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## Social Impacts of Protestantism in South Vietnam Before 1975

Post graduate Student Nguyen Duc Thang

Faculty of Political Science, VNU, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi

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**\*Corresponding author:** Post graduate Student Nguyen Duc Thang

Faculty of Political Science, VNU, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi

### Abstract

*The period from after 1954 to before 1975 was a period of strong development of Protestantism in South Vietnam. With the support of international Protestant organizations and especially through American aid, Protestantism spread in South Vietnam. In the process of evangelization and building the Church, Protestantism has had certain impacts on Southern Vietnamese society in the fields of communication, social relief and building mass organizations such as the Youth Union and Protestant women's association.*

*The paper points out the impacts of Protestantism on Southern Vietnamese society through the missionary process, thereby pointing out the contributions of Protestantism to Southern society before 1975.*

**Keywords:** Protestantism, social impact, media, social relief, mass organizations, Vietnam.

### Introduction

Protestants in Vietnam are now a religious minority, constituting from 0.5 to 2% of the population. Though its numbers are small, Protestantism is the country's fastest-growing religion, growing at a rate of 600% in the 2000s (US Department of State 2017).

Right at the end of the 19th century, a group of European Protestants came to Vietnam to establish a church in Hai Phong in 1884, then other congregations were established in Hanoi and Saigon in the same year, 1902, (Le Hoang Phu 2010, p. 276) but 1911 is considered the time that marked the introduction of the Protestant faith to Vietnam when missionaries from the United

States Evangelical Association (C&MA) arrived in Tourane (now Da Nang) to established a missionary base here (Le Hoang Phu 2010, p. 97).

In 1912, a Vietnamese Protestant, Mr. Nguyen Van Phuc, was one of the Protestant booksellers and established a base in Da Nang, giving the leaders of the C&MA more motivation. Pastor A.B. Simpson directed the reinforcement of missionary forces into Vietnam. In 1914, there were 09 Missionary missionaries in Vietnam, including 01 Englishman, 02 Norwegians, 04 Canadians and 02 Americans. The number of C&MA missionaries doubled in

1921 and tripled in 1927. From the base in Da Nang, C&MA missionaries opened a number of other facilities in surrounding areas such as Hoi An, Tam Ky, Dai Loc,... and sent people to preach in Tonkin and Cochinchina. By 1915, it was recorded that there were 5 branches in the North, 6 in the Central and 5 in the South (Quang Thanh Danh 2024).

By 1954, Protestantism had formed a stable community of believers in Vietnam with Vietnamese clergy. The 1954 Geneva incident divided Vietnam's territory into halves and also divided the National Church into two independent organizations, the Vietnam Protestant Church (North) and the Vietnam Protestant Church (South). Also after 1954, the Protestant Church in the South along with organizations of other Protestant denominations had a new development step, separated from the Protestant Church of Vietnam (North). Thanks to the support of international Protestant organizations and Protestant denominations from the US, the missionary process in South Vietnam entered a boom period in twenty years, and with its influences, Protestantism in the South has impacted many areas of society, including the media, mass organizations and especially social relief organizations.

## 1. The impact of Protestantism in the field of communication

*The presence of the media in the spread of Protestantism began right from the first period of building the Church in Vietnam.* Since 1920, Protestant missionaries have built the Protestant Printing House in Hanoi to serve the printing of tracts, Protestant newspapers and especially the translation of the Bible into Vietnamese (Lê Hoàng Phu 2010, p.112). With the development and proliferation of newspapers written in the National Language in the early 20th century, Protestant newspapers such as the Eastern French Call magazine and Holy Bible Newspaper appeared and became one of the effective tools to introduce Protestantism to Vietnamese readers. The Bible translation completed by pastor Cadman and writer Phan Khoi in 1925 was also printed at Hanoi Protestant Printing House, promoting the process of evangelizing Vietnamese people more quickly now that they could access the Holy Scriptures in their own native languages.

*In 1954, when the Church was divided in halves due to historical reasons, pastors and missionaries in the South continued missionary work with the more developed level of technology in the 1950s-1960s.* The media sector, especially the printing and publishing industry of the Church, had new and revolutionary developments.

In 1955, after the Geneva Agreement, the Protestant Printing House was moved to Saigon, where the printing house operated to serve missionary work in the South, the Uplands and Laos (Lê Hoàng Phu 2010, p. 341). During the initial period of operation, the decline in the exchange rate of the US dollar caused the number of printed pages of the Protestant publishing industry to decrease to just over 5 million pages compared to 11.2 million printed pages in 1953 (Lê Hoàng Phu 2010, 341). However, thanks to the help of private organizations such as the Bible Reading Group and the Bible Donation Association, the Protestant Printing House met the great needs of the 1950s, thus Protestant books and newspapers were sent to Southern military camps, refugee camps and military hospitals of the Southern government. The development of the private printing industry in the South made the church leaders see the potential of hiring private establishments to print Protestant cultural products instead of organizing their own printing press, a

job that requires expertise and abundant financial resources. Therefore, since 1957, the printing and publishing work of the Church was assigned to private printers on the market, and the Protestant Printing House in Saigon was dissolved by the Church (Lê Hoàng Phu 2010, 342).

*The late 1950s to the mid-60s was a boom period for the printing and publishing industry in Southeast Asian countries.* Not only Vietnam but also Hong Kong, Indonesia and Thailand made great progress in the publishing industry. Grasping this general trend, the Protestant Church in the South published many books, newspapers, tracts and theological documents to serve the training of pastors and clergy. The Church's publishing capacity during this time increased dramatically. In 1957, the Church printed and published more than 14.5 million printed pages, only one year later the number increased to over 17.8 million pages (Lê Hoàng Phu 2010, p. 342). By the early 1960s, the number of Protestant books and newspapers published throughout the South reached its peak with 19.4 million pages in 1961, 23.3 million pages in 1963. In particular, according to the report of Pastor Louis L. King sent the Gospel Mission Alliance at a conference held in Vancouver, Canada in May 1966, the number of printed pages of the Church in the South reached 42.2 million pages, reaching a high score. compared to other mission fields under the Mission Society in Asia (King 2021, pp.84ff).

*The strong, one can say brilliant, development of the Protestant printing and publishing industry had a strong impact on Southern Vietnamese society* as millions of people had the opportunity to access the Gospel message through the publications of the Church and other Protestant denominations operating in the South. The tracts of the Protestant Church of Vietnam (Southern region) were distributed to those who asked about the religion and were not yet believers.

*Along with publishing books and tracts, the Church also promoted the publication of newspapers and magazines.* The three newspapers affiliated with the Church were Holy Bible Newspaper, Sacred Torch and Breaking Dawn (later renamed Dawn). The content of all three newspapers was mainly aimed at readers outside the Church in addition to believers. However, Sacred Torch newspaper was later discontinued because it could not survive the financial crisis of the 1950s. The Holy Bible Newspaper continued to exist along with the Breaking Dawn newspaper under the directorship of Pastor Ong Van Huyen, who was also the Director of the Bible School in Da Nang. In the 1960s, due to the relocation of the Bible School to Nha Trang, Holy Bible Newspaper stopped for a year due to the new job of the newspaper's editor. From April 1962, under the direction of Pastor Doan Van Mieng and Pastor Nguyen Thang Hang, Holy Bible Newspaper was published again and existed until 1975.

In September 1964, the Executive Board of the General Association of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (Southern region) held a meeting and determined the development direction of the two newspapers Breaking Dawn and Holy Bible Newspaper. The Breaking Dawn newspaper targeted non-Christian readers and the Holy Bible Newspaper aimed to "build the spiritual life" of Protestants in the South.

After this special session, under the direction of Mr. Nguyen Van Van, chairman of the Breaking Dawn newspaper, this Protestant newspaper became the most attractive newspaper in South Vietnam, with the goal of targeting young people, students and

doctors. The newspaper published the articles that exemplify the change in the lives of Protestants from many walks of life. In particular, the Breaking Dawn newspaper was sent into military barracks and posts in South Vietnam, becoming a spiritual gift to the southern soldiers.

*Besides printing and publishing activities, the Protestant radio industry also left its mark on Southern society before 1975.* According to Herbert Kane in his work *A Global View of Christian Missions from Pentecost to the Present*, “ Vietnam is the only country in Southeast Asia where the Church of Christ has virtually no restrictions on broadcasting the Gospel.” (J. H. Kane 1971, p.17)

If we only count books, newspapers and tracts, it is not enough to carry out the missionary work and we will miss the opportunity to hear the Gospel of millions of people. Grasping the situation, the Church from the beginning prepared for radio broadcasting with the help of Radio Far East in Manila. By 1954, the Vietnamese missionary program had recorded 436 sermons and 364 hymns. After the Geneva Accords, the studio moved to Gia Dinh and was assigned to pastor Nguyen Kim Ngan to manage, combined with the help of Far East Radio in Manila. However, due to Pastor Ngan's illness, it was not until 1958 that the studio returned to operation, and in 1961 the studio was moved to Nha Trang, on the campus of the Biblical Theological Seminary. Also in 1961, the year 1961 marked a new development in the work of Gospel broadcasting with the establishment of the Radio Commission, the number of radio stations in the country also increased, transmitting 5 programs weekly, plus 14 programs broadcast from the capital Manila of the Philippines (Lê Hoàng Phu 2010, 344). Until the mid-60s, the Protestant Church of Vietnam (Southern region) owned 15 radio stations and 15 information rooms, broadcasting 80 evangelistic programs each week. If we include the programs broadcast by Radio Far East in Manila, there would be an additional 51 programs per week. The Protestant radio industry until the mid-60s covered the entire southern territory, providing effective support for missionary work (Lê Hoàng Phu 2010, 346).

*In general, during the 20-year period from 1954-1975, with the development of technology and the enthusiasm of Protestant pastors and missionaries in South Vietnam, the Church's communication efforts achieved great success.* Great results in evangelization at the same time had a profound impact on the ideological, cultural and social life of the Vietnamese people. With the new, progressive and modern characteristics of a reformed religion and through the media, the Gospel message touched the hearts of people from many social classes and gave them a new perspective on life, through the salvation of Jesus Christ. Especially in war situations, many people who suffered damage or fallen into misery that changed their lives thanks to the message of salvation. Many ethnic minorities living in remote areas approached the foundation of Christian ideology through radio or missionary pamphlets that helped them abandon outdated customs and rebuild ethnic communities based on Christian values, towards a civilized and happy life.

## **2. The impact of Protestantism on mass organizations**

*Before 1954, the mass organizations affiliated with the Church had very weak influences.* For example, the Youth Union, an important branch of the Church's personnel work, was organized in 1930 but not until 10 years later, were the new youth councils organized

annually by Southern county branches<sup>1</sup>, and it was not until 1956 that specific efforts were made to formalize their activities (Lê Hoàng Phu 2010, p.295). Meanwhile, other religious organizations such as the Catholic Church and Caodaism<sup>2</sup> have developed social organizations with the purpose of uniting their followers. It was not until after the Geneva Accords that the Protestant Church of Vietnam (in the South) paid attention to building and developing mass organizations as part of their missionary efforts, and for twenty years these mass Protestant organizations left many contributions to Southern society.

*The first important mass organization reorganized by the Church after 1954 was the Youth Union.* As mentioned above, the Protestant Youth Union plays an important role in training personnel and selecting outstanding believers to become missionaries or pastors. Therefore, in 1956, to formalize the activities of this organization, the General Confederation Council appointed Pastor Pham Van Thau as the first Youth Union Leader of the Protestant Church of Vietnam (Southern region). After two years, the General Confederation instructed the Youth Unions under the local branches to prepare draft regulations and submit them to the General Confederation Council. Immediately after the move to nominate a Youth Union Leader, in 1957, the first Council of Protestant Youth Unions met in Vinh Long to elect a national Executive Board. Since the governing board was established, Protestant youth organizations have regularly operated regularly at the central level (General Federation) and local level (grassroots churches) (Lê Hoàng Phu 2010, p.295).

*In the 50s, there were no outstanding achievements of the Youth Unions, except for the establishment of the Sacred Torch, a newspaper for young people.* However, during the financial crisis of the 50s, this newspaper was forced to stop publishing. Entering the 60s, the activities of the Protestant Youth Unions initially flourished with training programs for local youth organized by the clergy. Youth training classes along with short-term Bible courses helped many young people develop their talents and become useful members for the overall development of the Church.

*The turning point in the development of the Protestant Youth Union was 1965, when the intensity of the Vietnam War increased after the US landed troops in Da Nang.* The increase in war intensity throughout the South led to a population imbalance when the majority of young men were mobilized to serve in the military. This reality led to the fact that in daily activities in local churches, participants were mainly women, and for this reason, since the mid-60s, leaders of local youth groups to the Central Youth Union, which is mainly women. This was an unexpected impact of the war and also a good trend when for the first time in a society with a strong Confucian lifestyle, women were replacing men's role in the

<sup>1</sup> In the form of administrative management of the Vietnam Protestant Church, the mission territory is divided into three areas: North County, Central County and South County.

<sup>2</sup> Caodaism is a Vietnamese monotheistic syncretic religion that retains many elements from Vietnamese folk religion such as ancestor worship,[citation needed] as well as "ethical precepts from Confucianism, occult practices from Taoism, theories of karma and rebirth from Buddhism, and a hierarchical organization from Roman Catholicism". It was officially established in the city of Tây Ninh in southern Vietnam in 1926. The full name of the religion is Đại Đạo Tam Kỳ Phổ Độ (The Great Faith [for the] Third Universal Redemption).



daily activities of the Church, and in many cases, Protestant women performed equally and even superiorly in management as well as social activities of the Protestant Youth Union.

*During the next ten years, the Protestant Youth Union's greatest contribution was in the field of music.* Within a decade, hymn compositions by Protestant musicians such as Nguyen Chau An, Vu Duc Nghiem and Luong Van Sam became popular in both mass and daily liturgical activities. Not only influential in the Protestant community, were the hymns also sung and listened to by non-Christian audiences. The appearance of sacred music was like spiritual medicine for lost souls and was an effective yet gentle channel to introduce the message of salvation.

Besides the Protestant Youth Union, the Protestant Student Union was also a mass organization that developed in the 60s in the South. Southern education since 1954 has focused on building university training institutions. In addition to Saigon, big cities such as Can Tho and Da Nang all had typical universities such as Saigon University of Literature, the National Academy of Public Administration and Can Tho University. The appearance of these universities created a new class in society, students. Realizing that students' evangelism was essential to the work of the Church, with the support of the Missionary Association, Vietnamese pastors along with Pastor Paul Contento, former missionaries in China and Malaysia, built a missionary program for students. This program both trained Christian students and brought the Gospel message to non-Christian students.

With the help of the Missionary Association and from the experience of two Christian inter-university organizations in China and Malaysia, Pastor Contento and his wife quickly succeeded in building the Protestant Student Union in Saigon. Thanks to the outstanding students from the General Union, the movement quickly spread to Hue, Da Nang, My Tho, Can Tho, Nha Trang, the cities with large university campuses in the Southern region (Lê Hoàng Phu 201, p.2970).

Along with the development of two organizations for youth and students, the Women's Union was also an important progress of the Protestant Church. In the context of war, not only in the church but also in society, did women replace the absence of men in many jobs, even playing leadership roles. That's why since the mid-60s, most churches in Southern cities have organized women's committees in the church. The Women's Committees quickly demonstrated their active role in the Church's missionary work as well as social work activities. In Tuy Hoa, Ban Do-ca organized the sewing of ao dai for the poor, and the women's group of Khanh Hoi helped distribute food to 400 disadvantaged families in the area. From 1961 to 1967, the Women's Committee in Hon Chong and Da Lat organized to raise money to support missionary work in Laos.

In general, mass movements and organizations belonging to the Protestant Church of Vietnam (Southern region) contributed positively to missionary work, at the same time, left positive social impacts. Protestant mass organizations mobilized enormous resources from different groups such as youth, students and women, making them key factors and spreading influences in society. With a progressive spirit, the Protestant Church promoted the development of equality in society, especially on gender issues in ministry. Many female church workers later became deacons in the worship house or in social work. The Protestant women also held their leadership roles in many fields, especially in business.

This demonstrated the positive role of Protestant mass organizations in Southern society before 1975.

### 3. The impact of Protestantism on social relief organizations

Protestant social relief activities are rooted in the teachings of the Bible. When Jesus preached love, He taught his disciples to love their neighbors. And when he was crucified on the cross, Jesus still asked forgiveness for those who crucified Him: "Father, please forgive them because they do not know what they do." (New Testament Bible 2017). Showing love and charity to others becomes part of the doctrine of salvation. That's why in the process of evangelizing and expanding the Church in Southern Vietnam, the Vietnamese Protestant Church (Southern region) always attaches great importance to building social relief organizations as a way to express love and spread the spiritual message about the Savior Jesus Christ.

*The Church's social relief activities before 1954 were separate, local and had not been integrated into a system.* These characteristics made humanitarian activities limited in scale and financial capacity. To solve this problem and to enhance the spirit of the Gospel, in 1957, the 25th General Assembly of the General Confederation of Evangelical Churches of Vietnam (Southern region) established the Protestant Social Relief Committee. The first job assigned to the committee was to build a Protestant hospital in Saigon. However, it was not until 1960, with the help of the Mennonite Central Committee, an international Protestant organization, that the hospital construction project was completed (Nguyễn Thanh Xuân 2019, p.397). Saigon Protestant Hospital has helped and treated many patients, especially through mobile medical examination and treatment. By 1965, the hospital had examined and treated 1,300,000 people (Nguyễn Thanh Xuân 2019, p.397). This was an outstanding achievement not only in the medical field but also in the field of social relief when sick people were helped in the spirit of love of the Savior. This was also a new channel to help spread the message of faith effectively and substantively.

At the same time as the Protestant hospital in Saigon, the Church also organized the construction of a medical clinic and a hospital for people with leprosy in the Central Highlands region. Da Lat Protestant Hospital and Nha Trang Diagnostic Hospital were both inaugurated in 1960, along with the leprosy hospital in Buon Ma Thuot built in 1951 and have become places of examination and treatment for ethnic believers and even non-Protestant patients. Most of these facilities were built on the framework of cooperation between the Mennonite Central Committee and the Vietnam General Confederation of Evangelical Churches (Southern region). This is an international cooperative effort to help improve the lives of the people of the South, especially in difficult and remote areas, and is also part of the General Federation's efforts to evangelize and bring faith to people who do not know God.

*In general, the social relief activities that the Church carried out in the period before 1975 in the South were mainly building hospitals, an essential need for the people, especially in war situations.* This activity demonstrated the practicality as well as the social nature of Protestantism, always reached out to people who do not know God, to spread the Gospel message and love that Jesus preached to His disciples. Also through these activities, Southern people better understood the message and faith of Protestants, promoting the social influence of Protestantism in Southern Vietnam.

## Author's comments and Conclusion

During the twenty years from 1954 to 1975, Protestantism in South Vietnam promoted its social influences through missionary and social activities. Although it was a new religion introduced to Vietnam since the early 20th century, with its contribution, Protestantism has left great social impacts in Southern Vietnam while also demonstrated the characteristics of a reformed religion. Unlike its Catholic cousins, who focus on a closed monastic life and the rules along with a massive theology and rituals, Protestantism is highly social, always reaching out into society, meeting with many different classes in every place where Protestantism was spread.

Not bound by canon laws and strict organizational forms, Protestantism is open and easy to harmonize with daily life, especially in rural areas, the immigrant and minority communities. It is this characteristic that makes the social role of Protestantism stand out, while also upholding the humanistic values of Christianity. As Fukuzawa Yukichi once commented in his work *On Civilization*, Protestantism did not oppose the fundamental values of Christianity but only stood up to challenge the power of the Roman Church, because of its fundamental nature. Protestantism is a manifestation of the spirit of freedom, a sign of progressive civilization” (Fukuzawa Yukichi 2022, p.293). It is this characteristic of Protestantism that has highlighted Christian values in missionary activities and church building while actively contributing to the society of South Vietnam before 1975 in the midst of war and conflict, not only expressing love for fellow countrymen but also expressing human values and spreading the benevolent face of Jesus Christ to those who do not know God.

The development and social influences of Protestantism in South Vietnam before 1975 was a positive phenomenon and demonstrated the social values of the religion in life, which was also the spirit of the Gospels. That is also the spirit of the Gospels and the entire Bible, which is to worship God and love others because in the grace of Jesus Christ, we are all brothers./.

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