

THE CURRENT SITUATION, CHARACTERISTICS, AND EMERGING ISSUES OF RELIGION IN VIETNAM'S LAND BORDER AREAS AND SOME POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS¹

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Abstract: *This article analyzes the current situation, characteristics, and emerging issues of religious life in Vietnam's land border areas. The analysis is based on statistical data and field surveys conducted in several border provinces, with representative case studies from Điện Biên, Gia Lai, and An Giang. The findings indicate that religious life in these regions has undergone notable transformations in the context of economic reforms, international integration, and the increasing expansion of inter- and trans-border relations. Major religions such as Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hòa Hảo Buddhism, and Caodaism, together with several religions associated with ethnic minority communities - such as Khmer Theravada Buddhism and Islam - form a diverse yet unevenly distributed religious landscape across different regions. The article also devotes significant attention to identifying emerging challenges and pressing issues in contemporary religious life, particularly those related to religious security, the exploitation of religion for political purposes, and certain limitations in the implementation of religious policies and laws. On this basis, the author proposes several policy recommendations to strengthen capacity to ensure religious security and to reinforce political and security stability in border areas, thereby contributing to social stability and the sustainable development of Vietnam's border regions.*

Keywords: Land border areas, religious security, exploitation of religions.

Tóm tắt: *Bài viết này phân tích thực trạng, đặc điểm và những vấn đề đặt ra của đời sống tôn giáo ở khu vực biên giới đất liền Việt Nam. Phân tích được thực hiện dựa trên số liệu thống kê của chính phủ và các cuộc khảo sát thực địa tại một số tỉnh biên giới của tác giả, với các nghiên cứu trường hợp tiêu biểu ở Điện Biên, Gia Lai và An Giang. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy đời sống tôn giáo ở các khu vực này đã có nhiều biến đổi đáng chú ý trong bối cảnh đổi mới kinh tế, hội nhập quốc tế và sự gia tăng mở rộng các quan hệ liên biên giới và xuyên biên giới. Các tôn giáo lớn như Phật giáo, Công giáo, Tin Lành, Phật giáo Hòa Hảo và Cao Đài, cùng với một số tôn giáo gắn với cộng đồng dân tộc thiểu số - như Phật giáo Nam tông Khmer và Islam giáo - đã tạo nên một bức tranh tôn giáo đa dạng nhưng phân bố không đồng đều giữa các vùng miền khác nhau. Bài viết cũng dành sự quan tâm đáng kể đến việc nhận diện*

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những thách thức và vấn đề cấp thiết đang nổi lên trong đời sống tôn giáo đương đại, đặc biệt là các vấn đề liên quan đến an ninh tôn giáo, việc lợi dụng tôn giáo vì mục đích chính trị, cũng như một số hạn chế trong quá trình thực thi chính sách và pháp luật về tôn giáo. Trên cơ sở đó, tác giả đề xuất một số khuyến nghị chính sách nhằm tăng cường năng lực bảo đảm an ninh tôn giáo và củng cố ổn định chính trị, an ninh ở khu vực biên giới, từ đó góp phần duy trì ổn định xã hội và thúc đẩy phát triển bền vững các vùng biên giới của Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: *Vùng biên giới đất liền, an ninh tôn giáo, lợi dụng tôn giáo.*

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1. Introduction

In recent years, religious life in Vietnam's land border areas has undergone significant transformations, both internally and in its outward expressions. These changes have been driven by the Party and State's renovation policies on religion, as well as by the interaction of both longstanding and emerging processes, including restructuring, re-evangelization, modernization, secularization, and the expansion of inter-border, trans-border, and international relations. Notably, a number of issues have emerged that are closely related to religious security and the political and security stability of the national border regions. Clarifying the current situation of religion in these land border areas, while identifying and synthesizing the most salient issues, can enrich scholarly understanding of religious life in border regions and propose appropriate policy responses to the challenges that have arisen.

To date, several studies have addressed religion in Vietnam's border regions since the "Đổi mới" (Renovation). Some works have examined and clarified different aspects of religious and belief practices among ethnic minority populations, including communities residing in land border areas. Broad and comprehensive studies include those by Nguyễn Văn Minh (2013), Hoàng Thị Lan (ed., 2021), Nguyễn Thanh Xuân and Nguyễn Quỳnh Trâm (2024), and Lê Tâm Đắc (2025). These studies discuss the current situation, distinctive characteristics, and influence of religion on the lives and identities of ethnic minority communities. Trần Thị Phương Anh (2025) has made a notable contribution by analyzing the structural composition of religion in land-border areas, drawing on statistical data.

Other studies have focused on specific religions. Regarding Islam, important works include Philip Taylor (2007), who provides an overview of the mobility associated with long-distance economic activities among Cham Muslims in An Giang; Huynh Thanh Tien and colleagues (2018), who emphasize the advantages derived from linguistic similarities and shared Islamic identity among Cham communities in the Southwestern border region in conducting economic activities and expanding international relations compared with Cham communities in the South Central region; and Vũ Đình Mười (2022, pp. 87-89), who analyzes trans-border relations between Cham and Khmer communities, showing how shared ethnic

and religious identities facilitate the establishment of cross-border networks. Hoàng Văn Chung and Trần Thị Phương Anh (2025) analyze and compare demographic characteristics and patterns of religious practice among Cham Muslim communities residing in border districts and towns in An Giang and Tây Ninh.

With regard to Protestantism, notable studies examine its introduction, its relatively comprehensive development, and the challenges associated with these processes, particularly in ethnic minority regions (Nguyễn Khắc Đức, 2017; Nguyễn Xuân Hùng, 2018). Other research examines its values and social functions (Vũ Thị Thu Hà, ed., 2018) and its role in transforming Hmong communities (Trần Thị Phương Anh et al., 2024). More recently, Dương Văn Biên and colleagues (2025) have analyzed the ways in which actors associated with Protestantism have become involved in cultural, economic, and political spheres, arguing that this phenomenon both reflects the exploitation of religion by certain geopolitical forces to promote peripheral nationalism and serves as a measure and challenge for the state's capacity to maintain territorial and social control.

Regarding Catholicism, a recent study by Ngô Quốc Đông (2025) outlines its characteristics in Vietnam's land border areas. In the case of Khmer Theravada Buddhism, studies have pointed out recent trends and transformations, such as a decline in the number of adherents, a gradual relaxation in the strict observance of monastic discipline, and a weakening of traditional religious practices (Hoàng Minh Đô and Nguyễn Phú Lợi, eds., 2022; Nguyễn Phú Lợi, 2022).

Several studies on ethnic groups in border regions have also analyzed the religious factor within broader concerns about ethnicity, religion, and sustainable development, including works by Trần Thị Thúy Ngọc and Trịnh Thị Hằng (2018) and Vương Xuân Tình (2014; 2019). These studies provide substantial information on the formation processes and current conditions of religious communities in ethnic minority areas, including populations residing in border regions. In addition, some studies addressing border areas and ethnic minorities have analyzed ethnic-religious relations from the perspective of non-traditional security, social order, and national defense, notably those by Đoàn Minh Huấn and Võ Trọng Hải (co-editors, 2014), Lê Văn Lợi (ed., 2018), Phạm Ngọc Hòa (2020), Nguyễn Linh Khiếu (ed., 2020), and Phạm Ngọc Hường et al. (2025). Regarding vernacular religions in border areas, a notable contribution is the work of Nguyễn Thị Quế Hương (2025), which introduces their historical formation, development processes, and particularly their positive contributions to social welfare.

The afore mentioned studies have primarily examined religious life in ethnic minority regions in general, while relatively few focus specifically on the scope of land border areas. Moreover, there remains a lack of systematic and comprehensive research that clarifies the current situation, synthesizes the main characteristics, and identifies the emerging issues of religion across this vast, complex, and highly distinctive regional context at the local level. Several important questions, therefore, remain insufficiently addressed. For instance, how does the overall religious landscape in Vietnam's land border areas today differ from that of the past?

In what ways do the issues currently arising in religious life in these regions differ from those in inland areas? What are their underlying causes, how do they affect local and national security, and why have existing policy responses not yet effectively resolved these challenges?

This article seeks to contribute to answering these questions by reconstructing the current situation, highlighting salient characteristics, synthesizing the key issues facing religion in Vietnam's land border areas, and proposing several policy recommendations. The study adopts approaches from Religious Studies and the Sociology of Religion to examine religion in border areas through three theoretical perspectives: religion in border spaces, religion-ethnicity relations, and transnational religious relations.

Border studies theories have evolved from their early and classical phases, which primarily viewed borders through a functional lens, serving to demarcate one nation from another and to mark territorial boundaries, while being regarded as relatively stable. In this approach, borders encompass both natural boundaries and those constructed by humans. Newer theoretical perspectives, such as those advanced by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) and Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly (2005), examine borders through a geopolitical lens, emphasizing their role as instruments of power and national security. According to these scholars, borders should be understood as manifestations of state control mechanisms. Another line of theory conceptualizes borders as social constructs, dynamic and shaped by human interactions across political, economic, commercial, and socio-cultural domains. For example, borders truly come into being where cultures intersect and permeate one another; they are spaces where people of different ethnicities share the same territory and where diverse social strata interact. Borders also carry symbolic and social meanings, influencing how individuals negotiate and conduct social activities on either side of the boundary.

From an interdisciplinary perspective, Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly (2005, p.634) proposes that border analysis must address four equally important dimensions: (1) market forces and trade flows; (2) policy activities across multiple levels of government in adjacent border regions; (3) the specific political influence of borderland communities; and (4) the distinctive cultures of these communities. Moreover, the most recent border theories have increasingly focused on non-territorial boundaries, such as migration, border militarization, digital borders, cyberspace, and data flows. These factors are becoming ever more closely linked to issues of non-traditional security.

This theoretical overview of border studies connects quite directly and quite usefully to research on religion in Vietnam's borderlands. The key is that each "layer" of border theory opens a different analytical lens for understanding religious dynamics. First, the classical-functional view of borders helps to situate religion within the framework of state sovereignty and territorial management. In Vietnam's border regions, religious activities are not only matters of belief but are also linked to how the state manages territory, population, and cross-border mobility. For example, the regulation of religious organizations, cross-border missionary activities, or pilgrimage flows reflects the state's effort to maintain control and

stability along national boundaries. Second, the geopolitical approach enables me to frame religion within the security landscape. In Vietnam's land border areas, especially those adjacent to Laos, Cambodia, and China-religion can intersect with issues such as transnational religious networks; external influence on local communities; and concerns about political stability or "non-traditional security." Here, religion is not only cultural but also potentially strategic, especially when it involves cross-border affiliations or external funding. Third, the social-constructivist perspective on borders is particularly valuable for this research. Borderlands in Vietnam are typically inhabited by ethnic minorities with shared cultural and religious ties across borders. This means religious identities often transcend state boundaries; practices (rituals, festivals, beliefs) are shaped by cross-border cultural exchange; The "border" is less a barrier and more a zone of interaction. This directly supports an argument that religion in border areas cannot be fully understood within a purely national framework; rather, it must be seen as embedded in transnational social spaces. This new focus on non-territorial borders is highly relevant to contemporary Vietnam, where digital media enables cross-border religious communication (online sermons, networks, etc.); migration (legal and informal) reshapes religious communities; and religious issues may intersect with non-traditional security concerns such as identity politics, information flows, and social cohesion.

In this article, three principal research methods are employed in combination: (i) statistical analysis of religious data from 25 border provinces (based on data provided by the Government Committee of Religious Affairs prior to the provincial mergers in July 2025); (ii) fieldwork conducted in three localities - Điện Biên (Northwest), Gia Lai (Central Highlands), and An Giang (Southwest) (these borderland provinces are chosen for their representation in term of geographical, ethnicity, religious setting); and (iii) analysis of secondary sources combined with interregional comparison.

The concept of "land border areas" here refers to border districts and border towns (according to administrative units prior to April 2025) located along all three of Vietnam's land borders - Vietnam-China, Vietnam-Laos, and Vietnam-Cambodia - stretching from the Northwest through the Central Highlands to the Southwestern region. When more detailed data are unavailable, the research scope is expanded to include all provinces with land borders. The term "religion" here refers to both vernacular and foreign-origin religions currently present in these border areas that have been legally recognized by the state.

2. Results And Discussions

2.1. The Religious Landscape in Vietnam's Land Border Areas

2.1.1. An overview of the religious situation in the land border provinces

The current religious landscape in Vietnam's land border areas is the result of long-term processes of introduction, rooting, adaptation, and development, as well as interaction with pre-existing religious and belief traditions and with ethnic and community cultural institutions. This situation differs significantly from the period prior to the "Đổi mới" and

reflects the outcomes of several overlapping processes, including increasing domestic and international integration, religious diversification, religious transformation, and the secularization and modernization of religion.

Based on statistical data from the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (Ban Tôn giáo chính phủ) as of November 2023, several key indicators regarding religion in the 25 provinces with land borders can be identified. The total number of religious adherents in these provinces is 7,938,350, accounting for approximately 28% of the total nationwide religious adherents (28,069,241). An Giang has the largest number of religious adherents (1,747,184), far exceeding other provinces, while Lạng Sơn and Cao Bằng have the smallest numbers (12,044 and 24,060, respectively).

Among localities, Thừa Thiên - Huế (568 establishments), An Giang (518), and Thanh Hóa (521) have significantly more religious institutions than other localities. By contrast, provinces such as Điện Biên, Lai Châu, and Sơn La each have fewer than 4 religious establishments. Notably, An Giang ranks first across several indicators compared with other localities, including the diversity of religious types, the number of religions present, the number of adherents, the number of clergyman and religious functionaries, and the number of religious establishments (Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2023).

Among the total number of religious adherents in border provinces, Buddhism (including both Mahayana Buddhism and Khmer Theravada Buddhism) accounts for the largest share, with 3,071,518 followers. Catholicism ranks second with 2,040,636 adherents, followed by Hòa Hảo Buddhism with 1,000,094 adherents. Protestantism and Caodaism rank fourth and fifth, with 824,653 and 824,416 followers respectively. It is noteworthy that while Hòa Hảo Buddhism has approximately 1.2 million adherents nationwide, around 1 million reside in provinces with land borders.

Among these provinces, An Giang has the greatest diversity and concentration of religious adherents, followed by Kiên Giang, Long An, and Bình Phước. Localities with the least religious diversity - where only three major religions (Buddhism, Catholicism, and Protestantism) are present - are primarily located in the Central region and the Northern mountainous areas (Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2023). Data analysis also indicates that the further one moves toward the Southwestern region, the greater the religious diversity becomes, particularly due to the presence of vernacular religions.

According to data from the General Statistics Office in 2021, the number of workers serving at religious establishments in the 25 border provinces totaled 33,586. Provinces in the northern region recorded relatively small numbers, typically ranging from a few dozen to fewer than 200 workers, reflecting the very limited number of religious establishments in these areas. From the Central region southward, however, the number of workers serving at religious institutions increases significantly. Thừa Thiên-Huế and An Giang recorded the largest numbers of workers in religious establishments, with 3,697 and 3,874 people,

respectively. Provinces such as Nghệ An, Hà Tĩnh, Đắk Lắk, Kiên Giang, and Long An each have more than 2,000 workers serving at religious institutions. These individuals usually work on a voluntary basis without financial compensation. This constitutes a relatively abundant resource that embodies potential value in both tangible and intangible religious heritage and human resources (General Statistics Office - Tổng cục thống kê, 2022, pp. 126-128).

Regarding new religious phenomena, statistical reports indicate that across the 25 provinces with land borders, approximately 20 new beliefs or phenomena currently exist in 23 provinces, attracting approximately 13,461 followers (Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2023). These phenomena include both those of foreign origin and those emerging domestically, which have spread into ethnic minority communities along the border areas. In these regions, such phenomena generally occur in very small, scattered groups and tend to operate discreetly. Local reports indicate that, in addition to several well-known phenomena considered to have negative impacts - such as “Bà Cô Dợ,” “Giê Sùa,” and the “Chữ thập vãi đỏ” - there are also several newly emerging groups that local authorities have encountered for the first time. Some of these appeared after the COVID-19 pandemic and are currently beginning to operate and seek followers, such as “Thiền Tông Tâm Diệu” (Cao Bằng), “Lạc Việt Family Tradition Belief”, “Mùa Nở Cò”, and “Ánh sáng thật” (Điện Biên). Some phenomena related to the veneration of Hồ Chí Minh are also spreading into ethnic minority regions.

2.1.2. The religious situation in the border areas of Điện Biên, Lai Châu, and Gia Lai Điện Biên province

According to local statistics as of 2024, there are currently four religions present in Điện Biên Province: Catholicism, Buddhism, Protestantism, and the Vietnam Seventh-day Adventist Church. These religions are present in 646 villages and residential groups across 122 communes, wards, and townships in all 10 districts, towns, and cities of the province, with religious activities conducted at 455 meeting places (Sở Nội vụ tỉnh Điện Biên, 2024).

In the four border districts of Điện Biên province, as of October 2024, there were a total of 11,696 households with 68,355 followers of four religions: Catholicism, Buddhism, Protestantism, and the Vietnam Seventh-day Adventist Church. These followers belong to eight ethnic groups (Kinh, Hmong, Dao, Thái, Sán Chỉ, Hà Nhì, Hoa, and Kháng) and reside in 299 villages and residential clusters across 53 communes and townships, where religious activities take place at 308 meeting places, of which 276 have been officially registered for collective religious practice. Specifically, Protestantism has 11,221 households with 65,132 followers, meeting at 289 gathering places; the Vietnam Seventh-day Adventist Church has 148 households with 827 adherents, meeting at 7 gathering places; Catholicism has 327 households with 2,206 adherents, meeting at 10 gathering places; and Buddhism has 190 followers meeting at 2 gathering places (Sở Nội vụ tỉnh Điện Biên, 2024).

In the border areas of Điện Biên province, Protestant adherents account for an overwhelming majority, with 65,132 out of a total of 68,355 religious followers across the four border districts. For example, in Chung Chải Commune (Mường Nhé District), there are 467 religious households with 2,914 adherents participating in religious activities at 15 meeting places; among these, 13 belong to four Protestant denominations, while only two belong to Catholicism. A similar pattern can be observed in Na Cô Sa Commune (Nậm Pồ District), where three religions are present - Protestantism, Catholicism, and the Vietnam Seventh-day Adventist Church - across 18 meeting places. Of these, Protestantism has 634 households with 3,755 adherents; Catholicism has 221 households with 1,488 adherents; and the Vietnam Seventh-day Adventist Church has 68 households with 415 adherents. All 18 meeting places have been officially registered for collective religious practice (UBND xã Na Cô Sa, 2024).

Gia Lai province

As of 2024, five religions are active in Gia Lai province: Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Caodaism, and the Baha'i Faith, with a total of 450,476 adherents. Among these, 265,006 are ethnic minorities, accounting for approximately 59% of the total followers of the five religions. Religious adherents are widely distributed throughout the province. In border areas, most residents maintain beliefs in traditional forms of worship, particularly polytheistic practices. Alongside these traditional beliefs, a segment of the population in these areas also follows institutionalized religions, primarily Buddhism, Catholicism, and Protestantism (Sở Dân tộc và Tôn giáo tỉnh Gia Lai, 2025).

As of May 2025, the total number of religious adherents in Gia Lai's three border districts was 62,124 people, including 10,966 Buddhists, 27,639 Catholics, 23,429 Protestants, and 90 followers of Caodaism - an increase of 6,620 adherents compared to 2020. Religious activities are currently conducted at 24 Buddhist religious establishments, 24 subordinate religious organizations of Catholic and Protestant churches, and 99 registered collective religious practice places (76 Protestant and 23 Catholic).

In the seven border communes alone, there are 6,608 religious adherents (3,378 Protestants, 2,629 Catholics, 598 Buddhists, and 3 Caodaists). These communities maintain one Buddhist religious establishment, two subordinate religious organizations of Catholicism and Protestantism, and 25 registered collective religious practice places (19 Protestant and 6 Catholic), representing an increase of 10 registered religious practice places compared to 2020 (Sở Dân tộc và Tôn giáo tỉnh Gia Lai, 2025).

An Giang province

An Giang is home primarily to four ethnic groups - Kinh, Cham, Hoa, and Khmer - whose cultural life is associated with a wide range of beliefs and religions. The province is the birthplace of three vernacular religions - Hòa Hảo Buddhism, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, and Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương. It is also home to religions closely associated with particular ethnic groups, such as Khmer Theravada Buddhism among the Khmer people and Islam among the Cham.

As of 2024, An Giang province had 1,570,499 religious adherents residing across its 11 districts, towns, and cities. A total of 11 religions recognized by the state are present in the province, including Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Caodaism, Hòa Hảo Buddhism, Islam, the Pure Land Lay Buddhist Association, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa Buddhism, the Jesus Christ's Church of Latter-day Saints, Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism, and Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương. There are also three officially recognized religious organizations: the Hòa Hảo Buddhist Church, the Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa Buddhist Association, and representative board of the Islamic community of An Giang province.

In total, the province has 298 subordinate religious organizations, 529 places of worship, 1,416 clergy members, and 4,386 religious functionaries, with 1,747,784 adherents - accounting for 91.59% of the province's population. Religious adherents are present in all 156 communes, wards, and townships across the province's 11 districts, towns, and cities (Ban tôn giáo tỉnh An Giang, 2024).

The border region of An Giang is primarily inhabited by Kinh, Khmer, and Cham populations. Khmer communities are concentrated mainly in Tri Tôn District and Tịnh Biên Town, with smaller populations scattered across Châu Thành, Thoại Sơn, and Châu Phú districts. The cultural and spiritual life of the Khmer is closely associated with Theravada Buddhism and the communal temple. In contrast, Cham Muslims live in concentrated settlements, often interspersed with Kinh communities. There are nine Cham villages located in nine communes, including Vĩnh Trường, Quốc Thái, Nhơn Hội, Khánh Bình, and Đa Phước town (An Phú District); Châu Phong Commune (Tân Châu town); Khánh Hòa commune (Châu Phú District); Vĩnh Hạnh Commune (Châu Thành District); and Mỹ Long ward (Long Xuyên city). Their daily life is closely linked to mosques and smaller prayer houses (Ban Tôn giáo tỉnh An Giang, 2024).

The Kinh population resides throughout the border areas of An Giang province, practicing Mahayana Buddhism as well as vernacular religions such as Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa (notably in Ba Chúc town, Tri Tôn district). They maintain regular religious practices centered primarily on ancestor worship, the veneration of village tutelary deities, and the commemoration of individuals who have made contributions to the community.

In An Phú, a border district of An Giang province, seven religions are currently active, with approximately 169,019 adherents. These include Hòa Hảo Buddhism (88,032 adherents), Buddhism (35,828), Tây Ninh Caodaism (18,417), Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương (1,025), Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa (4,198), Catholicism (4,663), and Islam (17,142). The district has 33 religious establishments, including 14 Hòa Hảo Buddhist Administrative Boards, one Hòa Hảo Buddhist temple (An Hòa Tự), one Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương temple, seven Caodai temples, eight mosques, and two churches. Hòa Hảo Buddhism currently maintains 14 administrative boards across 12 communes and two towns, along with the An Hòa Tự B temple in Khánh An commune, with a total of 121 religious functionaries, including one member of the provincial representative board responsible for An Phú District (UBND huyện An Phú, tỉnh An Giang, 2023).

Overall, the data indicate that although each surveyed border region exhibits specific religious characteristics, certain common features distinguish religious life in these areas from that of inland regions. These distinctive characteristics will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

2.2. Characteristics of Religion in Vietnam's Land Border Areas

First, regarding religions of foreign origin, the most notable features are diversity and openness. Border areas display a level of religious diversity comparable to that of inland regions, while religious traditions in these areas tend to be relatively open, increasingly accommodating, and harmoniously coexisting with local cultural traditions and ethnic customs. However, this diversity is unevenly distributed. The further one moves toward the southern regions, particularly the Southwest, the greater the degree of religious diversity, the larger the religious population, and the denser the network of religious establishments. Viewed along a north-south axis, the density of religious presence gradually increases from north to south. In other words, the farther from the Vietnam-China border and the closer to the Southwestern border region, the greater the variety of religious traditions present. Protestantism is concentrated mainly in the northern border areas, whereas Buddhism (both Mahayana and Khmer Theravada) appears more densely from the Central Highlands to the Southwestern region. Certain religious communities are found in only a limited number of localities, such as Islam (in three border districts of An Giang and Tây Ninh) and Khmer Theravada Buddhism (mainly in the border districts of Đồng Tháp, An Giang, and Kiên Giang).

Second, some religious communities maintain cross-border and transnational connections. Several religious communities in Vietnam's land border areas maintain kinship ties with populations living across the border, including the Khmer (associated with Khmer Theravada Buddhism), the Cham (associated with Islam), and ethnic groups such as the Mnong, J'rai, and Hmong (many of whom follow Protestantism). This characteristic means that these religious communities do not exist as closed social units. On the contrary, they engage in regular exchanges and interactions, and in some cases maintain networks extending beyond local or national boundaries.

Third, religion is closely intertwined with ethnicity. In land border areas, the relationship between religion and ethnicity is often so strong that the mention of a particular religion immediately evokes association with a specific ethnic group or groups, for example, Protestantism among the Hmong and Dao, Islam among the Cham, and Khmer Theravada Buddhism among the Khmer. When a religion is adopted by an ethnic group, it gradually penetrates and transforms elements of that group's traditional culture. At the same time, religions - especially those that differ significantly from the host culture - often adapt to gain acceptance, take root, and develop within the community. This process of cultural interaction and adaptation between religion and ethnic culture tends to be particularly pronounced in land border areas. Over time, the long-term interweaving of religion and ethnicity generates shared

points of identity across religion, ethnicity, and culture, thereby strengthening cohesion within communities that share both an ethnic background and a religious affiliation.

Fourth, religion in border areas is sometimes exploited by hostile forces for political purposes. The use of religion - often in connection with ethnic identity - as a tool to pursue political objectives has occurred over a long period, although it may appear in somewhat different forms at different times (this issue will be discussed in more detail in a later section).

Regarding vernacular religions, several common characteristics can also be identified. First of all, their spirit of harmony, simplicity, and patriotism was closely associated with their emergence in Southern Vietnam during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Vernacular religions arose partly as means of social cohesion and to address people's existential needs, while also reflecting anti-colonial sentiments, resistance to foreign cultural influence, and efforts to preserve national cultural traditions and independence. Besides, vernacular religions generally display a strong engagement with social life, as evidenced by their regular contributions to social welfare. This can be clearly observed in charitable activities and social support initiatives such as disaster and epidemic relief, poverty alleviation, free medical services and patient transportation, and participation in improving local infrastructure, including roads and bridges.

Further, their integrative character creates diversity in objects of worship and forms of religious expression. Whether influenced primarily by Buddhism or by the syncretic traditions of the Three Teachings (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism), vernacular religions tend to integrate multiple philosophical and religious traditions. As a result, they display a rich variety of objects of veneration, religious symbols, and styles of religious practice.

In summary, religion in Vietnam's land border areas has undergone significant transformation across nearly all dimensions. The most salient features include the uneven spatial distribution of religious diversity, the close linkage between religion and ethnicity, the cross-border nature of religious-ethnic networks, and the prominent role of vernacular religions in the Southwestern region. These characteristics are shaped largely by factors such as ethnicity (particularly the cultural traditions of ethnic minority groups), settlement geography (remote, mountainous, and highland areas), border conditions (where security and defense concerns may limit large-scale collective activities), and socioeconomic conditions, which in many respects remain more difficult and less developed than those of inland regions.

2.3. Emerging religious issues

New challenges to religious security

Religious security may be understood as a condition in which religious life operates in a stable and normal manner, free from threats originating either externally or internally. Religious security is considered weakened or undermined when this condition of stability and normal development can no longer be maintained (see also Đỗ Lan Hiền, ed., 2021). In recent

years, the normal and stable functioning of religious life in border areas has shown signs of vulnerability to disruptions arising from both external and internal challenges.

(i) External challenges: These challenges primarily stem from the increasing expansion of cross-border and transnational relations among religious communities, including activities related to religious education and training, international exchanges and cooperation, and the reception of financial support from foreign organizations. While such activities may bring benefits, they also contain potential risks that could adversely affect religious communities. For instance, communities may inadvertently become influenced by or involved in activities that violate legal regulations. The introduction of foreign or unfamiliar elements into expressions of faith, ritual practice, or religious doctrine may also generate disagreements and tensions within communities. In addition, disputes may arise over the distribution and use of financial resources obtained through external support or fundraising activities.

(ii) Internal challenges: Internal challenges mainly arise from factors within legally recognized religious organizations or communities themselves. Conflicts and disagreements may arise among leadership members over interests, positions, or differing viewpoints that are difficult to reconcile. Such tensions may weaken trust and cohesion between followers and their religious organizations, leading to tendencies toward fragmentation, separation, denominational switching, or attempts to establish new organizations.

Under pressure to maintain and expand their communities of followers, some religious dignitaries and functionaries may engage in activities that do not comply with legal regulations, such as conducting missionary activities outside legally permitted locations, constructing places for collective religious practice without official authorization, or mobilizing large gatherings of followers to present demands or challenge local authorities.

In addition, as religious communities expand - especially in geographically fragmented border regions, community leaders often face difficulties in closely monitoring the information and ideological developments of individual members. Those who participate less frequently in communal religious activities are often more vulnerable to influence, manipulation, or exploitation by actors with malicious intentions. Meanwhile, religious life itself is constantly evolving, while many grassroots religious organizations and communities still lack sufficient governance capacity and experience to effectively manage and respond to these changes.

When such issues arise, they may directly undermine internal relationships and weaken the cohesion of religious communities. This may lead to psychological fragmentation, lack of cooperation, or even violations of the law. In general, when religious security is compromised, religious communities may lose their ability to function normally and become more vulnerable to instability. Uncontrolled actions, rising tensions, and potential conflicts may result. Consequently, the deterioration of religious security can also negatively affect local social stability and pose additional challenges to political governance and public security.

The exploitation of religion for political purposes

The exploitation of religion in Vietnam's land border areas has occurred in the past and continued to pose challenges today, primarily as part of political schemes pursued by hostile forces.

Several incidents illustrate the seriousness of this issue. Examples include the attacks against local authorities in Đắk Lắk in 2023, the large-scale gathering that disrupted social order in Mường Nhé (Điện Biên) in 2011, and similar incidents in Tà Tổng, Mường Tè district (Lai Châu) in 2020. Although the individuals directly involved were mainly local ethnic minority residents, the masterminds behind these actions were reportedly located abroad and employed sophisticated methods and strategies.

The principal tactics used to exploit religion include the following: First, spreading misleading narratives about religion and ethnicity. By invoking international documents such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and international conventions on fundamental human rights, certain individuals establish groups and claim that ethnic minorities in Vietnam who follow religions are subject to discrimination and are not able to fully exercise their right to religious freedom. They call for unrestricted freedom of missionary activity and religious practice, propagate "prophecies" about the "second coming" of God or the appearance of a sacred savior, and persuade people to adopt new forms of worship by promising a permanently prosperous life in which "one can live well without working." These narratives are often accompanied by repeated claims that the international community will support ethnic minority groups in establishing their own state in order to guarantee religious freedom.

Second, efforts are made to build domestic networks and incite segments of the population to oppose the government at varying levels. This includes exploiting the difficult living conditions and limited awareness of certain communities to pursue the agendas of "ethnicizing religion" and "religionizing ethnicity"; mobilizing and organizing followers by appealing to people's spiritual needs and material interests; recruiting remotely and training domestic personnel through social media in order to disseminate extremist ideas; and encouraging narrow forms of nationalism. In some cases, actors call for land claims or even secession with the aim of establishing autonomous entities based on religious beliefs. The right to freedom of religion may also be exploited to sow division among ethnic groups; to incite acts of resistance against authorities - such as mass gatherings intended to exert pressure on local administrations, spontaneous migration, or illegal border crossings to join reactionary organizations and networks. In addition, overseas students and migrant workers may be used as intermediaries to connect domestic ethno-religious communities with their counterparts abroad for purposes such as political lobbying, partisan mobilization, or the reception of religious publications and materials that violate existing legal regulations.

Third, attempts are made to politicize and internationalize domestic religious issues. This includes strengthening linkages between religious communities in Vietnam and foreign

organizations under the guise of “humanitarian assistance” or “religious dialogue,” and seeking deeper intervention in the internal affairs of religious organizations in order to create internal divisions. Particular attention is paid to exploiting religious issues in border areas, where the complex intersections of ethnicity, culture, and religion provide fertile ground for the emergence of new “hotspots” of tension. Such actors may also collect or fabricate evidence and provide misleading information to institutions responsible for drafting reports, assessments, and rankings on international religious freedom in the United States, with the aim of advocating for Vietnam’s inclusion on the list of Countries of Particular Concern (CPC). Efforts are made to construct narratives portraying religious groups as “victims” and to promote claims of “religious repression” or “religious discrimination,” thereby shaping international perceptions and undermining the reputation of the Vietnamese state. These activities often combine religious issues with other sensitive topics - such as ethnicity, human rights, democracy, social inequality, vulnerable social groups, and territorial sovereignty - in order to generate wider resonance and attract the attention of both domestic and international public opinion.

2.4. Discussions

The findings of this study reveal that religious life in Vietnam’s land border areas is undergoing complex and multidimensional transformations, shaped by the interplay of structural, socio-cultural, and geopolitical factors. When interpreted through the theoretical lenses outlined earlier, namely the functional, geopolitical, and social-constructivist approaches to borders, together with the interdisciplinary framework proposed by Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly, these empirical results can be more deeply understood both in terms of their internal logic and their broader implications.

First, the observed uneven distribution and diversification of religious life across border regions reflect not only historical trajectories but also the influence of spatial and structural conditions. From a classical-functional perspective, border areas are subject to varying degrees of state presence and administrative capacity. Northern mountainous border regions, characterized by difficult terrain and limited infrastructure, tend to exhibit lower densities of religious institutions and more fragmented religious organization. In contrast, the Southwestern border region-especially provinces such as An Giang-demonstrates a high level of religious diversity, institutionalization, and integration into social life. This disparity can be attributed to differences in historical settlement patterns, economic development, and accessibility, which in turn affect the state’s capacity to regulate and support religious activities.

However, the functional perspective alone is insufficient to explain the dynamism observed in these regions. From a social-constructivist viewpoint, borders in Vietnam are not merely lines of demarcation but “contact zones” where cultures, ethnicities, and religions intersect. The strong linkage between religion and ethnicity, evident in communities such as the Hmong (Protestantism), Khmer (Theravada Buddhism), and Cham (Islam), demonstrates that religious identity is deeply embedded in cross-border cultural continuities. These communities maintain kinship ties, shared rituals, and collective memories that transcend

national boundaries, reinforcing the idea that borderland religion is fundamentally transnational in its social formation. Consequently, the persistence and expansion of religious networks cannot be fully understood without considering these cross-border social structures.

Second, the study's findings on cross-border religious connections and transnational interactions highlight the increasing relevance of the geopolitical approach to border studies. As scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly emphasize, borders function as instruments of power and security, particularly in the management of religious activities. The expansion of international religious exchanges, foreign funding, and transnational networks has created new opportunities for religious development, but it has also introduced vulnerabilities. External influences may alter local religious practices, generate internal disagreements, or even create dependencies that challenge the autonomy of local communities.

These dynamics are closely linked to the emergence of new challenges to religious security identified in the findings. External challenges-such as the influx of foreign religious ideas and resources-can be understood as the result of intensified cross-border flows within the framework of globalization and international integration. At the same time, internal challenges-such as leadership conflicts, fragmentation, and governance limitations within religious organizations-reflect the growing complexity of religious life in a rapidly changing social environment. From the perspective of non-territorial border theory, these issues are further amplified by the role of digital communication, migration, and informal networks, which enable the rapid circulation of religious ideas and mobilization beyond the control of traditional territorial mechanisms.

Third, the exploitation of religion for political purposes must be analyzed within a broader geopolitical and socio-political context. The cases cited in the findings illustrate how religion can be instrumentalized as a tool for advancing political agendas, particularly in sensitive border regions where issues of ethnicity, identity, and sovereignty intersect. This phenomenon can be interpreted through the lens of the geopolitical approach, which views borders as spaces where state authority is both asserted and contested. The strategies employed by hostile actors - such as disseminating distorted narratives, mobilizing ethnic-religious identities, and internationalizing domestic issues - demonstrate an attempt to weaken state control and reshape the symbolic meaning of the border.

At the same time, from a social-constructivist perspective, such exploitation is facilitated by existing social conditions within border communities. Factors such as economic hardship, limited access to education, and the strong interweaving of religion and ethnic identity create fertile ground for the spread of misleading information and the mobilization of collective sentiment. In this sense, the problem is not solely external but also rooted in the internal vulnerabilities of borderland societies. The "soft border" formed by culture and religion, while contributing to social cohesion, can also serve as a channel for the transmission of destabilizing influences.

Fourth, the study highlights limitations in the implementation of religious policies and laws, which can be explained through the multi-level governance dimension in Brunet-Jailly's framework. The effectiveness of religious governance in border areas depends not only on national policies but also on local authorities' capacity to implement them. The shortage of qualified personnel, weak coordination among agencies, and the challenges posed by geographical and socio-cultural conditions all contribute to gaps between policy and practice. These limitations are particularly significant in border regions, where the complexity of religious life requires flexible, context-sensitive approaches rather than rigid administrative measures.

Moreover, the interaction among the four dimensions identified by Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly (market forces, governance structures, political influence, and cultural factors) is clearly evident in the Vietnamese context. Economic exchanges facilitate cross-border mobility and interaction, which in turn support the spread of religious networks. Governance structures attempt to regulate these processes but often face constraints. Borderland communities exercise agency in shaping their religious life, while cultural traditions provide both stability and adaptability. The tensions and challenges identified in this study arise precisely from the complex interplay among these dimensions.

Finally, the emergence of new religious phenomena and the transformation of traditional religious practices reflect broader processes of modernization, globalization, and social change. These developments can be seen as part of a larger trend in which religion adapts to new socio-economic conditions while also responding to individuals' spiritual needs in uncertain environments. In border areas, where traditional structures are often under pressure, new forms of religiosity may offer alternative sources of meaning and community. However, their rapid and sometimes unregulated expansion also raises concerns about social stability and regulatory capacity.

3. Conclusion and policy implications

The analysis of the data indicates that religious life in Vietnam's land border areas is currently evolving amid profound socio-economic transformation, international integration, and expanding cross-border interactions. Religion in these border regions not only reflects Vietnam's broader religious diversity but also exhibits distinctive characteristics shaped by the specific historical, cultural, and ethnic conditions of each locality. Religion functions not only as a form of personal belief but also as a social institution capable of shaping community relations, social networks, and even interactions that transcend national territorial boundaries. As religion is an important component of culture, and as the culture of borderland communities serves as a "soft border," safeguarding this cultural sphere contributes significantly to protecting national territory and sovereignty.

However, alongside its positive contributions to national defense, economic development, and socio-cultural life, religious life in land border areas is also facing several

emerging challenges. These challenges stem from both internal and external factors within religious communities, particularly the expansion of cross-border relations, the emergence of new religious phenomena, internal tensions within religious organizations, and the risk that religion may be exploited for political purposes. Given that border areas occupy a particularly sensitive position in terms of security and national defense, religious issues - if not promptly identified and addressed - may negatively affect social stability, weaken community cohesion, and create opportunities for hostile actors to exploit. In response to these concerns, the article proposes the following policy suggestions.

For the protection of religious security: First, enhancing capacity and religious knowledge: Measures should be taken to support grassroots religious organizations in strengthening their governance capacity; provide technical assistance (such as management applications, software systems, and access to artificial intelligence tools); and offer scholarships for members of religious organizations to pursue advanced training in organizational management. Religious individuals and organizations should also be encouraged to ensure transparency in activities and information related to cross-border and transnational religious interactions. In addition, the development of “religion and rule of law” education programs in schools, beginning at the general education level, should be considered.

Second, improving coordination mechanisms: It is necessary to strengthen collaborative mechanisms among agencies within the local political system in order to detect early and address potential issues affecting religious security. Special attention should be given to building and improving the capacity of specialized cadres responsible for religious affairs, particularly at the commune level.

Third, promoting dialogue and community communication: Multi-stakeholder dialogues should be proactively initiated whenever tensions or conflicts arise -whether within religious organizations, among different religious communities, or between religious groups and local authorities. The mediating and conciliatory role of local religious leaders should be further encouraged. At the same time, the content and methods of communication regarding religious policies, laws, values, and resources should be diversified and strengthened.

To address the exploitation of religion for political purposes, first, a comprehensive action program should be developed, grounded in consultation with academic experts, to enhance the capacity to detect and identify early signs of such exploitation. This program should mobilize participation from village elders, community leaders, religious dignitaries, and other respected figures within religious communities for grassroots-level information gathering and reporting. Technological solutions, including artificial intelligence applications, should also be developed to identify signs of religious exploitation across social media platforms.

Second, strengthening religious external communication and diplomacy is necessary. This includes expanding multilingual international communication on religious issues, promoting multilingual academic exchanges on religion, and enhancing engagement through

diplomatic forums addressing religious affairs. The role and responsibility of religious leaders in people-to-people diplomacy should also be encouraged, particularly when they participate in cross-border religious exchanges.

To address limitations in the implementation of religious policies and laws, it is essential to establish a dedicated cadre system to manage religious activities at the commune level. Regular training and capacity-building programs should be provided to ensure that these personnel are well-equipped with knowledge of policies and legal frameworks, as well as practical implementation skills. Appropriate incentive and remuneration mechanisms should also be introduced to ensure long-term commitment and professional stability. Finally, coordination among different forces within the local political system should be strengthened in order to ensure effective and sustainable policy implementation./.

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