

Editorial

Communist governments are hostile to Judaism and Islam as well as Christianity. There is plenty of evidence for that. Are they more benevolent to Buddhism, whose historical background is altogether different? Evidence about this is now coming through from Vietnam and we publish some documents from Vietnamese Buddhists on pp. 183-94. Keston College is just as much concerned for what happens under communist rule in Asia or Africa, but of course our expertise lies in the field of Eastern Europe.

So we are glad to publish these documents from the Unified Buddhist Church (UBC) in Vietnam. Until the early '60s the Buddhists in South Vietnam had no central organization: each pagoda functioned independently. The political situation, however, in the view of many Buddhists, eventually demanded some form of coordinated action from them. For this reason the Unified Buddhist Church was formed with its headquarters in one of the main pagodas of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), the An Quang Pagoda.

The UBC above all wanted peace and respect for the national identity of the Vietnamese people. It was deeply opposed to any form of violence and so welcomed an end to the war. From an *Appeal*, issued by the UBC on 9 June 1977 (see pp. 183-7) it appears that many Buddhists at first welcomed the communist take-over in April 1975: "Vietnamese Buddhists have repeatedly shown their intention of adapting themselves to the new situation and their readiness to cooperate in building socialism." The UBC believed the promises of "national reconciliation" made by the Provisional Revolutionary Government and hoped that Buddhists would be allowed to help rebuild their shattered country. They had been involved in social work: they had been running orphanages, hospitals, dispensaries and day-care centres. Many schools were organized by them, as well as a School of Youth for Social Service and a Committee for Reconstruction and Development. The UBC hoped that all this work would continue. "We want only to be Buddhist and socialist" states the June *Appeal*.

The UBC's goodwill and its offers of support appear to have been rudely rejected by the new government: "Government cadres proclaim everywhere that Buddhism is the opium of the people, that religious literature is poisonous and reactionary." All Buddhist publications have been banned, many Buddhist monks have been arrested and many pagodas confiscated and turned into government administrative buildings. All Buddhist social work has been forbidden: their schools, hospitals and orphanages have been confiscated and then closed because no other trained staff was available to take over. Buddhist monks are not allowed to preach or travel, and many of them have been harassed. A disturbing list of violations against Vietnamese Buddhists for the years 1975-77 is given in a document from the chairman of the UBC's Central Executive Committee (see pp. 187-90). We have only published a selection from the 85 specific actions cited, but they will give readers a vivid picture of what many Buddhists are enduring.

How have Buddhists in Vietnam reacted to such treatment? Their commitment to peace and non-violence has not wavered. Rather than retaliate, some have immolated themselves by fire. On 2 November 1975, for example, 12 monks and nuns burned themselves when the government authorities tried to destroy the life of their monastery.

In April last year the Provisional Revolutionary Government decided to destroy the UBC's central organization: the An Quang Pagoda – the UBC's headquarters – was raided by the police and six of the UBC's leaders were arrested. In an attempt to justify this action, the local authorities afterwards (15 April) organized a public meeting and invited as speakers several prominent religious leaders whom the authorities expected would defend their religious policy. One at least did not. The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Hue declared (see pp. 193-4): "I want to share the suffering of my Buddhist colleagues." He stated clearly that the government's promise of religious freedom had not been fulfilled: its written proclamations were being contradicted by oral orders, and religious believers – Buddhists and Christians – were not in practice being granted the same rights as other citizens.

In a speech given on 22 April (published in *L'Homme Nouveau* 18 September 1977) the Archbishop of Hue claimed that religious faith cannot be destroyed by physical means. He illustrated this by the story of an eight-year-old Vietnamese girl who lost her parents during the war. She was told that her parents had abandoned her and did not love her. "You are a Catholic aren't you? Well, from now on there won't be any more religion here." The little girl stopped crying and gravely declared: "It's not true. As long as I am here, religion will exist."

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