga”/ The Truth about the So-called State of Degar Protestantism”, *Biên Phòng*: <https://www.bienphong.com.vn/su-that-cai-goi-la-nha-nuoc-tin-lanh-de-ga-post275932.html>.

³⁹ Ban Tuyên giáo – Huyện ủy Ea Kar. (2023, September), “Tài liệu tuyên truyền đấu tranh phòng, chống âm mưu, thủ đoạn “diễn biến hòa bình” trong vùng đồng bào dân tộc thiểu số trên địa bàn tỉnh Đắk Lắk/ The document for struggling against the conspiracies and tricks of the “peaceful development” within the areas of ethnic minorities in Đắk Lắk Province”, *Cổng thông tin điện tử huyện Ea Kar*: <https://eakar.daklak.gov.vn/uploads/eakar/dang-vb/T%C3%A0i%20li%E1%BB%87u%20tuy%C3%AAn%20truy%E1%BB%81n%20theo%20C%C3%B4ng%20v%C4%83n%20155%20c%E1%BB%A7a%20Ban%20tuy%C3%AAn%20gi%C3%A1o%20Huy%E1%BB%87n%20E1%BB%A7y.pdf>

Hmong Protestant Christians were involved in political activities under the shade of secession to establish the so-called autonomous kingdom of the Hmong. For instance, in May 2011, many Hmong Protestants holding a messianic belief came to gather in Mường Nhé, a border district of Điện Biên Province. They came there to wait for “*the Justify of God*” (phán xét của Chúa) and to “*proclaim to become a king*” (xưng vua), aiming to establish an independent kingdom called “*the Kingdom of Hmong*” (Vương quốc Mông).⁴⁰ In Lai Châu, in February 2020, certain numbers of Hmong Protestants were also involved in separatist activities, attempting to establish an “autonomous Hmong state,” which was described as something based on the religious foundation of Protestantism.⁴¹

Another challenge that should be taken into account here is that cross-border activities of Protestantism in Vietnam are quite unprecedented and strain the Vietnam government’s management of religious issues. Some Protestant organizations have been believed to link with foreign organizations in efforts to seek funds and advance their positions within religious competition. However, for the government side, authorities worry that as long as Protestant Christians heavily relied on the support of outside sources, they could become dependent on their supporters, even sometimes becoming manipulated to be involved in opposing political activities against the State of Vietnam. To prevent potential outside dangers to social and national security, the government authorities must keep an eye on underground transnational religious-related activities.⁴²

⁴⁰ Rumsby, Seb., “Rumours, sects rallies: the ethnic politics of recent Hmong Millenarian movements in Vietnam’s highlands”, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46, No. 7 (2019): 1347-1367. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2018.1525362>; Trần Quỳnh. (2020, October 1), “Đẩy lùi tà đạo ở Điện Biên/ Pushing back the Heresy in Điện Biên” *Báo Đảng cộng sản Việt Nam*: <https://dangcongsan.vn/tu-tuong-van-hoa/day-lui-ta-dao-o-dien-bien-564692.html>.

⁴¹ Hoàng Thị Lan, “Hoạt động lợi dụng tôn giáo ở vùng dân tộc thiểu số hiện nay/ The Activities of abusing Religion in the Ethnic minority Communities at Contemporary time”, *Lý luận Chính trị*, No. 12 (2020): 63.

⁴² Trần Thị Hồng Yến, “Thực trạng tôn giáo, tín ngưỡng ở một số dân tộc thiểu số vùng biên giới Việt Nam – Trung Quốc (Nghiên cứu tại hai tỉnh Điện Biên và Hà Giang)/ The

CONCLUSION

In the postcolonial time, Vietnam sought to construct a nation-state in line with the socialist orientation. The state of Vietnam, particularly after the Renovation of the country in 1986, made several efforts to renovate the peripheral borderland areas. Along with that, the State has implemented more tolerant policies on religious affairs, fertilizing the good conditions for the spread of religions there, which include Protestantism.

However, the rapid spread of Protestantism in the peripheral borderlands sometimes led to political entanglement. At certain levels, the activities of this religion, whether accidentally or deliberately, competed with the State in the process of transforming the lives of local people. When gaining a reputation, Protestant agents sometimes become counterforces with local authorities, influencing the lives of local people in Vietnamese peripheral borderlands. Moreover, the spread of Protestantism there also created a space in which geopolitical forces could see and attempt to exploit to serve their projects. Protestant-related factors became a source for these forces to stir up ethnic sentiments and take advantage of religious cohesion to rally people involved in political revolts, aiming to exclude the influence of the central power represented by the State of Vietnam. In so doing, the geopolitical forces endeavored to deepen the dichotomies between the periphery and the center in terms of geographic, historical, and cultural axes.⁴³ Their goal was to detach the local communities in peripheral areas from the influence of the State of Vietnam. This was demonstrated through certain revolts related to Protestant figures. Noticeably, some of those involved in the

Situation of Religion and Belief in some Ethnic Minorities in the Vietnamese areases Sharing the common borderland with China (The Case Study in Two Provinces Điện Biên and Hà Giang)", *Tạp chí Dân Tộc học*, No. 4 (2022): 103.

⁴³ Salemink, Oscar., "Is Protestant conversion a form of protest? Urban and upland Protestants in Southeast Asia", in *Christianity and the State in Asia Complicity and Conflict*, eds. Julius Bautista and Francis Khok Gee Lim (Routledge, 2009), 37. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203883761>.

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geographic forces included some returning refugees from Western countries.⁴⁴

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⁴⁴ Michaud, JP. and Culas, C. (2000). The Hmong of the Southeast Asia Massif: Their Recent History of Migration. In Grant Evans, Christopher Hutton, and Kuah Khun Eng (Eds.), *Where China Meets Southeast Asia Social & Cultural Change in the Border Regions*. (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore), p. 116.

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