

AD-775 675

IS THE WAR IN VIETNAM MORALLY DEFENSIBLE

Corbin W. Ketchersid

Army War College  
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania

7 December 1970

DISTRIBUTED BY:

**NTIS**

**National Technical Information Service**  
**U. S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**  
5285 Port Royal Road, Springfield Va. 22151

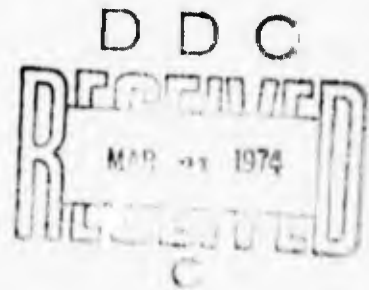
USAWC RESEARCH ELEMENT  
(Essay)

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Defense or any of its agencies. This document may not be released for open publication until it has been cleared by the Department of Defense.

IS THE WAR IN VIETNAM MORALLY DEFENSIBLE?

by

Colonel Corbin W. Ketchersid  
Chaplain



US Army War College  
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania  
7 December 1970

Approved for public  
release; distribution  
unlimited.

## SUMMARY

Moral support must come from religious leaders and religious groups for a war in which their country is involved. In this essay an attempt is made to establish the moral defensibility of the United States presence in Vietnam, without going into the modality of the war. Arguments are presented to prove that our actions **there** are supported by the major religious groups of both Vietnam and the United States. Conditions for a just war are discussed from the point of view of Judaeo-Christian theological concepts.

## IS THE WAR IN VIETNAM MORALLY DEFENSIBLE?

In the history of man it is generally conceded that his religious beliefs shape and rule his culture, mores, education, politics, and economics. Man's recognition of a power greater than himself has led in one way or another to what we know today as rules of morality or ethics. Man's fear or awe of this great power has also led to the development of the myriad religions of the world. No society can be understood or appreciated, much less influenced to any lasting degree, without an awareness of the impact of local religions on its people. This is especially true when we are speaking of Americans and the people of South Vietnam.

Since moral support for the actions of a nation, and this includes wars, must come from religious leaders and religious groups of the countries involved, it is most important for the political and military leaders to have the moral backing in a greater or lesser degree of the religious groups proper to their societies. The influence of churches, pagodas, temples and synagogues, as well as the philosophies and doctrines emanating from them, affects great numbers of people and in a most forceful manner.

To investigate the moral defensibility of the war in Vietnam, it will be helpful to know something of the moral support given to their respective governments by the religious bodies of both Vietnam and the United States. First for Vietnam.

The question is proposed: ARE THE RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN VIETNAM ANTI-WAR OR ANTI-GOVERNMENT?

To answer this properly one must first examine the religious situation in Vietnam. At least four major beliefs have had a profound impact on the people and their culture and are reflected subtly or obviously in behavior and customs. These are Animism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Christianity found its way to Vietnam later and is now a strong religious and political force. The result of this potpourri is a blend or synthesis of beliefs in which the forms and practices are peculiarly Vietnamese. Buddhism in Vietnam, for instance, is unlike Buddhism in Thailand. Catholics may practice ancestor worship and Buddhists may adhere also to the principles of Confucianism, but through all of these travels the thread of Animism.

Animism is the oldest of Vietnamese religions. It has been called the "peoples religion," and is practiced basically among the Montagnards, the inhabitants of the Central Highlands. Animism is the collection of beliefs that every human being has one or more spirits which can either help us or hurt us and that such things as rivers, mountains, trees, the soil and the weather also have good and bad spirits. Americans familiar with Indian lore and customs in our own country would better understand the Animists.

The Montagnards are a simple people, and have generally been the pawns of whatever government or group is in power, or at best are ignored by, for example, Saigon, because they are so far away from the centers of culture and have no particular influence. After being trained to fight the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese, they have done so with distinction. In the same token they have

suffered much at the hands of the Viet Cong and Hanoi, with the result that for the present they are loyal to Saigon and to their American advisers. Constituting about 5 percent of the population, they must depend to a great degree in modern times on a beneficent political party in Saigon, whether they are completely aware of this fact or not, for protection and even life itself.

Taoism has a limited formal organization in Vietnam today, but is much in evidence in the daily life cycle of the Vietnamese people. Its more basic beliefs and practices have been absorbed into other religions found in the country, and are noticed particularly in the consultation of horoscopes for certain actions or decisions and the extensive use of astrologers. As a religion Taoism presents no problem to the government.

Confucianism generally makes one think of ancestor veneration. Coming from China, the Confucian influence is very strong in the outlying, rural areas of Vietnam. This way of life makes itself known in the ancestral shelf of most Vietnamese homes, the ancestral memorial tablets, the Tet holidays, and the general respect paid to the older people. Confucianists believe that the family is always more important than the individual, and that men should be more conscious of their obligations than their rights. Under the French rule Confucianism declined and lost the dominant position it had held throughout the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, its basic precepts remained deeply imbedded in the morals and values of the people.

Buddhism, originating in India about 500 B. C., is without doubt the most visible of Vietnamese beliefs and has contributed immensely to the formation of Vietnamese culture and character over the centuries. The Chinese form of Buddhism seems to be most dominant today in South Vietnam, and this is a significant fact in the politics of South Vietnam. Buddhism attempts to tie man to eternity by providing a means by which he can adjust to what seems unchangeable in his environment. The rule of life as presented by Buddhism is one of accepting suffering and misfortune with patience and serenity, and generally living according to the Golden Rule. Buddhists believe in reincarnation, and a person's rebirth in another life is determined by the sum total of his good or bad actions. This religion does not believe in a prayer-answering deity as most western religions teach, but rather that the ultimate goal of supreme happiness is Nirvana, the summit of existence, complete detachment, the city of peace and perfect peace itself.

There are two great divisions of Buddhism: Theravada, which teaches that only a select few will reach Nirvana; and Mahayana which teaches that everyone can strive for the better world. This latter is the major form in Vietnam, although it is permeated with Animistic practices as well as some of the doctrines of Taoism and Confucianism. Since 1948, Vietnamese Buddhist groups have strengthened their organizations, and currently there exists the very strong Unified Buddhist Association, which includes all significant branches of the religion in South Vietnam.

Probably the one significant unifying force for the Buddhists was the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, a Roman Catholic, who openly favored his family and his religion. Largely as a result of Buddhist opposition and psychological use of it by other dissident groups in South Vietnam, including many military figures, the Diem government ended in November 1963 with the murder of the President and his brother. The actions that led to the military coup, and the justification for what took place, have been a matter of much debate. True, there was political and religious discrimination of the Buddhists by Diem, who showed a preference for Catholics for high civil and military posts. As the French had found out, the Catholics usually had higher educational and professional qualifications than the non-Catholic groups. For the most part, the Buddhist monks are an educated group, but they are also passive, and South Vietnam was conducting a war with the Communists. The Buddhist ranks could also be more easily infiltrated by the insurgents, who made the best possible use of the discontent prevalent under Diem. Hue, the largest city of the northern part of South Vietnam, was the scene of a demonstration and a riot in May 1963, resulting in the death of several Buddhist monks and followers during a procession. This began the series of incidents and self-immolations that led to the downfall of the government of Diem.

The foregoing shows the potential force of a large religious group in a country such as South Vietnam, and the tremendous influence it holds over the future of any regime in power.



Let us now look at another major religious and political force in South Vietnam, the Roman Catholic group. At present constituting 10 to 11 percent of the population, Catholicism was introduced into Vietnam in the sixteenth century by Portuguese and Italian Jesuit missionaries, but received its greatest stimulus in the seventeenth century through the missionary work of the French Jesuit, Alexander of Rhodes. He is the same man who is given credit for the development of the Vietnamese language as we now know it.

It is impossible to treat the subject of the Catholic Church in South Vietnam today without mention of the Geneva Accords of July 1954. This "Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Viet-Nam," as it was called, dealt with the establishment of a demarcation line and a demilitarized zone on the 17th parallel, as well as permission for groups to move from one side of the parallel to the other if they so desired. This latter agreement is found in Chapter II, Article 14, and resulted in what is called the Great Exodus of 1954. Briefly, this was the resettlement of about 861,000 North Vietnamese, the majority of the number being Catholic, to areas south of the 17th parallel. There is good reason to believe the reports that another 100,000 wished to leave, but were subjected to threats, punishment, even death, for causing such embarrassment to Hanoi. There was no great exodus to the North, there being a mere 5,000 people deciding for that option, and this certainly did not improve the image of the "ideal community" of Ho Chi Minh.

The Catholic people went south with their parish priests, sometimes whole villages, and made up a very strong nucleus of anti-Communist forces in the south. Their loyalty to Diem was demonstrated in many ways, politically and militarily, and he reciprocated with a vigor and kindness that was misunderstood and misused by his enemies. The Catholic educational system provided qualified civilian and military leaders so necessary for the survival of the tiny, new nation. But this was not the proper road toward winning the minds and hearts of all the people, and in the end Diem fell victim to a militant group of Buddhists who had the sympathy and support of many members of the foreign press as well as a great part of the population. Ironically, this situation was followed with great joy by Hanoi and actually followed the plan of the Communist element to overthrow the government of South Vietnam. Diem had followed a pattern of leadership that was traditional for him and for Southeast Asia; however, in these modern times he made the gross mistake of not winning over to his side all of the religious sects. Practically speaking, this would be quite impossible in any nation, let alone a nation at war.

WHAT IS THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN VIETNAM TODAY? It has been a long time since the Geneva Accords of 1954, and several governments have come and gone in Saigon since the death of Diem. None, including the present regime of Thieu and Ky, has received the whole-hearted support and blessing of the American people. Our government, however, has apparently established a working relationship with President Thieu, who is doing his best under

very adverse conditions to save his people and his country, to prevent a Communist takeover, and to end the war. He is doing this with the help of most of the religious groups in his country. All beliefs are represented at all levels of government, civilian and military, in the cities and among the peasants. At this time there appears to be the harmony between all of the Buddhist sects, the Catholics and other Christian denominations, that is so necessary in Vietnam today. During the Diem regime, for example, there were practically only Catholic chaplains in the Vietnamese armed forces; now there are Buddhist and Protestant chaplains, all working together in a great effort to care for their charges in that combat-torn land. There is a fair representation of all sects in the Vietnamese Congress, the lack of which at one time was a source of great discontent, especially among the Buddhists. Village and province chiefs, doctors and lawyers, teachers and police--all represent the various religions of the people. Without doubt, such a condition, added to the advanced state of training and morale of the armed forces of Vietnam, has contributed much to the mounting success of the present regime.

Of great comfort to the people of the United States is the fact that the success of the Vietnamization program now in progress in South Vietnam is virtually assured because of the growing trust of the people in each other and in their leaders. The local religions have much to do with such attitudes, as the history of Vietnam clearly proves.

South Vietnam poses many problems and apparent contradictions to the average American citizen. Many of us have been there, but that is not possible for all Americans. Most who have served in Vietnam are sympathetic and understanding as far as the Vietnamese people are concerned. They do not want war any more than we do, and they want us to be able to leave their country as soon as possible, just as we do.

All of our Presidents since World War II have held the firm conviction that aggression must be stopped if Communist subversion is to be contained and another major war averted. Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and now President Nixon--all have pledged that we would assist Vietnam. Our civil and military leaders believe that South Vietnam, a country we are pledged by treaty to assist, was the victim of aggression by the Communists from North Vietnam. We promised our help and gave it in answer to the request of these seventeen million people. If we are to practice what we preach, namely, peace with freedom and the right of self-determination of all nations and peoples, then we must acknowledge our pledges if people on both sides, friends as well as enemies, are to know our stated purpose.

While the Vietnamese people are working toward greater and greater unity in order to achieve their goals and end the war, it is in the United States, the citadel of freedom and the best example of self-determination in the world, that the forces of dissent have threatened the entire effort of the past several years. Even in the churches and synagogues, dissenters,

demonstrators and disturbers of the peace have confused many of our citizens as to just what is our position in Vietnam. Is it morally right for us to be there? Is our position in Southeast Asia morally defensible?

The answer to this is an unqualified affirmative. It is morally right for the United States to promise to assist a small country unjustly attacked by another and larger one, and it is only right for the United States to keep that promise. We are involved in a shooting war like no other that we have ever been involved in. The war in Vietnam is the type labeled "Limited War," and is a new concept of conflict for Americans. We want to fight it, win it and get back home, but this is not the case in Vietnam. The question of whether or not we should be involved in Vietnam has divided our citizens in an unbelievable manner, even to the extent of great bitterness and violence.

"Limited War" is the trend of the future, if the forces of Communist Russia and North Vietnam and China are to have their way. And they will have their way if we surrender to them the people of South Vietnam. A nation is slowly being welded together in spite of the war, and a sense of national unity is becoming apparent. Most Americans sense this, and are willing to give more time, money and, if necessary, even lives.

The Judaeo-Christian theological concept of a just war has been developing since the beginning of mankind. Man has constantly asked his leaders, and especially his spiritual leaders of whatever time and belief to which he belonged, "Is it possible

to kill my fellow man in battle and not be guilty of murder?"  
And, "Who decides whether or not a particular war is justified?"  
Finally, "What are the principles of a just war?"

Writing in The Homiletic and Pastoral Review, the Reverend James C. Fleck, of the Society of Jesus, brought the concept of a "just war" up to date not just for Catholics, but for Protestants and Jews as well. He proposes the two basic questions of whether it is ever morally justifiable for a man to wage war in the service of his country, and is it ever morally justifiable for a man to refuse to wage war when his country calls him to do so. He then gives the answer in the Judaeo-Christian tradition of the "just war."

This tradition states that the Bible and human reason; the Old Testament; the New Testament; the Church; the early Christian Fathers; popes; bishops; saints; theologians; reformers; creeds; biblical exegesis; ecumenical councils; synods, and conferences; declarations of social action committees of Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic persuasions have all manifested in words and deeds that a man may, and in fact, in certain circumstances must fight in a "just war" to defend his neighbors and country from the unjust attacks of enemies. The "just war" theory and the Natural Law from which it derives is a part of the revelation of God to man through human nature. By its use, the explicit claims and duties for fulfilling the demands of justice and charity between men is delineated in broad norms for human conduct.<sup>1</sup>

For his Student Thesis in 1969, Chaplain Ben S. Price, an Army Chaplain and Baptist minister, covered in depth the subject,

---

<sup>1</sup> James C. Fleck, The Homiletic and Pastoral Review, July 1966, p. 820.

American Religious Groups And The Vietnam War. His extensive research included those who opposed the war in Vietnam, those who supported the administration's policies and actions, and those who had no particular opinion as a group. After considering the teachings of the Catholics, the Jewish leaders, and all of the Protestant denominations in the United States, he concludes that there are divisions within groups and between groups on the morality of the war in Vietnam. Some denominations are more outspoken than others on the subject, and some of our American churches are basically pacifist, and therefore, against any and all wars, no matter what the provocation.

The major Protestant denominations and the Catholics have had individual spokesmen or groups speak out on the issue of war, but not as the official representatives of their churches. For instance, about 6,000 Roman Catholic priests have united in an anti-war stand against the government, but there are 54,000 others who are either behind the administration or at least are not vocal about it. Jewish spokesmen from among the rabbinical group are generally against the war and the administration supporting it.

There are several thousand clergymen in uniform, the military chaplains, who represent practically every religious belief in America, and who are in the various branches of the military service with the blessings of their religious leaders. This means, at least, that the religions of America are not against military service. The problem is simply the war in Vietnam, this special war that has caused so much debate and difference of opinion,

DO THEN, THE CHURCHES OF AMERICA SUPPORT THE WAR IN VIETNAM? And on what do they base such support?

Let us examine the position of the Catholic Church as to the "just war" theory. Pope Pius XII stated in 1957 that a war of efficacious self defense against unjust attacks, which is undertaken with hope of success is morally right. Pope Paul VI in his audiences with military men and women from all over the world praises their vocation. His predecessor Pope John had been a soldier. The Second Vatican Council recognized the possibility of wars in the future, and while it stated the hope of an international organization that could prevent or settle all wars, until such time governments are accorded the right of self defense after every means of peaceful settlement has been exhausted. It added that those who are in the military service are the nation's agents of security and freedom, and therefore, contribute to the establishment of peace.

While phrased differently and stressing their individual doctrinal tenets, Protestant churches, creeds and practices are virtually identified with those of Roman Catholics as regards the "just wars." All provide room for the sincere conscientious objector as well as for the combat soldier.

The Jewish opinions of "just wars" are generally identical with those of the Christians, which rather conclusively proves that the "just war" tradition has always been the mainstream Judaeo-Christian consensus. The "just war" doctrine perhaps will always be the general consensus of mankind.



Now for an examination of the conditions or principles for a "just war," which are also the result of the Judaeo-Christian consensus. They have been often and variously stated, nevertheless they traditionally include the following:

1. Legitimate authority. War is a public affair and must serve public purposes. This can be decided only by the highest public authority.

2. Just cause. The war must be waged in defense of a profound right, chances of victory must be reasonably high, and the good effects must be judged to exceed the inevitable evil effects.

3. Last resort. A nation must exhaust all other reasonable alternatives before resorting to arms.

4. Right intention. The stated aims of the national policy makers must truthfully reflect their goals and ambitions. It must not become needlessly brutal.

5. Moral means. No intrinsically immoral means may be employed. Non-combatants must be immune from direct attack.

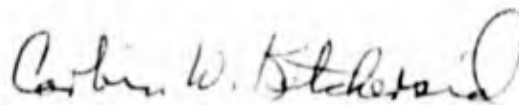
The anti-war proponents are quick to point out the use of napalm, the indiscriminate bombing of cities in North Vietnam, that all alternatives were not exhausted, that Congress did not declare war in Vietnam. The bleeding hearts know by memory the facts of My-Lai, or any other atrocity that may have been committed by our side. We never deny such things if they are true; war is brutal, and sometimes it brutalizes people. But that is not the general method of conduct of our American fighting men.

The same people will not admit to the atrocities of the Viet Cong, the mistreatment of prisoners by North Vietnam, or the evil stated goals of the Communist forces. They will not concede the great possibility of a mammoth blood bath in South Vietnam if we were to withdraw our support and allow Hanoi to take over the South.

For the most part the churches and the people of the United States support the war in Vietnam, but they want it to end soon and honorably. Most religious leaders see our presence in Vietnam as an answer to a call for help, and perhaps as a lesser evil than if we permitted the slaughter of the South Vietnamese people, or their enslavement by communism.

There may be sincere differences as to the degree of military commitment, but our involvement in Southeast Asia is a moral and necessary price for a nation that believes in championing the cause of the oppressed.

Let our churches, their theologians and all other adherents pray that peace will come soon, a peace that will ensure the integrity and security of South Vietnam. To do otherwise than keep our word and honor our commitment there would truly be one of the most immoral acts of history.



CORBIN W. KETCHERSID  
Colonel, Chaplain

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Fall, Bernard B. The Two Viet-Nams. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1966.
2. Fall, Bernard B. Viet-Nam Witness 1953-66. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1966.
3. Finn, James. Protest: Pacificism and Politics. New York: Random House, 1967.
4. Fleck, James C., S.J. "The Just War Theory--Past, Present, Future" Parts I and II. The Homiletic and Pastoral Review, Vol. 66, Nos. 10 and 11, July-August 1965. New York: Joseph A. Wagner, Inc.
5. Hamilton, Michael P. The Vietnam War: Christian Perspectives. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967.
6. Price, (COL) Ben S. American Religious Groups and the Vietnam War. (Student Thesis). US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. 25 February 1969.
7. Raskin, Marcus G., and Fall, Bernard B. The Vietnam Reader. New York: Alfred A. Knoff, Inc. and Random House, Inc., 1965.
8. Ross, Floyd H. and Hills, Tynette. The Great Religions By Which Men Live (Rev.) Greenwich, Conn. Fawcett Publications, Inc.
9. Sheen, Fulton J. War and Guilt. Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishers, 1941.
10. Tanham, George K. War Without Guns. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1966.
11. Trager, Frank N. Why Viet Nam? New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1966.