



Governing Religion in Vietnam (1986-2022): A Case Study of Ho Chi Minh City

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the transition from a “control” model to a “governance” model of religious policy in Vietnam over the period 1986-2022, highlighting key institutional milestones (1986, 2004, and 2016). Employing a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach that combines political science, sociology, and religious studies, the research is based on secondary sources—including Party documents, legal frameworks, government reports, and scholarly works—and applies content analysis and historical-comparative methods. Ho Chi Minh City serves as a case study, illustrating how multi-religious diversity and the complexity of religious activity have shaped local policy adaptation and governance practice. Findings reveal that institutional reforms have progressively institutionalized religious freedom while reflecting a pragmatic balance between political stability and religious expression. The case of Ho Chi Minh City demonstrates both the potential and the limitations of this governance shift, revealing administrative coordination challenges and the need for adaptability amid urban complexity. The study further suggests that Vietnam’s approach reflects efforts toward greater compatibility with international human rights norms, though this process remains gradual and selective. The paper concludes by discussing sustainability concerns under globalization, urbanization, and digital transformation, and proposes areas for further empirical research.

KEYWORDS: Religious policy, Governance of religion, Freedom of belief, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, Đổi Mới reforms.

INTRODUCTION

Religion is a profound social and cultural phenomenon that shapes the political, spiritual, and security dimensions of many societies. In Vietnam, religion is recognized both as an integral part of the national cultural fabric and as a sensitive domain requiring careful governance to preserve political and social stability. In the post-1975 period, religious policy was largely defined by “control,” as the state relied on administrative measures to restrict religious activities and regarded religion as a potential source of instability. The Đổi Mới (Renovation) reforms of 1986 marked a decisive turning point. The Party’s comprehensive reform agenda redefined religion, shifting from viewing it primarily as a security concern to recognizing it as a cultural and social dimension with moral and humanistic values capable of contributing to national development (Tran, 2022).

Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam’s largest economic and cultural hub, represents a microcosm of the country’s diverse religious landscape, encompassing Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Caodaism, Hoa Hao Buddhism, and various forms of folk belief. By the end of 2022, the city was home to 11 religions with 33 registered religious organizations officially recognized by the State, 2,970 places of worship, and more than 160 male and female religious orders with headquarters or representative offices in the city. The city had an estimated 3.9 million followers (accounting for 43% of its population), over 10,000 clergy, more than 3,000 religious dignitaries, and nearly 7,000 monks and nuns. In addition, the city has witnessed the emergence of new religious phenomena, often referred to as “strange religions” (Ho Chi Minh City Department of Home Affairs, Committee for Religious Affairs [HCMC DOHA-CRA], 2023). With such diversity and scale, Ho Chi Minh City vividly illustrates the profound transformations in religious policy during the Đổi Mới era. Religious life has expanded in scope and variety, yet it has also generated

complex challenges, including the rapid proliferation of places of worship, the rising number of adherents, and the emergence of new forms of religious practice in cyberspace. These dynamics have compelled local authorities to adopt more flexible approaches, gradually moving from administrative control toward a governance model rooted in the rule of law, dialogue, and cooperation with religious organizations (Phan, 2025).

Over the past three decades, Vietnam's legal and policy framework on religion has developed significantly. Before 1986, state policy was predominantly restrictive and top-down. After Đổi Mới, especially with the 1992 Constitution, the state began to recognize freedom of belief and religion as a fundamental right. Successive milestones include Resolution 24-NQ/TW (1990) on religious affairs, the 2004 Ordinance on Belief and Religion, the 2013 Constitution, and the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion. The 2016 Law in particular represents a watershed moment, codifying a more modern and transparent governance framework and signaling efforts toward greater compatibility with international norms (Government Committee for Religious Affairs [GCRA], 2022).

From a theoretical perspective, this transformation can be interpreted through multiple lenses. Secularization theory posits that modernization diminishes the public role of religion, yet scholars such as Casanova (1994) and Taylor (2007) argue that religion adapts by transforming its functions and presence in the public sphere. In Vietnam, especially in Ho Chi Minh City, the dynamics of a socialist-oriented market economy and globalization have led to a "restructuring of religion" reflected in the growth of adherents, increasingly diverse practices, and the enhanced social role of religious organizations (Phan, 2025). The framework of religious governance further suggests that modern states need not pursue strict separation from religion; instead, they may foster cooperative relations, grant legal recognition, and regulate practices in the public interest (Davie, 2007; Modood, 2013). Vietnam's experience illustrates such a shift, with the state progressively recognizing religion not only as an object of management but also as a partner in social development, particularly in charity, education, healthcare, and environmental protection.

The rise of non-traditional security concerns since the 1990s has also underscored the relevance of religion in addressing global challenges. Non-military threats such as climate change, pandemics, terrorism, economic crises, and communal tensions highlight the importance of integrating religion into sustainable development strategies (United Nations, 1994). During 2016-2022, religious organizations in Ho Chi Minh City actively contributed to social initiatives, most notably in Covid-19 relief efforts, affirming religion's positive role as a social resource. This evolution signals Vietnam's gradual transition from a control-oriented paradigm toward more inclusive governance grounded in law and collaboration (HCMC DOHA-CRA, 2023).

Taken together, the transformation of Vietnam's religious policy between 1986 and 2022 reflects the state's adaptation to the complex realities of religious life while contributing to broader academic debates on religious governance in transitional societies. The case of Ho Chi Minh City, with its pluralistic and dynamic setting, offers a compelling example of this shift and provides a foundation for comparative research in Southeast Asia and beyond.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that combines political science, sociology, and the study of religion, with the objective of explaining the transition from a "control" model to a "governance" model of religion in Vietnam during the period 1986-2022. It also seeks to clarify the mechanisms, driving forces, and consequences of critical institutional milestones (1986, 2004, 2016). Ho Chi Minh City is selected as a case study due to its high level of religious diversity, the intensity of religious and socio-cultural activities, and its role as a central urban hub, thereby reflecting more clearly the policy implementation at the local level.

First, the research relies on the analysis of secondary sources, including Party and State documents on religion, relevant legal frameworks, reports issued by the Ho Chi Minh City government, and published academic works on religious policy and state governance of religion. Synthesizing, comparing, and systematizing these sources provides both the theoretical foundation and the practical context for the study.

Second, the study employs a qualitative research design, particularly content analysis, to identify achievements, limitations, and challenges in the implementation of religious policies. Data are drawn from official reports, statistical records, and illustrative cases of religious activities in Ho Chi Minh City.

Third, the study applies a historical-comparative approach to examine changes across different phases of policy implementation, thereby clarifying developmental trends, continuities, and necessary adjustments.

By combining these three approaches, the study offers a comprehensive and objective analysis of the transition from a "control" to a "governance" model of religion in Vietnam, while also proposing feasible policy recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of state governance of religion in the future.

RESULTS

Overview of the Pre-Reform Control Phase (1975-1986)

Following the reunification of Vietnam in 1975, the state sought to build a socialist system amid the devastation of war, severe economic hardship, and persistent security pressures. During this period, religious policy was primarily defined by administrative control, shaped by a perspective that prioritized political stability over recognition of religion as a social resource.

As noted in government reports, “the religious policies of the Party and the State from 1975 to 1986 faced numerous shortcomings, necessitating adjustments to meet new realities, as the prevailing management model was predominantly oriented toward strict supervision, limiting the space for legitimate religious activities” (GCRA, 2022, p. 18).

The ideological foundation of this approach was heavily influenced by Marxist-Leninist thought, which considered religion “a false form of social consciousness, reflecting social existence under backward, oppressive, and unjust conditions” (Marx & Engels, 1995). For Vietnam’s early socialist leadership, religion was simultaneously a historical-cultural phenomenon and a “remnant” of the old order that required gradual transformation through political, economic, and cultural education. This explains why post-1975 religious policies prioritized strict control, with an emphasis on security concerns, rather than mobilizing religion’s potential contributions to social life (Tran, 2022).

In practice, the legal and administrative measures enacted during this phase were primarily designed to regulate and constrain religious organizations, facilities, and activities. The state established a tiered management system and relied on administrative oversight to monitor institutions, restrict public rituals, and limit the construction of new places of worship (GCRA, 2022). Within the centrally planned economy, religious activities were required to comply strictly with regulations and were subject to close local surveillance. This contributed to tensions and a lack of mutual trust between religious communities and the government (Le, 2024).

From a comparative perspective, Vietnam’s approach during this period corresponds to what scholars describe as “religious control policies” in socialist states during the Cold War. Ramet (1993), in examining Eastern Europe, observed that socialist governments typically combined administrative restrictions with ideological guidance to limit the mobilizing capacity of religious organizations. Vietnam exemplified this pattern: formal practices were tightly constrained, while informal rituals and folk beliefs persisted at the community level, often outside the formal regulatory framework (Tran, 2022; Roszko, 2021).

It is important to situate this policy within its historical context. In the immediate post-war years, the state’s priority was to safeguard political stability and consolidate revolutionary gains. Given the multiplicity of religions in Vietnam and their international connections, the leadership was wary that religion might be exploited for political or external purposes. Reports note that “the lack of a clear legal framework and limited understanding of religion’s social role contributed to management shortcomings, reinforcing the necessity for reform as Vietnam moved toward the *Đổi Mới* period” (GCRA, 2022).

In sum, the 1975-1986 phase can be characterized as one of stringent religious control, with the state focusing on stability, ideological consolidation, and socialist construction under a centrally planned economy. Yet this paradigm revealed notable limitations: (i) it discouraged religious organizations from engaging in social development; (ii) it fostered suspicion and distance in state–religion relations; and (iii) it failed to recognize or harness the cultural and ethical potential of religion. These historical shortcomings underscored the need for fundamental policy adjustments, setting the stage for the transformations initiated by the *Đổi Mới* reforms of 1986.

Analysis of the Initial Phase of Reform Policy (1986-2003)

The Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1986 marked a watershed moment in the country’s reform trajectory, initiating not only economic restructuring but also a reorientation in religious policy. Moving beyond the earlier tendency to interpret religion solely through the lens of security, the state began to embrace a more flexible and pragmatic approach, acknowledging religion as a legitimate spiritual need and a dimension of social life (Le, 2022).

A landmark development was Resolution 24-NQ/TW (1990) on religious affairs, which for the first time explicitly affirmed respect for and protection of the right to freedom of belief and religion. At the same time, it emphasized the importance of uniting religious and non-religious citizens in the pursuit of national development (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 1990). This resolution laid the groundwork for a paradigm shift: from administrative control toward a more integrative model that recognized religion’s potential contributions to social cohesion, moral education, and welfare. Scholars note that this period reflected a “renewal of thinking, shifting from viewing religion as an obstacle to recognizing its positive contributions to social ethics and national unity” (Nguyen, 2015, p. 6).

The 1992 Constitution further institutionalized these shifts by enshrining freedom of belief and religion as a constitutional right (GCRA, 2005). This was a significant step forward, given that earlier constitutions had not clearly articulated this right. In practice, many localities-especially Ho Chi Minh City-saw notable changes: religious facilities were rehabilitated, the number of adherents rose, and religious organizations became increasingly visible in social initiatives (Vietnam Fatherland Front Committee of Ho Chi Minh City [VFF Ho Chi Minh City], 2020).

During this period, the legal and administrative foundations for religious management began to take shape. Although sub-legislative documents largely followed a “request-grant” logic, they nonetheless created a rudimentary legal framework within which organizations could operate. Some new groups were formally recognized, while state management gradually shifted from “restriction” to “regulation” (GCRA, 2022). Local authorities, particularly in Ho Chi Minh City, often adopted flexible approaches that combined control with dialogue to foster consensus between the state and religious communities (VFF Ho Chi Minh City, 2020).

Nonetheless, limitations persisted. The legal framework lacked coherence, being based largely on sub-legislative instruments rather than a unified code. Moreover, many officials continued to view religion primarily as a latent source of instability, which slowed the expansion of religious freedoms and sometimes created local tensions (GCRA, 2005).

In conclusion, the 1986-2003 period can be regarded as the formative stage of Vietnam's transition from control to governance. Key milestones such as Resolution 24 (1990) and the 1992 Constitution institutionalized a more inclusive vision of religion, laying the foundation for subsequent phases of codification and modern governance.

Legalization and Shaping Religious Governance (2004-2015)

Following the initial phase of reform, Vietnam entered a decisive period of legalization in religious affairs. The Ordinance on Beliefs and Religion (2004) was the first national legal document to systematically regulate freedom of belief and religion while establishing a governance framework for religious activities (GCRA, 2005). Analysts highlight this as a “significant milestone, creating a legal corridor for the state to gradually shift from administrative command to management by law” (Thayer, 2009, p. 8; GCRA, 2022).

To operationalize the Ordinance, the government promulgated Decree 22/2005/ND-CP, which clarified procedures for registering activities, recognizing organizations, and managing related operations. This marked a fundamental shift from a “request–grant” model toward a “registration–recognition” mechanism, symbolizing the broader trend of legalization (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2005). Policy analysts emphasize that management increasingly relied on legal frameworks rather than ad hoc administrative measures, fostering greater transparency and equality among organizations (Tran, 2022; Nguyen, 2015; Phan, 2025).

At the local level, religious life expanded significantly. In Ho Chi Minh City, religious facilities were not only restored but also newly constructed, while festivals and rituals were organized openly, attracting large participation. Religious organizations assumed greater roles in charity, education, and healthcare, contributing to community well-being (Ho Chi Minh City Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholics, 2019). This shift reflected the recognition of religion as a social resource that could complement state objectives of stability and development.

Internationally, this phase coincided with Vietnam's deeper engagement in dialogues on religious freedom within its broader foreign policy. The issuance of the Ordinance and its implementing decrees allowed Vietnam to demonstrate efforts toward greater compatibility with international standards (Thayer, 2009). The 2013 Constitution further consolidated this trend by reaffirming freedom of belief and religion as a fundamental right, paving the way for the Law on Belief and Religion (Nguyen et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, limitations remained. Local implementation lacked consistency, with variations in interpretation across provinces. The registration–recognition model, though progressive, was sometimes enforced in a rigid administrative manner, complicating compliance for organizations. International observers also note that Vietnam continued to emphasize “security and social order” as guiding principles, illustrating the persistence of political oversight in religious governance (García Álvarez, 2023).

In sum, the 2004-2015 period can be characterized as the legalization phase and the emergence of a governance framework for religion in Vietnam. It institutionalized a more transparent legal foundation while balancing religious freedom with stability, laying the groundwork for the codification efforts of 2016 and beyond.

Comprehensive Codification and International Engagement (2016-2022)

The period from 2016 to 2022 represents the consolidation of Vietnam's legalization and governance of religion, marked by the enactment of the Law on Belief and Religion (2016), which took effect on January 1, 2018. For the first time in Vietnam's legislative history, issues of belief and religion were codified in a law rather than an ordinance, signifying both the maturity of the socialist rule-of-law state and efforts toward greater compatibility with international standards on religious freedom (GCRA, 2022).

The 2016 Law established a unified and comprehensive legal framework, replacing the earlier “request–grant” mechanism with a “registration–notification–recognition” process that enhanced the transparency and predictability of religious activities (García Álvarez, 2023). Beyond reaffirming citizens' rights to freedom of belief and religion, the law expanded provisions to include the right to establish training institutions, engage in publishing, participate in social welfare, and regulate organizations with foreign connections. These reforms strengthened the legal status and autonomy of religious organizations in Vietnam.

In practice, this period witnessed deeper state-religion cooperation across sectors. In Ho Chi Minh City, religious institutions expanded their contributions to healthcare, education, and social welfare. During the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-2021), Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, and Caodai communities mobilized resources to provide medical care, food distribution, and mental health support. These activities confirmed religion's growing role as a social resource and reinforced a governance model grounded in dialogue and partnership (Phan, 2025; HCMC DOHA-CRA, 2023).

Internationally, Vietnam expanded bilateral and multilateral dialogues on religious freedom, with the 2016 Law serving as a platform for engagement. While international reports—including those of the U.S. Department of State and non-governmental organizations—continued to raise concerns over restrictions, scholars argue that the law provided Vietnam with a more credible basis for dialogue by embedding commitments to religious freedom within a national legal framework (Matthews, 1992; Thayer, 2009).

This positioned Vietnam's religious governance within the broader trajectory of international engagement, extending beyond economics and politics into human rights and social governance.

New challenges also emerged. The rapid spread of digital technologies enabled transnational religious activities that sometimes bypassed state oversight, requiring innovative management approaches. Moreover, instances of groups "exploiting religion" to contest state authority persisted, highlighting the ongoing tension between safeguarding national security and respecting religious freedom (USCIRF, 2022).

In sum, the 2016-2022 period can be seen as the phase of comprehensive codification and expanded international engagement in Vietnam's religious policy. The 2016 Law consolidated a transparent and modern legal foundation while institutionalizing religion as a partner in social development. Despite enduring tensions, this stage marked Vietnam's closest convergence to date with contemporary global models of religious governance.

Overall Assessment

Over more than three decades of the *Đổi Mới* reforms, Vietnam's religious policy has undergone a profound transformation, evolving from a model of stringent administrative control to one of legalized governance and structured cooperation. This trajectory reflects not only the changing relationship between state and religion but also Vietnam's broader process of institutional modernization and gradual engagement with international norms.

One of the most significant achievements has been the establishment of a comprehensive legal framework for religious governance. The promulgation of the 2004 Ordinance on Belief and Religion and, more decisively, the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion marked a shift from a "request-grant" mechanism to a "registration-recognition" process (GCRA, 2022). These reforms expanded the constitutional guarantee of freedom of belief and religion and enhanced transparency and predictability for religious organizations. In practice, religious communities-particularly in Ho Chi Minh City-have been able to broaden their social roles, contributing to charity, education, healthcare, and disaster relief. During the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-2021), Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, and Caodai groups in Ho Chi Minh City mobilized substantial resources for food distribution, medical care, and psychological support, illustrating religion's growing importance as a social resource (Phan, 2025).

At the international level, these legal and practical developments have provided Vietnam with stronger foundations for dialogue in human rights forums. While concerns remain among international observers about restrictions on sensitive activities, the codification of religious rights has nonetheless improved Vietnam's credibility in bilateral and multilateral exchanges (Thayer, 2009; USCIRF, 2022).

Despite these achievements, challenges persist. Implementation remains uneven across provinces, with some grassroots authorities continuing to apply procedures in a bureaucratic or restrictive manner (HCMC DOHA-CRA, 2023). Moreover, security considerations continue to shape the boundaries of religious freedom: activities perceived as politically sensitive are often subject to close oversight. The rapid expansion of digital platforms and new religious movements has further complicated governance, raising questions about the adequacy of current regulatory mechanisms.

Overall, the impact of religious policy in the *Đổi Mới* era can be seen in three key dimensions. First, it has restructured state-religion relations, moving from confrontation toward cautious cooperation and partnership. Second, it has bolstered social stability by creating a legal space for religious activities, reducing underground practices and fostering trust. Third, it has provided a basis for Vietnam's engagement with global dialogues on human rights and governance.

In conclusion, Vietnam's religious policy during the *Đổi Mới* period embodies both continuity and adaptation. Its most notable success lies in building a transparent legal framework that has enabled religion to play an expanded social role while upholding the principle of freedom of belief. Its limitations stem from uneven local implementation and the persistent dominance of security-driven imperatives. Taken together, these dynamics point to an evolving model of governance-anchored in law, tempered by pragmatism, and exemplified in Ho Chi Minh City-that contributes to domestic stability while positioning Vietnam as a distinctive case in comparative studies of state-religion relations.

DISCUSSION

The shift from "control" to "governance" in Vietnam's religious policy has entailed more than legal reform; it reflects a transformation in state management philosophy. The 2004 Ordinance, 2013 Constitution, and 2016 Law have progressively institutionalized religious freedom within formal state governance, demonstrating efforts to reconcile political stability with religious pluralism. This transition is not a mere nominal change but signifies a broader shift toward accommodation and regulated partnership between the state and religious bodies.

Ho Chi Minh City exemplifies this dual dynamic vividly. Its rich religious pluralism and scale of activity necessitated flexible administrative practices and facilitated engagement with religious organizations in areas such as religious infrastructure, social welfare, and cultural preservation. Yet, such dynamism also exposed internal frictions: overlapping permissions, procedural complexity, and tensions between development imperatives and social cohesion.

Comparatively, Vietnam's trajectory diverges from Western models of secularization by institutionalizing cooperative state-religion relations rather than promoting strict separation. This model contributes to comparative theory on religious

governance in non-Western contexts, illustrating a pragmatic adaptation to socio-political realities. At the same time, Vietnam's religious reforms demonstrate incremental adaptation to international expectations, visible in legal recognition of religious organizations and participation in bilateral human rights dialogues.

A central limitation lies in the reliance on secondary policy documents; this focus obscures local-level variations and the lived experiences of religious communities. Further qualitative research-including fieldwork, interviews, and comparative provincial studies-is essential to deepen understanding of policy impact and governance outcomes.

Finally, future inquiry should address whether the governance model can withstand pressures of globalization, urban transformation, and digitalization. Ensuring its adaptability and legitimacy amid evolving social expectations remains critical for sustainable religious governance in Vietnam.

CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed the transformation of Vietnam's religious policy from 1986 to 2022, highlighting the transition from a "control" model to a "governance" model. The key institutional milestones-Đổi Mới in 1986, the 2004 Ordinance on Belief and Religion, and the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion-reflect not only adjustments in the legal framework but also fundamental changes in the state's governance philosophy. Religion is no longer viewed primarily as a sensitive security issue but increasingly recognized as a social component that can contribute to national development.

The case of Ho Chi Minh City exemplifies this transformation. With its high religious diversity and the large scale of activities, the city has served as a "policy laboratory," where reforms have been implemented and tested in practice. The municipal government has achieved positive outcomes by facilitating the construction and renovation of religious sites, encouraging religious participation in social welfare, and fostering dialogue with religious organizations. At the same time, the city reveals persistent challenges, including administrative complexity, fragmented inter-agency coordination, and the ongoing pressure to balance rapid urban development with the need for social stability.

Based on these findings, the study proposes three policy recommendations: (i) simplifying procedures and increasing transparency in the regulation of religious activities; (ii) establishing more regular and effective mechanisms of dialogue between the state and religious organizations; and (iii) developing policy evaluation systems at the grassroots level to ensure responsiveness and timely adaptation.

Overall, Vietnam's religious policy transformation represents a distinctive path that combines legal institutionalization with pragmatic cooperation. Rather than being fully "aligned" with international standards, the reforms illustrate gradual movement toward greater compatibility with global norms, reflected in selective legal reforms and engagement in international human rights dialogues. The sustainability of this governance model will depend on its capacity to adapt to new challenges posed by globalization, urbanization, and digital transformation in the coming decades.

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