

SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY
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INSTITUTE ON ASIA

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Dr. Wesley R. Fishel
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Dear Dr. Fishel:

I don't see how it is possible to be anything but non-scientific on the question of Buddhist population in Viet-Nam. Even Jerry Hickey gives no hard data on population-by-religion for Khanh Hau. All he says is: "Most villagers who are not Catholic or Cao Daist consider themselves Buddhists, and in most village houses there is, in addition to the ubiquitous altar of the ancestors, a shrine honoring a Buddhist deity."

That would be pretty much the non-scientific attitude I adopt toward the entire country: anyone who doesn't formally profess some religion other than Buddhism would consider himself a Buddhist. On the other hand, Cadière says that there are no Buddhists in Viet-Nam, except for the bonzes! Technically, this is probably correct, but it is not very helpful for the kind of problem that challenges us.

But I think the vast difference between these two positions does point up the nub of the problem. Everything depends on what one considers a 'Buddhist' to be. I would readily agree that the number associated with the GBA is no greater than they themselves claim, but if we are going to recognize only these as Buddhists, then it might be reasonable to agree with Cadière and say that there were no Buddhists in Viet-Nam before 1951, when the first Buddhist Studies Association came into existence.

The figure given in the Army Handbook for Viet-Nam is absurdly large. It claims 20,000,000 Buddhists in 1954, which with the 3 million Cao Dai and Hoa Hao it reports, the 2 million Catholics, about 2 million montagnards, and about 1 million Chinese, runs to about 2 million more than the most generous estimates of total population at that time.

I suppose, in the last analysis, my major point concerning your figures is that it is necessary for you to as-

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sert that some 33 to 35% of the Vietnamese people have no religious faith at all -- which is clearly not true. You could avoid this by claiming that this group practises an unorganized cult of ancestors, a peculiarly Vietnamese development of Confucianism, with strong indigenous elements. (Hickey describes this amalgam well, pp. 55-57 and 75-79; but it is Hickey also who says that in his village all who are not Cao Dai or Catholic consider themselves Buddhist.)

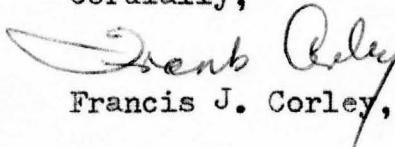
So, in fine, it all turns on what is meant by "Buddhist." Even Tran-van Chuong, who is no more a Buddhist than I am, professed his "Buddhism" when the chips were down in 1963!

The Institute was a challenging and rewarding experience, and I am grateful to you for the able contribution you made to its success.

I understand that we shall both be speaking at Wartburg College this fall, but, I presume, on different occasions.

A background article on the 1956 constitution will be published some time early next year. I shall send a copy of it.

Cordially,


Francis J. Corley, S.J.

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