



Protestantism and Nation-Building: A Case Study of Vietnam

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ABSTRACT. This study explores Protestantism's influence in Vietnam through a textual analysis, observations, interviews, and reference materials. Initially incompatible with traditional beliefs, Protestantism faced many challenges but gradually met people's spiritual needs and secured a place in Vietnam's religious landscape. Today, it fosters social cohesion and transformation, especially among urban youth and marginalized groups. Protestantism's focus on personal faith and empowerment aligns with socioeconomic changes. As Vietnam modernizes and globalizes, Protestantism shapes values tied to justice, equality, and rights. Despite Vietnam's religious pluralism, it contributes to evolving dialogues on faith, identity, and development in a rapidly changing society. This article explores the socioeconomic, cultural and ethical contribution of Protestantism to Vietnamese society from 2005 to the present day.

KEYWORDS: Protestant role; reformed religion; Vietnam Protestants; Vietnamese culture; Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

Protestantism entered Vietnam in 1911 and gradually developed, particularly in the south, before 1975. During Doi Moi (renovation) (from 1986 onward), Protestantism saw significant growth among ethnic minority populations in the Central Highlands and the Northern mountainous regions. By 2021, there

were about 1.2 million Protestants, 4.5% of all believers nationwide and 1% of the Vietnamese population. These followers are distributed throughout the country, with 76% of ethnic minority groups belonging to various denominations (Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs 2023). Although Protestantism has fewer followers than Buddhism or Catholicism, it has broadly influenced ethnic minorities across Vietnam as well as its foreign relations with other nations.

Protestantism contributed to education, healthcare, and humanitarianism in Southern Vietnam and the Central Highlands from 1954 to 1975, but these activities declined in the decades that followed. Over the last two decades, Protestants' charitable and humanitarian activities have been restored and expanded. Studies have mainly assessed the development of Protestantism and its causes, with a few examining the role or positive influence of Protestantism; objectively, few studies have examined the role of Protestantism in Vietnam. What, then, is the role of Protestantism in Vietnam today? This study explores Protestantism's role in Vietnam's socioeconomic development, charity, humanitarianism, social welfare, culture, and ethics from 2005, when the prime minister introduced the Directive on Some Tasks Regarding Protestantism to create favorable conditions for Protestant growth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACT OF PROTESTANTISM IN VIETNAM

Examining Protestants' ethical views and behavioral motivations, Weber (2011) hypothesized that Protestant ethics' "selective compatibility" with capitalism facilitated capitalism's development in Europe. In the Vietnamese context, Thang (2009) argued that through their conversion to Protestantism, the Hmong minority formed stronger relationships and a wider system of mutual assistance than had been the case under their traditional beliefs. Tâm (2015) also examined Protestantism's influence on the Hmong people and concluded:

[...] becoming a Christian seems more attractive for women than men, as it can be a path to empowerment; women play a leading role in many conversion cases [...] As a Christian, a Hmong woman could enjoy a Sunday free from labor. She would also not have to spend money to host all kinds of ceremonies, which often involve a lot of cooking and cleaning. If her husband is a Christian, in theory, he would give up drinking alcohol. The Lord also prohibits men from beating women and from having two wives, so some Hmong women contemplate conversion as a form of protection against domestic violence and having to share their husbands with other women. (283–284)

Grim and Grim (2016) provided conservative, mid-range, and high-end estimates of the economic value of religion in American society. Their conservative estimate of the annual revenues generated by faith-based organizations was \$378 billion. Their mid-range estimate of religion's value for American society was over \$1 trillion annually, comprising healthcare networks (\$161.0 billion), congregations (\$326.5 billion), education (\$138.1 billion), charities (\$95.2 billion), and businesses (\$438.4 billion). Their higher-end estimate, based on the annual household incomes of religiously affiliated Americans, was \$4.8 trillion, or nearly one-third of the United States' gross domestic product (GDP). Their mid-range estimate, in particular, has attracted scholarly attention.

Hung (2017) analyzed the social responsibilities of Protestant institutions in Vietnam, including those of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North), the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South), Vietnam Christian Mission, Presbyterian Church of Vietnam, Baptist Convention of Vietnam (BCV), and Christian Fellowship Church of Vietnam. Hung (2017) noted that under the ECVS' policy, every Protestant believer is responsible for building their society, participating in local social work, maintaining solidarity, promoting social welfare, and praying for peace for everyone.

Xuan (2019) studied Protestantism in Southern Vietnam and concluded that Protestantism significantly contributed to healthcare and education. By 1975, for instance, ECVS operated five hospitals and dispensaries, mainly supported by the Mennonite Central Committee. It also operated 142 primary, secondary, and high schools, attracting about 50,000 students annually. These figures do not include the orphanages established with the support of World Vision, an ecumenical Christian humanitarian organization. An (2019) also noted the role of Protestantism and Protestant-related nongovernmental organizations in Vietnam in relief work, social welfare, vocational training, and addiction-recovery support. For instance, Compassion and Mercy Associates Services, a Christian and Missionary Alliance charitable branch, implemented projects, such as the "smile surgery" initiative, clean water programs, and credit schemes, in local areas. Focusing on the Aquila Center in Hanoi, Anh (2020) highlighted the positive results of the drug-rehabilitation activities conducted by Protestant institutions. Meanwhile, Ha (2020) discussed Protestantism's impact on sustainable development in Vietnam, noting, for instance, its contribution to eliminating costly, outdated customs that hinder development. Specifically, the Evangelical Church of Hanoi encourages believers to clean their living environments, segregate daily household waste, adhere to traffic laws, and plant trees.

THE CULTURAL IMPACT OF PROTESTANTISM IN VIETNAM

Thang (2009), Tâm (2015), and Duc (2024) examined Protestantism's influence on the Hmong people. For instance, Protestantism has encouraged Hmong believers to work hard and spend less money; it has also encouraged believers to distance themselves from outdated customs and improved the status of Hmong women. Phong (2014) analyzed Protestantism's influence on the political thought, ethics, lifestyle, culture, and traditional beliefs of ethnic minority communities in the Central Highlands. By converting to Protestantism, some of these communities could quickly adapt to social changes, abandon old customs, and adopt progressive norms. Phong and Binh (2015) noted Protestantism's contributions to the literature, music, sports, healthcare, education, society, economy, and national sovereignty of Vietnam, helping to promote its image worldwide and maintain public security.

THE ETHICAL IMPACT OF PROTESTANTISM IN VIETNAM

Focusing on ethics, social responsibility, charity, humanitarian work, education, and healthcare, Huong (2020) noted the significant charitable and humanitarian achievements of Protestant institutions in Vietnam. In recent years, for example, Protestant organizations have been involved in programs such as the Agent Orange Victim Fund, giving Tet gifts, building houses for poor people, supporting those affected by natural disasters, drilling wells in areas with water shortages, and building bridges in the Mekong Delta.

The abovementioned studies examined Protestantism's effects on specific aspects of Vietnamese social life, mainly focusing on its spiritual role. However, no up-to-date research has systematically and comprehensively analyzed the role of Protestantism in Vietnam.

METHODS

This study employs textual analysis, participant observation, seminars, telephone interviews, and field trips. It also analyzes reference materials, such as publications, official reports, reports from Protestant institutions, conference proceedings, and doctoral dissertations. For observation, the author attended Protestant services on Sundays in urban, rural, and mountainous regions and also made several visits to Protestant communities. On November 11, 2022, the author visited Sin Suoi Ho village, Phong Tho District, Lai Chau Province¹, to explore Protestantism's role in the village's development. Hang A Xa, a Sin Suoi Ho Protestant Group pastor, provided information and guided the author to explore the village's recent modernization and development processes. The pastor noted Protestantism's contribution to the village's sustainable development.

On December 10, 2023, the author attended a Sunday morning Protestant service at Gia Dinh Church, Phu Nhuan District, Ho Chi Minh City². About 30 people attended the service. Pastor Lam Huu Phuc delivered the sermon from a private room, and attendees participated via four TV screens. The service included hymns, a Bible sermon, and a common prayer. After the service, the author spoke to the pastor, who mentioned that believers regularly attended services. Their living conditions were average, with only a few facing difficulties. The prayer session lasted about 40 minutes.

Lastly, from April 14 to 17, 2024, the author and his colleagues conducted a religious study in Cao Bang Province³, during which they attended a roundtable with provincial officials and religious leaders. The roundtable acknowledged that Protestantism helped fulfil the spiritual needs of some ethnic minorities, helping them abandon superstitious customs. Protestant communities actively support each other, and many villages have become more “civilized” owing to conversion to Protestantism.

RESULTS

PROTESTANTISM'S ROLE IN THE SOCIOECONOMIC SECTOR

Protestant ethical thought contributes to economic growth. Protestantism encourages the belief that believers' success brings glory to God and motivates them to pursue economic activities. Weber (1864–1920) posited that Calvinist Protestant ethics fostered the spirit of capitalism in Europe, noting that “Calvinism exercised an apparent effect also in Germany, in the Wuppertal region as well as elsewhere, and the ‘reformed’ faiths seem to have promoted the development of the capitalist spirit, as became especially clear in comparison to other faiths” (Weber 2011, 74).

Protestantism is a reformed religion characterized by simplicity in its organization and rituals. Protestants are advised not to waste time or money and to work diligently. Weber (2011, 160) states:

According to the will of God, which has been revealed, only activity, not idleness and enjoyment, increases His glory. Hence, wasting time constitutes the first and, in principle, the most serious of all the sins. A single life offers an infinitely short and precious time to ‘make firm’ one’s election. The loss of time through sociability, ‘idle talk,’ sumptuousness, and even more sleep than is necessary for good health (six to eight hours at most) is morally reprehensible.

Protestantism regards labor as a daily responsibility and duty before God, promoting frugality and discouraging indulgence in alcohol and other vices. For Protestants, laziness, an unwillingness to earn more money, extreme

poverty, and vagrancy are considered “sins” and a failure to follow God’s commandments (Mchedlov and Filimonov 1997). Weber’s conception of how Protestantism influences economic activity can be summarized as follows: Protestantism induces guilt in individuals; God favors diligence and despises laziness, all work is sacred, and miracles do not exist (Ha 2020). The Protestant clergy shares knowledge and guides believers in conducting business. Consequently, most of those who convert to Protestantism become more industrious and frugal, work more efficiently, and spend money more judiciously, thus contributing more to their communities.⁴

Protestant-owned businesses often contribute to communities’ socioeconomic growth. Based on the idea that production, business, and services are “Beruf”—or divine duties entrusted by God—these businesses focus on enhancing product quality, maintaining customer trust, and elevating their brand reputation. Protestants view business activity as a means of seeking profit, serving community interests, and glorifying God; thus, they avoid unethical business practices. Additionally, Protestantism in ethnic minority areas has helped form stable communities centered on religious activity and secure, prosperous livelihoods. Such stability has improved their economic status while reducing practices such as migration and slash-and-burn agriculture (Quang 2010).

In Lam Dong Province, most Protestant ethnic minorities have achieved greater economic stability than non-Protestant ethnic minorities. In certain areas, the proportion of households experiencing hunger and poverty among Protestant ethnic minorities is lower than that of non-Protestant households. Protestant ethnic minorities are more adept at economic activity and better at organizing family life (Ha 2018). Moreover, in the Central Highlands, Protestantism has helped develop social capital, with religious-based social relationships and networks as the most significant components. Believers can obtain social, economic, and business knowledge through these networks and enhanced trust. Protestants engage in weekly group activities and maintain close-knit relationships. Mutual care and assistance among believers extend beyond religious activities into all areas of social life, such as visiting each other during illness, sharing family difficulties, and raising children. Such interconnectedness enhances the economic development of the Protestant community and society in general (Ngoc 2014).

Protestant organizations provide capital assistance to help families purchase tools, seeds, and fertilizers for farming. According to Pastor Kim (2011), Protestantism positively affects believers’ lives in the Central Highlands in the following aspects. First, they no longer depend on superstitious rites. Second, they have abandoned indulgence in alcohol and smoking. Third, they quickly

adapt to social change and help each other improve their lives. Fourth, they tend to be peaceful, courageous, and life-affirming.

The transformation of the Hmong village Sin Suoi Ho in Lai Chau Province illustrates Protestantism's role in socioeconomic life. Previously, residents of Sin Suoi Ho had engaged in opium cultivation; many had an addiction and experienced poverty and illness. Since the 1990s, however, when the village converted to Protestantism, its residents have undergone significant changes. The village has more than 140 households, 95% of which are now Protestant under the ECVN. Nguon Song Radio, which broadcasts in the Hmong language, started promoting Protestantism in the early 1990s. Subsequently, the pastor of the Sin Suoi Ho Protestant Group and his colleagues initiated drug rehabilitation programs for villagers, alongside religious activities. Organizing rehabilitation faced numerous challenges, requiring determination from the pastor, organizers, and villagers; it took about 10 years to implement. Rehabilitation methods included studying the Bible, providing care and support, and offering massages to people with an addiction. Consequently, more than 100 individuals were successfully rehabilitated without relapse.

The pastor and his colleagues began implementing an economic development plan for the village. The work commenced with road construction, completed with the assistance of local authorities, who provided cement. The village's road system now consists of concrete roads, facilitating convenient transportation. Next, the village established a market for goods and daily necessities. Initially based on a system of trade or exchange, the market, which convened on Saturdays, expanded into a venue for the buying and selling of goods as well as socializing between villagers and tourists. The market includes local products such as potatoes, farming tools, clothing, backpacks, and souvenirs. Additionally, local residents changed their production habits and learned to cultivate cymbidium orchids and peach trees to increase income (Nguyen 2020).

Village tourism developed through the construction of lodgings, with inns now accommodating more than 300 tourists. Moreover, human resource training has been implemented to support tourism, with villagers being trained in international cuisine and English-language proficiency areas. In 2015, provincial authorities recognized Sin Suoi Ho as a community tourism site. Its tourism services include lodging, meals, and refreshment shops. Moreover, a cooperative society and two companies operating in agriculture and tourism were established. The village provides signposts and guided tours in both Vietnamese and English. Tourism is professionally organized with trained local guides, and the village receives tourists from the US, France, the UK, Australia, and elsewhere.

Protestantism, with its “religious treatment for addiction” model, supports rehabilitation for addiction to drugs, gaming, alcohol, and gambling without the use of medication. This is achieved through religious methods (reading the Bible, praying), physical therapy (massage, exercise), and social connection. These methods have been proven effective and have gained social attention. In many facilities, rehabilitation is conducted in six steps: intake, classification, detoxification, behavioral and character education, recovery, and reintegration into the community. In 2020, Protestant institutions operated 79 rehabilitation centers and successfully rehabilitated 1,900 individuals (Huong 2020). Notably, the Vietnam Full Gospel Church has been organizing rehabilitation facilities for over 20 years, assisting more than 25,000 individuals. By 2022, the Church had 40 rehabilitation centers nationwide.⁵ The United Gospel Outreach Church (UGOC) has actively participated in drug rehabilitation efforts since 2009, helping thousands of individuals overcome addiction.

Currently, 35 rehabilitation centers operated by UGOC assist about 500 individuals in addiction recovery.⁶ The Assemblies of God of Vietnam (AGV) recently established a free rehabilitation center for 30 individuals in the Cu Chi district, Ho Chi Minh City. Since 2018, ECVS has been running the “House of Love” in the Vinh Thanh commune, Nhon Trach District, Dong Nai Province, where 20 individuals are typically undergoing rehabilitation. These individuals receive free accommodations, electricity, and water. Rehabilitation usually lasts two years, after which individuals return to their families. The effectiveness of these rehabilitation efforts, characterized by a high success rate and low relapse rate, is attributed to the love, care, and faith that the staff shows to the participants, and the guidance and teaching they receive based on biblical principles. These factors form the foundation for transformation, helping participants believe they can change and start over (Anh 2020). Participants’ confidence in their recovery is further strengthened through interactions with former addicts and witnessing their transformed lives; they include pastors and staff members at rehabilitation centers, who previously struggled with addiction but overcame it after embracing Protestantism. This has inspired many individuals to successfully recover from addiction.

Protestant organizations and denominations actively participated in COVID-19 prevention and control efforts, contributing human and material resources. Their activities included contributing to vaccine funds; donating medical equipment, medicine, and oxygen; providing financial support, food, and free meals for virus-infected individuals, those in difficult circumstances, and frontline workers; and serving as volunteers directly involved in pandemic response efforts. The specific monetary contributions of some Protestant organizations to COVID-19 prevention and control are as follows:

- As of 2020: ECVN: 850 million VND⁷
- As of August 2021: Vietnam Full Gospel Church: 860 million VND⁸
- As of September 2021: ECVS in Ho Chi Minh City and Binh Phuoc Province: 12 billion Vietnamese dong (VND) (Vietcombank 2024) (ECVS 2021); AGV in Ho Chi Minh City: 500 million VND⁹
- As of December 2021: UGOC: 11.7 billion VND (Ho Chi Minh Committee of the Vietnam Fatherland Front 2021)

Protestantism fosters social cohesion, which is reflected in unity and solidarity within the community of believers stemming from their shared faith and joint participation in religious rituals. Protestants share a common belief in a singular God who offers salvation and blessings. They usually attend church services together and gather to glorify God. This creates a sense of unity and connection among believers and fosters mutual love and support in their daily lives. In relation to society, the cohesive role of Protestantism is reflected in acts of sharing and solidarity with other social groups to fulfill common national duties. These include charity and humanitarian work, environmental protection and climate change responses, disease prevention and control, public security maintenance, political system building, and patriotic movement participation.

PROTESTANTISM'S ROLE IN CHARITY, HUMANITARIAN WORK, AND SOCIAL WELFARE

With the teaching “honoring God, loving people,” Protestants encourage believers to do good deeds and contribute to society. Protestant doctrines emphasize continuous charitable and humanitarian activities to help others, especially during times of natural disasters and crop failures, as reflected in the Bible: “He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise” [Luke 3:11].

ECVN has affirmed its commitment to engaging in charitable, humanitarian, and social support activities under the law. Protestant organizations have launched various charitable and humanitarian initiatives, such as offering scholarships to underprivileged students and orphans and distributing wheelchairs and assistive devices to individuals with disabilities. Additionally, they have implemented medicine cabinets; supplied medical equipment; organized free medical checkups and treatments for people experiencing poverty; donated blood; established job counseling centers, addiction rehabilitation facilities, and educational support funds; and provided loans for business production.

Protestant organizations contribute about 24 billion VND annually to charitable, humanitarian, and social welfare activities. Between 2013 and 2017, Protestant institutions donated 56.66 billion VND, 540 wheelchairs, 20

bridges, and 180 wells to support local communities (Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs 2021).

From 2008 to 2014, ECVS conducted charitable and humanitarian activities valued at 47 billion VND (Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs 2015). In 2017 alone, contributions amounted to 12,821,405,354 VND (HTTTLVN.ORG 2018). In Binh Phuoc Province, ECVS contributed over 5.7 billion VND to charitable and humanitarian activities between 2015 and 2020 (ECVS Binh Phuoc Representative Board 2021). Similarly, during 2018–2022, ECVN performed charitable and humanitarian work valued at over 8 billion VND (ECVN 2023). During 2017–2018, UGOC contributed 3,218,000,000 VND to community welfare activities (UGOC 2018). During 2018–2022, the BCV in Can Tho City conducted charitable and humanitarian activities valued at over 12.2 billion VND (Can Tho Representative Board 2022). Further, Protestant organizations (including ECVS) in Binh Phuoc Province contributed over 2.4 billion VND to charitable activities during 2020–2021 (ECVS Binh Phuoc Representative Board 2021).

Some Protestant institutions in Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province contributed 5,720,030,000 VND to charitable and humanitarian activities over five years (2016–2020) and 1,883,500,000 VND in 2021 (Ba Ria-Vung Tau Committee of Vietnam Fatherland Front 2020, 2021). Notably, ECVS supported nine projects, and Protestant churches in Quang Tri Province started implementing them in May 2015. These projects included the provision of clean water, free medical examinations, medical cabinets, wheelchairs, tricycles or bicycles, adult literacy classes, microloans, housing support, and Christmas gifts. The total value of these projects amounted to nearly 3 billion VND (ECVS 2016).

Protestants' charitable and humanitarian activities in ethnic minority areas have been conducted in various ways, such as providing financial aid, clothing, blankets, and other necessities. According to a survey conducted by Ha (2018), 71% of respondents reported helping people experiencing poverty by donating money, 24.5% by donating goods, and 37.3% by offering visits and emotional support.

ECVS and ECVN implemented a communal clinics program, organizing mobile medical examinations and free medication distribution for individuals in various localities. Additionally, community health counseling activities include providing guidance on proper nutrition, preventing malnutrition, providing prenatal care, and avoiding consanguineous marriage. The participants included Protestant doctors, nurses, healthcare workers, and non-Protestants. Funding was mobilized through contributions from ECVS and Protestant institutions in collaboration with the Vietnam Red Cross

Society in different localities and other domestic and international organizations and individuals.

Protestantism serves as a bridge, fostering the involvement of Protestant-related nongovernmental organizations, such as World Vision, Samaritan's Purse (SP), and the Allianz Mission, as well as the international Protestant community, including South Korea, in charitable and humanitarian activities in Vietnam, such as building schools and hospitals. Between 2006 and 2015, SP conducted the Christmas Gift Box Program and provided gifts to 698,126 children in 37 provinces and cities. These organizations regularly support vocational training centers; care for the elderly, children, and people with disabilities; assist disadvantaged households and underprivileged students; and maintain a green, clean, and beautiful environment (Phong and Binh 2015).

PROTESTANTISM'S ROLE IN CULTURE, ETHICS, AND LIFESTYLE

PROTESTANTISM'S ROLE IN CULTURE

Protestantism embodies the spirit of charity, freedom, and democracy and fosters social development through an attitude that values labor. It teaches believers to strive for success; be diligent, frugal, and serious in life and work; and maintain a spirit of volunteerism in serving the community. In addition, it promotes the harmonious resolution of conflicts.

Engels stated, "Calvin's Reformation became the banner for republicans in Geneva, the Netherlands, and Scotland, liberating the Netherlands from Spanish and German imperial domination and providing an ideological framework for the second act of the English bourgeois revolution" (Marx and Engels 1995, 448). Weber (2011, 100), meanwhile, observed the following:

The single means of living in a manner pleasing to God changes accordingly: an ascetic withdrawal from the world, as practiced by monks, and the clear **surpassing** of the world's routine morality of daily life that such asceticism implied, is now replaced by this-worldly morality. This morality involves fulfilling duties derived from each person's [social and occupational] positions. The "calling" for each person is defined through these positions.

Protestantism fulfills the spiritual needs of a population segment, including communities of ethnic minorities. Most Protestants believe their faith provides spiritual value such as personal transformation, care and support, peace, and joy. Ethnic minority believers often seek advice from the Protestant clergy when facing difficulties.

Table 1. Protestantism’s benefits for believers.

Benefits of Protestantism	Number of People	%
Providing spiritual support for believers	162	82.2
Teaching people to live in harmony and mutual love	180	91.4

Source: Ha (2018, 137).

Protestantism emphasizes education in various forms for people of all ages. Protestant education also focuses on societal challenges such as education on gender issues, cohabitation, and contraception. Believers are taught the appropriate ways of speaking and behaving. Protestant organizations contribute to community education through seminars on parenting and child education, discussions with teenagers, marriage and family, prenatal care, addressing school violence, perspectives on money, career guidance, and inspiration.¹⁰

Among ethnic minorities, there are noticeable differences between Protestants and non-Protestants in terms of educational attainment. Children from Protestant families generally have higher levels of education. These families ensure their children complete their general education and often encourage them to pursue vocational training. Through meetings, Protestants raise awareness of vocational training and job opportunities to improve living standards and promote sustainable development. Popular vocational fields include driving, cooking, and tourism. By contrast, children from non-Protestant families tend to have lower educational attainment, typically completing only primary or lower secondary education, with fewer children finishing high school. This disparity is attributable to non-Protestant families lacking clear career guidance for their children.

Protestant media channels, such as those operated by ECVS, ECVN, Vietnam Christian Mission, BCV, and the United Methodist Church of Vietnam, have developed programs tailored to youth, encouraging them to stay away from “social evils.” Hundreds of websites and media channels managed by Protestant organizations attract large domestic and international audiences.

Aside from preaching the Bible, pastors and missionaries provide social knowledge and raise awareness among believers. After converting to Protestantism, some ethnic minorities have become more dynamic, more easily adapting to social advancements and abandoning outdated customs that previously hindered their lives (Ha 2018). Thang (2009) argued that Protestantism emphasizes progress, helping the Hmong people abandon backward practices in favor of more advanced ones. The shift of some Hmong people from traditional beliefs and religions to Protestantism has positively

affected their socioeconomic development. Evidence for this includes the fact that Hmong Protestants have discarded outdated practices, encourage their children to attend school, use herbal and modern medicine for treatment, implement family planning, and abandon vices such as fighting, drug addiction, alcohol abuse, and theft (Thang 2009).

Recently, several Protestant communities have encouraged ethnic minorities to preserve their cultural identities, organize cultural life by promoting the cultural values of their ethnic groups, and motivate believers to wear traditional attire for religious services and prayers. They also support the revival of traditional festivals, such as rites of water source worship, gong festivals, and traditional folk songs and dances (Nam 2012).

PROTESTANTISM'S ROLE IN ETHICS AND LIFESTYLE

Protestant values, such as love, honesty, filial piety, tolerance, benevolence, and respect for life, significantly shape believers' ethical behavior, encouraging responsibility toward themselves, families, and communities. As the Bible advises, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" [Matthew 22:39] and "Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another" [I John 4:11]. Love is expressed in thoughts, words, and actions, such as feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, assisting the uneducated, advising those who have gone astray, and caring for the vulnerable and those struggling with addiction. The role of shaping ethical behavior is reflected in biblical doctrines and laws:

Honour thy father and thy mother. Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbour's. [Exodus 20:12–17]

Believers are also advised to abstain from alcohol consumption and smoking. Protestant doctrines encourage sharing, living with others, tolerance, and generosity while avoiding gambling and other vices. They teach ethical living in family, community, and societal relationships, such as advising believers to heed their parents' guidance and make them happy, thus positively contributing to preserving filial piety and regulating family members' behavior (Ha 2018).

Protestant followers demonstrate filial piety by maintaining good relationships with their parents in their lifetime. Simultaneously, parents express concern for their children and foster love within their families (Phong and Binh 2015). Protestant doctrines teach believers to love their families, communities, and homelands.

Through its ethical norms and strict rewards and punishments, Protestantism help transform adherents' lifestyle. Among the Protestant Hmong people in the Northern mountainous region have adopted a more civilized and healthier lifestyle, abandoning outdated customs, refraining from smoking, and reducing or eliminating alcohol consumption. Weddings and funerals have become simpler and more aligned with individuals' economic conditions, alleviating the burden of outdated traditions and customs (Duc 2017). Furthermore, Protestantism promotes a positive lifestyle by cultivating individuals with good moral character, harmonious families, and resilient communities against social ills.

DISCUSSION

The modest socioeconomic contributions of Protestantism, compared with those of other religions in Vietnam, can be attributed to the following. First, the number of Protestants is smaller than other religious groups, such as Buddhism or Catholicism. Second, the majority of Protestants are ethnic minorities, living under difficult circumstances, while there is a segment of Protestant followers that is not interested in contributing to society. Third, Vietnam's policies and laws still lack provisions for promoting the contribution of religion to society. Furthermore, several local officials still have an biased view of the potential contribution of Protestantism, so they have not encouraged Protestant participation in social activities. Therefore, raising the awareness of religious organizations regarding socially oriented activities and amending the law on religion will promote the socioeconomic contributions of Protestantism in Vietnam.

CONCLUSION

Protestantism plays a significant role in various domains in Vietnam. It provides its adherents with faith in goodness, promotes freedom and democracy, and encourages adherents to strive for success and contribute to socioeconomic development. This helps eliminate outdated customs and overly elaborate rituals. Protestant doctrines and laws teach adherents to live a life of love, sharing, responsibility, simplicity, diligence, and seriousness.

The Protestant community actively participates in social welfare activities, such as helping the poor, individuals with disabilities, children in difficult circumstances, and ethnic minorities. It provides relief during natural disasters and offers free medical checkups and treatment for the public. Additionally, Protestant organizations educate their believers about respecting the leadership and management of the Party and State and strictly adhering to the law.

This study has highlighted the significance of Protestant contributions to national development in Vietnam. However, such contributions remain modest. Addressing this requires greater effort from Protestant organizations and denominations to contribute to society and influence the policies of the Vietnamese government about this issue.

A limitation of this study is the lack of an overall survey of the contributions of Protestantism to Vietnamese society; this is attributable to challenges in funding and available contributors. Additionally, this study mainly focuses on the role of recognized Protestant organizations and denominations. Therefore, future studies should provide a more comprehensive examination of the role of Protestantism, including that of unrecognized Protestant groups in Vietnam.

ABBREVIATIONS

AGV: Assemblies of God of Vietnam

BCV: Baptist Convention of Vietnam

CAMA: Compassion and Mercy Associates

ECVN: Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North)

ECVS: Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South)

UGOC: United Gospel Outreach Church

VND: Vietnamese dong

NOTES

¹ Lai Chau is a mountainous province of Northern Vietnam.

² Ho Chi Minh City, in Southern Vietnam, is the country's largest economic center.

³ Cao Bang is a mountainous province of Northern Vietnam.

⁴ Alexandre Yersin (1863–1943) was a Protestant who contributed to global and Vietnamese medicine by discovering the cause of the plague. He also played a role in founding Hanoi Medical University. He lived in Vietnam for 50 years and left behind 55 valuable research works in medicine, geography, meteorology, astronomy, and agriculture.

⁵ Information from Vietnam Full Gospel Church, November 2022, obtained via telephone interview.

⁶ Information from UGOC, November 2022, obtained via telephone interview.

⁷ Information from ECVN, April 2021, by telephone interview.

⁸ Information from the Central Committee of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, November 2021.

⁹ Information from AGV, November 2022, by telephone interview.

¹⁰ Historically, Protestants in Vietnam have emphasized education. In 1975, ECVS operated 142 primary and secondary schools with 800 classes, annually attracting about 50,000 students, along with running orphanages (Xuan 2019, 398).

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