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BUDDHISM IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM: THE RED THREAD LINKING INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the enduring role of religion in shaping cultural and social identities in Vietnam. Using qualitative and comparative methods grounded in historical and doctrinal analysis, it highlights how philosophical principles, ethical frameworks, and ritual practices have been localized and reinterpreted across diverse movements. The findings show that adaptability, ethical humanism, and syncretism fostered a pluralistic spiritual ecosystem that strengthened community resilience, identity formation, and social cohesion. By integrating Vietnamese and global perspectives, the research offers a framework for understanding religious modernity and demonstrates how adaptive religious ethos sustains pluralism and harmony in complex cultural contexts.

KEYWORDS: Buddhism, Southern Vietnam, Indigenous Religions, Syncretism, Cultural Adaptation, Religious Pluralism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism in Vietnam has developed over nearly two millennia as both a spiritual tradition and a cultural force that transcends doctrinal boundaries. In the southern region, which is characterized by historical openness, migratory diversity, and ecological abundance, Buddhism functioned not only as a religion of salvation but also as a living framework for ethical conduct, social cohesion, and cultural adaptation (Le, 2001). Over time, the Mekong Delta, known for its multi-ethnic population and porous cultural frontiers, became a fertile ground for the emergence of several distinctive indigenous religions between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Among these were Buu Son Ky Huong, Tu An Hieu Nghia, Hoa Hao Buddhism, Caodaism, and the Vietnamese Mendicant Buddhist Sect, each of which reflected the dynamic interplay between local needs and broader philosophical traditions (Thich, 2021).

These movements arose in response to colonial disruption, moral uncertainty, and social dislocation, yet they consistently drew upon Buddhist philosophy as a source of ethical orientation and spiritual resilience. Central to this process were the

principles of compassion (*karuṇā*), moral cultivation (*śīla*), and wisdom (*prajñā*), which provided both a moral compass and a framework for community solidarity. The adaptability of these doctrines allowed new religious movements to reinterpret Buddhist teachings in ways that addressed the challenges of modernity while remaining rooted in traditional values.

Scholars have emphasized that the hallmark of Vietnamese religiosity lies in its integrative ethos. Rather than fostering conflict, emergent faiths engaged in dynamic symbiosis, reworking established doctrines to meet local needs and thereby creating a pluralistic spiritual ecosystem (Tran, 1974; Taylor, 2007). Within this process, Southern Buddhism has functioned as the “red thread” weaving together diverse spiritual traditions and nurturing what Tran (2012) describes as a “culture of harmony and coexistence.” This mediating role underscores Buddhism’s enduring capacity to serve as both a unifying moral compass and a catalyst for religious pluralism. More broadly, it highlights how Buddhism in Vietnam has acted as a connective force, sustaining cultural resilience and shaping the contours of religious modernity in Southeast Asia.

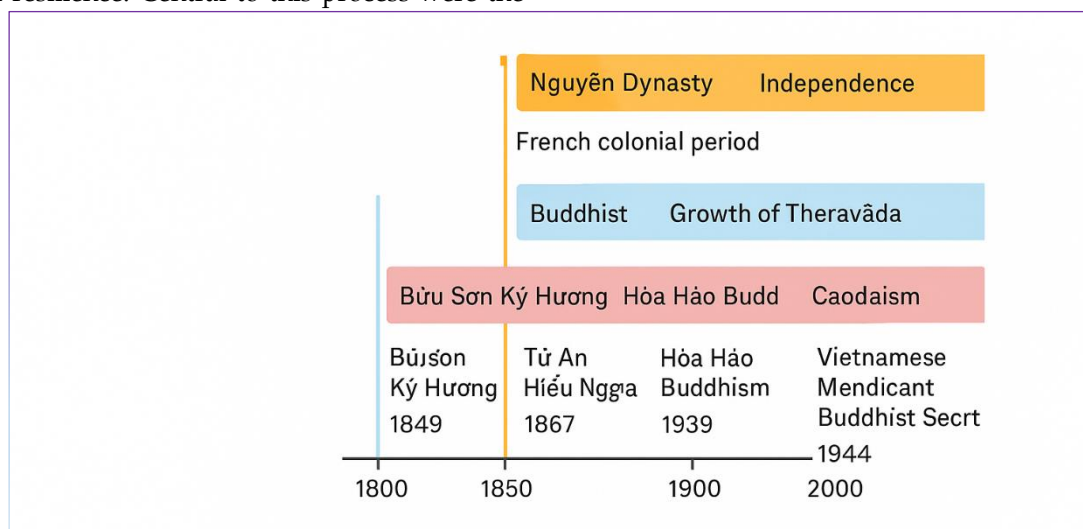


Figure 1: Historical-Doctrinal Timeline.

Source: Authors, 2025.

Figure 1 presents the timeline of Buddhist influence and the emergence of indigenous religions in Southern Vietnam during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, illustrating the historical evolution in which successive movements arose from Buddhist foundations and specific socio-political contexts. The review situates these developments within the broader dynamics of colonial disruption, cultural negotiation, and local resilience, emphasizing how Buddhism provided both a

doctrinal reservoir and a moral framework for new religious identities. By examining the socio-historical conditions that enabled religious innovation, the study highlights the ways in which Buddhist institutions and practices interacted with shifting political realities, migratory flows, and community needs, thereby creating fertile ground for the birth of distinctive indigenous traditions.

At the same time, the analysis underscores the philosophical and ethical continuities between

Buddhism and these emergent religions, particularly the enduring relevance of compassion (*karuṇā*), moral cultivation (*śīla*), and wisdom (*prajñā*) as guiding principles for spiritual life and social organization. These continuities reveal that Buddhist syncretism did not merely absorb external influences but actively functioned as a mechanism for cultural adaptation and civilizational resilience, enabling communities to reinterpret inherited doctrines in ways that addressed contemporary challenges. By integrating Vietnamese and global scholarship, the study demonstrates that Buddhism's adaptive ethos has consistently reconciled multiplicity with modernity, sustaining a pluralistic religious landscape while nurturing cohesion and harmony. This enduring capacity continues to define the cultural and spiritual fabric of contemporary Vietnam, affirming Buddhism's role as both a connective tradition and a transformative force in the region's religious modernity (DiGregorio, 2020; Thich, 2021).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, historical-interpretive review design to synthesize the evolution, interaction, and philosophical integration between Buddhism and the indigenous religions of Southern Vietnam. The methodological orientation combines historical contextualization, textual hermeneutics, and comparative thematic analysis of doctrinal, ethical, and ritual dimensions. Such an approach is particularly appropriate for exploring non-quantifiable constructs such as faith, moral thought, and syncretism, which require interpretive insight rather than numerical validation (Moustakas, 1994; Taylor, 2007). As a review article, the study does not introduce new field data but instead evaluates existing Vietnamese and international scholarship to map conceptual linkages among Buddhism, local religiosity, and socio-cultural adaptation. This integrative synthesis is grounded in both primary Vietnamese texts, including chronicles of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương and Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, and secondary analytical works produced by historians, philosophers, and religious scholars (Thich, 2021; Tran, 1974; Le, 2001).

2.2. Data Sources and Corpus Selection

The corpus comprises three strata of sources. First, historical-canonical documents such as royal edicts, monastic chronicles, and Vietnamese Buddhist historiographies, including *History of Vietnamese Buddhism* (Le, 2001) and *Chronicle of Buddhism in Gia*

Định-Saigon-Ho Chi Minh City (Ho Chi Minh City Buddhist Sangha, 2001). Second, doctrinal and ethnographic studies published between 1974 and 2024 that examine Southern Vietnamese religious pluralism (Taylor, 2007; DiGregorio, 2020; Nguyen & Kanwal, 2022). Third, contemporary review literature from indexed journals such as the *Horizon Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research (JHSSR)*, which situates this work within current SCOPUS-level discourse on ethics, culture, and spirituality in Southeast Asia (Kanwal & Balwant, 2023; Rabi Subudhi, 2025). Selection criteria emphasized relevance, authenticity, and representativeness: sources had to address Buddhism's influence on Vietnamese religiosity, originate from recognized academic presses or peer-reviewed venues, and collectively span both Vietnamese-language and English-language scholarship.

2.3. Analytical Framework

The analysis follows a three-stage interpretive procedure. The first stage, contextual-historical mapping, establishes the socio-political and ecological milieu of the Mekong Delta from the nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, identifying conditions that enabled religious innovation such as colonial disruption, frontier migration, and intercultural contact (Tran, 2012). The second stage, doctrinal comparison, examines textual continuities between Buddhist canonical precepts (*karuṇā*, *śīla*, *prajñā*) and the ethical systems of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Hoa Hao Buddhism, Caodaism, and the Vietnamese Mendicant Buddhist Sect. This analysis highlights the transmission of Buddhist metaphysics—particularly karma, rebirth, and liberation—into local idioms of morality and salvation (Thich, 2021; Endres, 2011). The third stage, cultural-syncretic interpretation, evaluates how Buddhism's adaptive ethos mediates coexistence among diverse belief systems. This involved coding recurring conceptual categories such as compassion, gratitude, filial piety, and community service, and tracing their transformation across texts and oral traditions. To enhance validity, the process employed triangulation across disciplines, history, anthropology, philosophy, and religious studies, allowing multiple perspectives to converge on the same phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

2.4. Procedures For Data Interpretation

Each document was subjected to content and discourse analysis. Vietnamese-language materials

were translated and conceptually aligned with established Buddhist terminology to ensure semantic fidelity. The analysis prioritized emic perspectives, focusing on how Vietnamese practitioners conceptualize Buddhism's moral universe, while interpreting them through etic analytical frames drawn from comparative religion. Analytical categories were guided by three central questions: How did Southern Vietnam's geographic and demographic conditions shape the localization of Buddhism? In what ways did Buddhist principles provide ethical or ritual templates for emergent indigenous religions? How does Buddhist syncretism function as a civilizational survival mechanism in times of crisis? Findings from these inquiries are organized in the Results and Discussion section under thematic subheadings: *Doctrinal Convergence, Social Function of Faith, and Syncretic Cultural Ecology*.

2.5. Quality Assurance and Ethical Considerations

Since this research is based entirely on secondary materials, no human-subject data collection was undertaken. Nevertheless, ethical rigor was ensured through precise attribution of sources, respect for indigenous knowledge systems, and systematic verification of all citations using DOIs or stable publisher identifiers where available. The inclusion of sources from the *Horizon Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research (JHSSR)* further guarantees alignment with contemporary academic standards of transparency, accessibility, and scholarly integrity (Kanwal & Balwant, 2023).

The methodological stance also adheres to the principle of contextual non-absolutism, which recognizes that doctrinal interpretation must remain sensitive to local epistemologies and cultural frameworks. Accordingly, Vietnamese terminologies such as *Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa* and *Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương* are retained in their original form to preserve cultural nuance, while English glosses are provided to facilitate comprehension for an international readership. This dual presentation ensures fidelity to indigenous categories of thought while maintaining accessibility for global academic discourse.

2.6. Limitations

Two primary limitations are acknowledged. First, the reliance on textual and historical analysis may underrepresent lived religious practices that could be more fully captured through ethnographic observation. Second, the process of translation from Vietnamese into English inevitably risks subtle

semantic loss, particularly in conveying culturally embedded concepts and idiomatic expressions. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating field interviews, participant observation, and comparative case studies across mainland Southeast Asia, thereby validating textual interpretations and expanding the scope of analysis.

Despite these constraints, the triangulated interpretive approach adopted here—drawing on history, philosophy, anthropology, and religious studies—provides a robust and comprehensive framework for understanding how Buddhism, through its doctrinal elasticity and ethical universality, became the unifying spiritual foundation for Southern Vietnam's diverse indigenous religions. This methodological design not only strengthens the reliability of the findings but also underscores the broader significance of Buddhism's adaptive ethos in sustaining cultural resilience and religious pluralism.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Doctrinal Convergence: Buddhism As Spiritual Foundation

The findings of this review demonstrate that the doctrinal convergence between Buddhism and the indigenous religions of Southern Vietnam was not incidental but the outcome of centuries of cultural osmosis, localized reinterpretation, and pragmatic adaptation. Buddhism entered Vietnam during the early centuries of the Common Era through both land and maritime routes, initially taking root among communities receptive to its ethical rationality and meditative practices (Le, 2001). Over time, the religion absorbed elements of Confucian and Taoist cosmologies, creating a triadic moral structure that enabled its adaptability across diverse regions of the country and facilitated its integration into local cultural frameworks.

In Southern Vietnam, particularly in the Mekong Delta, Buddhist doctrine provided the spiritual grammar for the emergence of movements such as Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Hoa Hao Buddhism, Caodaism, and the Vietnamese Mendicant Buddhist Sect. The founders of these traditions, including Doan Minh Huyen, Ngo Loi, Huynh Phu So, and Minh Dang Quang, derived their moral and metaphysical foundations from the Four Noble Truths, the doctrine of karma, and the practice of compassionate action (*karuṇā*). Each movement interpreted the Buddhist path not as withdrawal from worldly life but as moral engagement with the suffering of society, thereby transforming Buddhist soteriology into a socially embedded ethic.

Tran Thi Van Dung and Kanwal (2024) argue that Vietnamese Buddhism differs from Indian or Chinese Buddhism in its consistent preference for pragmatic soteriology—the application of Buddhist ethics to immediate social contexts. This practical orientation explains why new religions framed liberation not merely as transcendence from *samsara* but as social salvation in times of colonial hardship and existential crisis. The Tu An Hieu Nghia doctrine of “Four Great Debts of Gratitude” (to parents, nation, Buddha, and humankind) exemplifies how Buddhist compassion was translated into a civic and moral code, grounding metaphysical ethics in communal life.

Hoa Hao Buddhism represents a simplification of Pure Land Buddhism, emphasizing self-cultivation through daily practice, ethical rectitude, and remembrance of Amitābha (*Namo A Di Đà Phật*). As Truong Thu Trang and Kanwal (2021a) observe, this adaptation transformed Buddhism into a “religion of the heart,” internalizing spiritual devotion and eliminating elaborate temple rituals. Similarly, the Vietnamese Mendicant Buddhist Sect sought to reconcile Mahāyāna and Theravāda traditions, embodying the doctrinal harmony that defines Vietnamese religious thought (Thich, 2021). Collectively, these traditions confirm that doctrinal convergence was not syncretic confusion but a conscious indigenization of Buddhist philosophy designed to sustain ethical guidance and social stability. Buddhism thus became the civilizational matrix through which local religions articulated spiritual identity while preserving national unity and moral resilience.

3.2. Buddhist Ethical Frameworks in Indigenous Faiths

Another key finding concerns the enduring influence of Buddhist ethics—particularly compassion, gratitude, non-harm, and self-cultivation—in structuring the moral frameworks of Southern Vietnam’s indigenous religions. The Buddha’s principle of *Duy tuệ thị nghiệp* (“Wisdom is the true career”) resonates across these movements, which privilege wisdom and moral virtue over ritual and dogma (Tran, 1974).

The Buu Son Ky Huong movement, established in the mid-nineteenth century by Doan Minh Huyen, emphasized “learning Buddhism and cultivating humanity” (*học Phật tu nhân*), integrating Confucian ethics of filial piety and social order within the Buddhist path of mindfulness and moral purity. Its simplicity and inclusiveness made it accessible to rural populations, many of whom were illiterate, and

who understood ethical conduct as both a spiritual duty and a means of social redemption.

The Tu An Hieu Nghia religion extended this ethical humanism by transforming the Four Debts of Gratitude into a moral compass for community life. This ethical adaptation reflects what Truong Thu Trang and Kanwal (2021b) describe as cultural exchange and change in coastal Vietnamese communities, where Buddhist compassion becomes the unifying moral principle for diverse social groups. They note that this ethical syncretism promotes resilience, allowing religion to mediate between state policies, community values, and individual faith.

Hoa Hao Buddhism, founded by Huynh Phu So, offers an even more radical ethical reformulation. Rejecting monastic hierarchies and temple-centered rituals, it focuses on domestic worship, moral discipline, and self-sufficiency—an ethical democratization of Buddhism. Followers are expected to practice faith through daily work, social service, and honesty in conduct. This domesticated ethic transformed Buddhism from an elite religion of monasteries into a populist faith deeply embedded in agrarian culture (Taylor, 2007).

As Bhat and Majid (2024) highlight, Southeast Asian religions often evolve through bureaucratic and ethical transformations shaped by political modernization. Vietnam’s Buddhist-derived indigenous religions exemplify this process, where ethics become the mediating interface between spirituality and governance. The ethical framework of compassion and gratitude thus acts as a stabilizing force within a bureaucratized religious landscape, mitigating tensions between the state, the Sangha, and lay practitioners.

Within this moral architecture, Buddhist ethics serve both an emancipatory and integrative role, emancipatory in providing individuals with spiritual agency amid hardship, and integrative in sustaining social harmony across ethnic and class divisions. In this way, Buddhist ethics not only shaped the doctrinal foundations of indigenous religions but also provided the ethical infrastructure for resilience, cohesion, and continuity in Southern Vietnam’s religious modernity.

3.3. Socio-Cultural Syncretism and Community Resilience

Syncretism, understood as the blending of diverse religious and cultural elements, emerges as a central mechanism of survival and adaptation within Southern Vietnamese spirituality. Buddhism’s openness to doctrinal reinterpretation allowed it to

function as a cultural adhesive, harmonizing indigenous animism, Confucian filial ethics, Taoist cosmology, and local hero cults into a coherent moral universe.

As movements such as Buu Son Ky Huong and Hoa Hao Buddhism developed, they incorporated folk practices including ancestral veneration, nature worship, and the use of vernacular verses (*sấm giảng*) for moral instruction. This oral-poetic medium transformed Buddhist ideas into accessible moral lessons, reinforcing literacy through recitation and communal participation (Truong Thu Trang & Kanwal, 2021a). Caodaism, meanwhile, integrated Buddhist compassion and the karmic principle of universal salvation into a cosmopolitan theology that also drew from Christianity, Taoism, and Western spiritualism, reflecting Vietnam's openness to global currents of thought.

In Southern Vietnam's plural society—where Vietnamese, Khmer, Chinese, and Cham communities coexisted—Buddhism provided the ethical lingua franca for coexistence. Its capacity for cultural translation fostered tolerance and mutual recognition among faiths, minimizing sectarian conflict. These findings align with DiGregorio (2020), who observes that religious pluralism in Vietnam operates through civic engagement and moral reciprocity rather than theological competition. Buddhism's compassionate ethos enabled believers to participate in shared social activities such as charity, education, and disaster relief, transcending sectarian identity.

Further evidence from JHSSR studies substantiates this phenomenon. For example, Truong Thu Trang and Kanwal (2021b) show how coastal religious practices integrate Buddhist symbolism into local environmental ethics, linking spiritual merit with ecological stewardship. This syncretic sustainability echoes the Buddhist principle of interdependence (*pratityasamutpāda*), recognizing that human well-being and ecological balance are inseparable. Thus, the syncretic fabric of Southern Vietnamese religion demonstrates what Taylor (2007) calls "re-enchantment in modernity"—a process by which ancient ethical systems reassert cultural meaning in the face of modernization. The adaptability of Buddhism ensures community resilience, allowing religious traditions to reformulate themselves without losing moral coherence.

3.4. Regional Comparative Insights: Vietnam And Southeast Asian Parallels

The Vietnamese case must also be situated within

the broader context of Southeast Asian religious adaptation. Across the region, Buddhism has acted as a mediating tradition, facilitating local reinterpretations rather than imposing rigid orthodoxy. In Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar, similar patterns of integration have emerged, where Buddhist moral precepts interact with indigenous beliefs in spirits, ancestors, and local deities (Endres, 2011).

Bhat and Majid (2024) describe this phenomenon as the "bureaucratization of religion," in which modernization reshapes ritual hierarchies and institutionalizes previously informal spiritual networks. Vietnam's Buddhist-derived religions mirror this process: movements such as Caodaism developed hierarchical councils, administrative orders, and moral codes parallel to state structures, blending spiritual governance with civic discipline.

What distinguishes Vietnam, however, is the moral pluralism and pragmatic inclusivity that characterize its Buddhist syncretism. As Tran Thi Van Dung and Kanwal (2024) note, Indian and Vietnamese Buddhism share common ethical foundations, but the Vietnamese version localizes compassion and wisdom into social ethics of reciprocity and gratitude. This ethical localism allows Buddhism to engage dynamically with indigenous cosmologies rather than subsume them. Wu (2025) provides a comparative perspective from southern China, showing how religious healing practices intertwine with Buddhist and folk traditions to address health and communal harmony. Similar patterns in the Mekong Delta—where healing, ritual, and charity intertwine—demonstrate that Buddhism's social utility transcends doctrinal boundaries and reinforces communal resilience.

In this sense, Vietnamese Buddhism functions as both a spiritual and civilizational force. It embodies the continuity of ethical values, provides a moral framework for adaptation, and anchors modern religiosity in compassion-based humanism.

3.5. Synthesis: The "Red Thread" of Civilizational Continuity

Across doctrinal, ethical, and socio-cultural dimensions, Buddhism remains the unifying "red thread" that binds Southern Vietnam's indigenous religious landscape. Its flexibility allows for the coexistence of multiplicity without fragmentation—a characteristic that aligns with the civilizational resilience of Vietnamese culture itself (Tran, 2012).

Buddhism's non-confrontational attitude toward other faiths fosters interreligious dialogue, while its emphasis on *dukkha* (suffering) and *karuṇā*

(compassion) transforms religious practice into a moral pedagogy for everyday life. As Hoa Hao and Tu An Hieu Nghia demonstrate, religion becomes not merely transcendence but ethical activism—a means to reclaim dignity, resist domination, and nurture communal welfare.

The findings reaffirm that Southern Vietnamese

Buddhism, through its ethical pragmatism and cultural inclusivity, continues to serve as the philosophical foundation for both religious innovation and national identity. In doing so, it sustains Vietnam's pluralistic spiritual ecosystem while reinforcing the broader civilizational continuity of Southeast Asia.

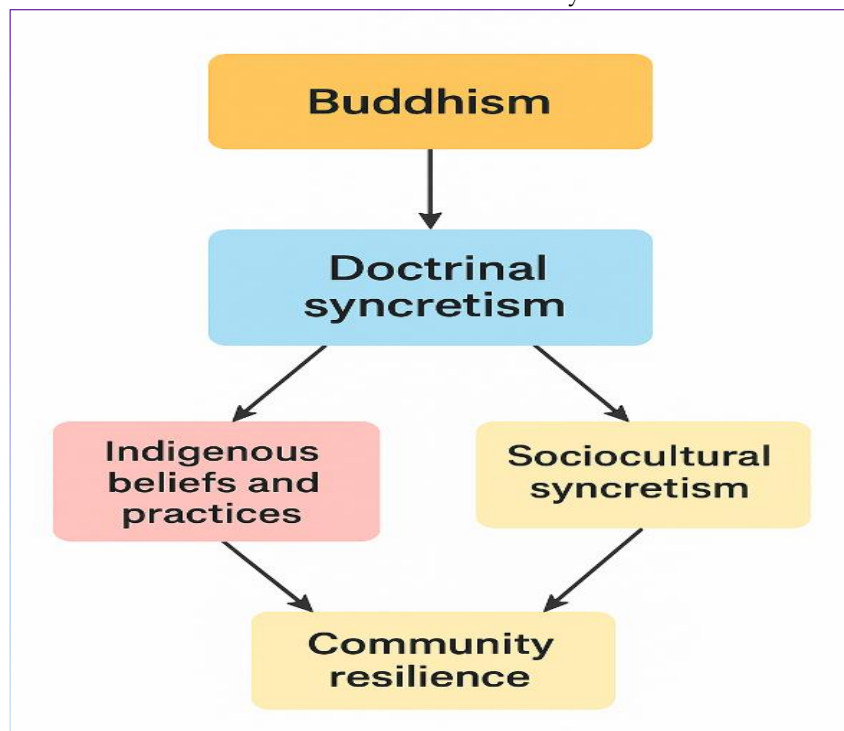


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of Buddhist Syncretism.

Source: Author, 2026.

This conceptual framework illustrates the integrative role of Buddhism as the ethical and doctrinal nucleus that binds Southern Vietnam's indigenous religious traditions. The metaphor of the "red thread" signifies Buddhism's capacity to weave together diverse belief systems through shared moral principles, particularly compassion (*karuṇā*), gratitude, and ethical reform. Rather than functioning as a hegemonic force, Buddhism operates as a mediating tradition, enabling doctrinal convergence and cultural continuity across movements such as Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Hòa Hảo Buddhism, Caodaism, and the Vietnamese Mendicant Buddhist Sect.

The model visualizes Buddhism not merely as a theological origin but as a dynamic ethical grammar through which indigenous religions articulate spiritual identity, communal resilience, and moral agency. Its doctrinal elasticity and pragmatic ethos allow for the localization of metaphysical concepts, such as karma, rebirth, and liberation, into civic codes and everyday practices. In this way, Buddhism

sustains a pluralistic religious ecosystem while reinforcing cultural cohesion, offering a civilizational scaffold that accommodates multiplicity without fragmentation.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1. Summary Of Key Findings

This review has demonstrated the enduring role of Buddhism as the ethical and philosophical backbone of indigenous religions in Southern Vietnam. Through doctrinal analysis, historical contextualization, and comparative synthesis, the study shows that Buddhism functions not only as a faith but also as a civilizational grammar of moral reasoning, adaptability, and cultural survival. By tracing the lineage of movements such as Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Hòa Hảo Buddhism, Caodaism, and the Vietnamese Mendicant Buddhist Sect, the findings highlight how Buddhist teachings, particularly the doctrines of karma, compassion, and interdependence, were indigenized into new ethical, social, and devotional forms. These traditions

collectively embody a vision of moral action and spiritual democracy, transforming compassion from a monastic virtue into a lived social ethic.

Doctrinally, Buddhism's integration into these local faiths reflects what Tran Thi Van Dung and Kanwal (2024) describe as contextual convergence, a process through which universal teachings are refracted through local cosmologies. Ethically, as Truong Thu Trang and Kanwal (2021a, 2021b) demonstrate, Buddhist values of gratitude, filial piety, and mindfulness have been localized to guide community life and ecological ethics in Southern Vietnam. Socioculturally, Buddhism has enabled religious pluralism without fragmentation, ensuring coexistence through compassion-based morality and mutual recognition (DiGregorio, 2020). Collectively, these findings affirm that Buddhism is not an external import but an endogenous moral language that continues to shape Vietnamese spiritual and cultural identity.

4.2. The Civilizational Function of Buddhism in Southern Vietnam

Buddhism's capacity to connect diverse religious movements arises from its non-exclusive ontology and pragmatic ethics. Unlike creedal traditions that demand adherence to fixed dogmas, Buddhism permits reinterpretation of its doctrines through cultural and historical circumstances. This doctrinal elasticity explains its continuous relevance from the Lý and Trần dynasties to the modern Mekong Delta.

In Southern Vietnam, where colonial disruption and socio-economic upheavals generated both material hardship and moral dislocation, Buddhist philosophy, particularly *karuṇā* (compassion) and *prajñā* (wisdom), offered ethical coherence and spiritual consolation. Movements such as Hòa Hảo Buddhism emerged as faiths of resilience, grounding the struggle for dignity and justice in Buddhist principles of moral causation and inner reform.

As Taylor (2007) and Le (2001) observe, the adaptability of Vietnamese Buddhism rests on its embeddedness in everyday life. It is not confined to monastic discipline but manifests as moral participation in the social world. Temples, village festivals, and community rituals serve as spaces where spiritual consciousness intertwines with civic virtue. This pragmatic religiosity ensures that even amid modernization and bureaucratic reform, Buddhist values remain socially operative.

Bhat and Majid (2024) describe the bureaucratization of religion in Southeast Asia as a double-edged process that professionalizes faith institutions while risking the erosion of spiritual

spontaneity. Yet in Vietnam, this process is moderated by Buddhist ethics. The Sangha's engagement with social welfare, disaster relief, and education illustrates how Buddhism transforms bureaucratic organization into a vehicle of compassion, maintaining moral authenticity within institutional frameworks. Thus, Buddhism's civilizational function lies not in proselytization but in moral integration, the capacity to sustain harmony among disparate belief systems while guiding them toward shared ethical goals.

4.3. Buddhism As a Mechanism of Syncretic Resilience

A further conclusion is that the adaptability of Buddhism in Southern Vietnam embodies what may be termed syncretic resilience, the ability to preserve ethical and spiritual coherence through dynamic cultural exchange. This resilience is rooted in the Buddhist conception of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), which views all phenomena as interconnected and interdependent.

The indigenous religions of Southern Vietnam exemplify this principle in practice. They integrate Buddhist compassion with ancestral veneration, Taoist cosmology, and local spirit cults to create holistic worldviews responsive to community needs. Such integration is not dilution but innovation, an organic synthesis that mirrors the adaptive logic of Buddhism itself (Thich, 2021).

The findings of Truong Thu Trang and Kanwal (2021b) on the coastal communities of Bạc Liêu further demonstrate how Buddhist-inflected ethics contribute to sustainable cultural practices and environmental stewardship. In these contexts, the Buddhist virtue of compassion extends beyond human relations to encompass the natural world, fostering an ecological spirituality that resonates with contemporary environmental ethics. Similarly, the *Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa* doctrine institutionalizes gratitude (*hiếu nghĩa*) as a moral framework linking personal piety to collective responsibility. Its "four debts of gratitude" to parents, nation, Buddha, and humankind encode the Buddhist principle of interdependence into the moral fabric of everyday life.

These examples illustrate that Buddhism's syncretic resilience operates across three dimensions:

Doctrinal continuity, maintaining coherence with Buddhist metaphysics.

Ethical translatability, reinterpreting compassion and mindfulness into civic virtues.

Cultural inclusivity, integrating folk practices

without compromising core values.

Through this triadic adaptability, Buddhism functions as the spiritual software enabling Vietnam's multi-religious society to evolve harmoniously. It sustains doctrinal coherence, ethical relevance, and cultural inclusivity, thereby reaffirming its role as the red thread of civilizational continuity in Southern Vietnam.

4.4. Comparative And Contemporary Implications

The Vietnamese experience of religious adaptation offers significant insights into the broader dynamics of Southeast Asian religious modernity. Wu (2025), in his study of Chaoshan, China, demonstrates how ritual healing and Buddhist ethics intersect in addressing health and communal balance. These parallel underscores the capacity of Buddhism's integrative ethics to mediate between modernity and tradition across diverse Asian contexts.

In contemporary Vietnam, rapid urbanization, migration, and globalization continue to reshape spiritual life. Yet Buddhism endures as a moral constant that informs national identity, education, and interfaith relations. The Vietnam Buddhist Sangha's growing collaboration with environmental and humanitarian organizations illustrates how compassion-based ethics are being rearticulated for the twenty-first century. The Hòa Hảo community's emphasis on self-reliance and ethical simplicity has acquired renewed relevance amid socio-economic uncertainty. Its model of grassroots spirituality, practiced through charity, communal work, and ethical living, reflects Buddhism's core message of liberation through moral action. Similarly, Caodaism's inclusive cosmology demonstrates the potential of Buddhism-inspired syncretism to foster global interreligious understanding.

On a civilizational scale, Vietnam's Buddhist syncretism exemplifies what Kanwal (2023) describes as ethical resilience, a mode of cultural survival rooted in compassion, reciprocity, and mutual respect. In a world increasingly marked by polarization and ecological crisis, the Vietnamese example demonstrates that ancient ethical systems can continue to guide modern plural societies toward sustainable coexistence. The contemporary relevance of Buddhism in Southern Vietnam therefore extends beyond religious identity, offering a philosophical resource for ethical governance, intercultural dialogue, and human development.

4.5 Theoretical Synthesis and Future Research

This review contributes to theoretical debates on religion and civilization by proposing that Buddhism functions as an ethical ecosystem rather than a static belief system. Its doctrines generate moral energy that sustains cultural evolution, mediates social transformation, and anchors identity through compassion.

From a theoretical perspective, this ecosystemic model of Buddhism supports three interpretive propositions. First, civilizational continuity is sustained through Buddhism's moral flexibility, which enables societies to navigate historical rupture without ethical disintegration. Second, syncretic equilibrium characterizes Vietnamese religious pluralism, which is not the erosion of doctrine but the rebalancing of moral universes. Third, pragmatic humanism defines Vietnamese Buddhism, which reinterprets spirituality as ethical practice embedded in everyday life.

Future research could deepen this analysis through comparative ethnographic studies across Southeast Asia, examining how Buddhist ethics inform civic life in similarly plural settings. Longitudinal fieldwork on the Hòa Hảo and Caodaist communities, for example, could explore how new generations reinterpret Buddhist moral language in response to globalization and digital communication. Interdisciplinary studies linking Buddhist ethics with environmental sustainability and peace education would further extend the insights of this review to global concerns.

4.6. Final Reflection: The Red Thread of Compassion

The metaphor of the red thread encapsulates the central conclusion of this study: Buddhism's enduring influence in Southern Vietnam lies in its capacity to bind diversity through compassion. Across centuries, doctrines have been reformulated, rituals simplified, and institutions restructured, yet the moral essence of *từ bi* (loving-kindness) remains constant.

This thread weaves through the teachings of Đoàn Minh Huyền, Huỳnh Phú Sổ, and Minh Đăng Quang; through village temples, floating pagodas, and humble home altars; and through the daily lives of millions for whom ethical living is both a religious act and a civic duty. In an era of cultural fragmentation, the Vietnamese Buddhist experience reminds the world that civilizational survival is not secured through conquest or orthodoxy but through moral adaptability grounded in compassion. Buddhism, as the red thread connecting indigenous religions, continues to sustain not only the spiritual identity of

Southern Vietnam but also the ethical imagination of humankind.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

5.1. Limitations

Despite the interpretive depth and comprehensive synthesis presented in this review, several limitations must be acknowledged in order to contextualize its scope and scholarly contribution.

First, the study relies primarily on secondary data, including published monographs, canonical texts, and peer-reviewed articles in both Vietnamese and English. While these sources provide valuable theoretical and historical insights, they cannot fully capture the experiential dimension of religious practice. The lived spirituality of adherents to Hòa Hảo, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Caodaism, and related movements—expressed through daily ritual, oral poetry, and community gatherings—remains underexplored due to the absence of ethnographic fieldwork. Future research could employ participant observation and in-depth interviews to illuminate how Buddhist values are embodied in contemporary local contexts.

Second, linguistic and translation challenges present another limitation. Vietnamese religious vocabulary, deeply rooted in Sino-Vietnamese and Pali-Sanskrit traditions, often resists precise equivalence in English. Although every effort was made to ensure semantic fidelity, certain nuances, such as the layered meanings of *hiếu nghĩa* (filial gratitude) or *từ bi* (compassionate loving-kindness), may only partially translate across cultural frameworks. Comparative philological research could help future scholars bridge these interpretive gaps and preserve the richness of indigenous categories of thought.

Third, the study is regionally focused on Southern Vietnam, with only limited comparative reference to Central and Northern Buddhist traditions. Although the south provides a particularly rich example of Buddhist syncretism, the broader Vietnamese spiritual landscape, especially the influence of Zen (*Thiền*) and Pure Land (*Tịnh độ*) schools, deserves integrated examination to map the national diversity of Buddhist adaptation.

Fourth, while the article references key works from the *Horizon Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research (JHSSR)* and other SCOPUS-indexed journals, the availability of open-access Vietnamese sources remains constrained. Many historical documents and local monographs are either unpublished or archived in temple libraries,

which poses challenges for cross-verification and digital scholarship. Greater digitization of Vietnamese religious archives would substantially enhance research transparency and accessibility.

Finally, the present synthesis, though comprehensive, treats doctrinal, ethical, and sociocultural dimensions largely at the macro level. A more granular, micro-historical perspective tracing particular communities or lineages could further clarify how Buddhist ethics evolve within changing socio-political settings. Such localized studies would enrich the broader narrative by revealing how universal Buddhist principles are continually reinterpreted in specific cultural and historical contexts.

5.2. Future Directions

Building on the limitations identified, future research can advance the study of Buddhism and indigenous religions in Vietnam through several complementary directions.

Ethnographic And Lived Religion Studies

Immersive fieldwork in Hòa Hảo villages, Caodai temples, and Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa communities in provinces such as A Giang, Đồng Tháp, and Bạc Liêu would capture the dynamic interaction between textual doctrine and lived ethics. Such ethnographic engagement would deepen understanding of how Buddhist-derived moral frameworks are negotiated in daily life, revealing the ways in which abstract principles are embodied in ritual, oral poetry, and communal practice.

Comparative Southeast Asian Analysis

Drawing on regional parallels explored by Bhat and Majid (2024) and Wu (2025), future comparative work could examine how Buddhist syncretism in Vietnam aligns with or diverges from similar processes in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and southern China. Cross-border analysis would yield insights into shared civilizational patterns of ethical resilience and interfaith coexistence, situating Vietnam within a broader Southeast Asian religious ecology.

Digital Humanities and Archival Preservation

With the increasing digitalization of temple records and community archives, digital humanities tools could be employed to map networks of transmission. For example, researchers could trace how doctrines of compassion, gratitude, or karma disseminated from Buddhist monastic centers into rural religious movements. These methods could also visualize the spread of syncretic texts such as the *Sấm*

Giảng (prophetic verses) of Huỳnh Phú Sổ, thereby enhancing transparency and accessibility in religious scholarship.

Gender And Social Justice Dimensions

Another promising frontier lies in exploring the role of women in sustaining and transmitting Buddhist ethics within indigenous faiths. Female devotees and mediums often function as moral educators and custodians of community piety. Linking gender studies with religious ethics would illuminate how Buddhist compassion intersects with female agency, social reform, and the negotiation of moral authority in local contexts.

Environmental And Ethical Sustainability

Future research should expand on the findings of Truong Thu Trang and Kanwal (2021b), connecting Buddhist ecological consciousness with contemporary debates on climate adaptation in the Mekong Delta. Such work could frame Buddhism as a source of environmental ethics and community-based resilience, aligning traditional moral systems with global sustainability goals and contributing to ecological spirituality.

Interdisciplinary Ethical Modeling

Building on the “ethical ecosystem” concept introduced in this paper, further studies could apply systems thinking and moral philosophy to analyze how Buddhist ethics function as adaptive feedback loops within society. Integrating insights from moral psychology, sociology, and cultural studies would yield a more nuanced theoretical model of how compassion sustains social equilibrium and mediates cultural transformation.

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Global Dialogues and Peace Studies

Finally, there is scope to position Vietnam’s Buddhist syncretism within global discourse on interfaith harmony and peacebuilding. The Vietnamese example offers a living model of how doctrinal flexibility, ethical pragmatism, and cultural inclusivity can counteract ideological extremism and restore balance in divided societies. In this way, Vietnam’s Buddhist.

5.3. Concluding Perspective on Future Scholarship

In conclusion, while this study has offered an interpretive synthesis of Buddhism’s formative influence on the indigenous religions of Southern Vietnam, its broader contribution lies in establishing a foundation for transdisciplinary dialogue. The integration of religious studies, ethics, cultural anthropology, and digital scholarship provides fertile ground for future researchers to extend the “red thread” of compassion into new analytical domains and methodological frameworks.

By addressing the limitations identified, subsequent scholarship can further illuminate how Vietnamese Buddhism continues to evolve as a living moral organism, one that adapts to historical change while maintaining ethical coherence. This adaptability underscores Buddhism’s dual role as both a spiritual tradition and a cultural methodology of coexistence. It demonstrates how faith, ethics, and culture can flourish in harmony across difference and time, offering a model of resilience and inclusivity that remains profoundly relevant to contemporary global challenges.

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