Enclosing the Highlands: Socialist, Capitalist and Protestant Conversions of Vietnam's Central Highlanders

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1. Introduction

In February 2001, groups of indigenous residents in Vietnam's Central Highlands protested against Government policies, triggering a crack-down by security forces and a small exodus of refugees across the border to Cambodia. These events led to increased international attention for the problems of the so-called "Montagnard" groups, as brought out in the actions of the diaspora Montagnard ("Dega") organizations and their supporters in the U.S.[1]; of religious groups and pressure groups in the U.S., like the Center for Religious Freedom of the Freedom House; of international human rights organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International; of the U.N. High-Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); and of countries and territories like Cambodia, the U.S. and the E.U.

Thus far, the events leading up to and following on the February 2001 protests have been the subject matter of two serious – but anonymous – analyses, one by Human Rights Watch (HRW), entitled *Repression of Montagnards: Conflicts over Land and Religion in Vietnam's Central Highlands* (2002), and one by Writenet, under the auspices of the UNHCR Centre for Documentation and Research, entitled *Vietnam: Indigenous Minority Groups in the Central Highlands* (2002). However, there have been hardly any first-hand accounts of the situation in the Central Highlands by international observers since February 2001, with only few foreign experts and journalists gaining brief access to the region. In October 2002, I had the opportunity to return to the Central Highlands where I had done the field research for my doctoral dissertation in 1991 and which I had the opportunity to revisit repeatedly up until 2000. Although my last research trip was brief and highly supervised and although many villages were inaccessible, I had the opportunity to revisit some earlier research locations, and I could gather some impressions and insights based on observations and conversations – some being surprisingly open.[2] This paper is mostly the result of earlier research, supplemented with the information gathered in October 2002.

As the title of the Human Rights Watch report indicates, the protests revolve around conflicts over land ownership and religion, with a third issue looming not far back. This is the issue of "Montagnard" political autonomy, promised – as *statut particulier* ['special status'] – by the French colonial government during the First Indochina War; promised by the National Liberation Front and supported by factions in the American military during the Second Indochina War – though involving different groups of "Montagnards"; and contested in the form of a small guerrilla war between the autonomy movement FULRO (*Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées*) and Vietnam's Communist regime during the Third Indochina War.[3] Apart from these two publications, a few other more or less recent publications discuss in more or less depth the conditions leading up to the protests of 2001. Salemink (1997, 2000a, 2000b, 2002) and Guérin et al. (n.p.) pay ample attention to the two main points of contention, namely land tenure

and religion. The discourse on land focuses on the massive in-migration of ethnic Vietnamese lowlanders and – to a lesser extent – northern highland minorities after 1975, turning the indigenous minorities into minorities in their ancestral lands as well. Begun as Government-sponsored relocation programs, the transmigration became "spontaneous" and uncontrolled by the promise of quick profits from cash crops such as coffee. The traditional land tenure systems of the indigenous groups, mostly based on rotational shifting cultivation, are usually seen as primitive and archaic, and in need of "improvement". The net result for such groups is that they are losing their ancestral lands very quickly, and often are not capable of cultivating their small, allocated plots of land profitably and sustainably.

The discourse on religion focuses on the massive conversion of Highlanders to evangelical Christianity, in particular since the 1980s. This conversion is even more puzzling in the light of the absence of foreign pastors or missionaries and their support networks since 1975. Most analysts – Montagnard/Dega, Vietnamese and foreign – tend to see this Protestant conversion as an act of loyalty to their American supporters, and hence as an act of political protest against the Communist regime. According to the Constitution, the Vietnamese Government is supposed to uphold freedom of religion, but this human right is qualified with reference to the security of the state and the unity of the nation. Though the Vietnam Protestant Church has officially been recognized (ironically in 2001!) as a legitimate religion, the Highlander congregations are considered to be foreign-supported political opposition, and therefore illegal. The Center for Religious Freedom and Human Rights Watch have released Vietnamese Government documents which would illustrate this kind of official discourse and associated repressive practices.[4] U.S.-based Dega-supporters and evangelical groups tend to concur and see the conversion as an act of allegiance to their erstwhile U.S. ally. The HRW and Writenet reports follow Salemink (1997: 522-3) in contending that the conversion to Protestantism is grounded in the social and ritual incompatibility of the traditional "animist" community religions with the economic and political requirements of present-day life, as is brought out in the suppression of various rituals as superstitious, unhygienic and backward. By embracing a "modern" world religion that is seen as antithetical to the current political regime, Highlanders redraw and reconfirm their ethnic boundaries even while changing the substantive contents of an important part of their culture, i.e. religion.

In this article I have no intention of going into the details of the February 2001 protests and the Government actions that formed both the prelude and aftermath to these events. Instead, I am focusing on the question of conversion, and asking a few questions that seem to have been overlooked by most commentators so far. One question is, of course, why Highlanders would choose to abandon their traditional beliefs and practices, and embrace a completely different religion and life-style that is so controversial in the Vietnamese context, namely evangelical Protestantism? If they have to change their faith, then why not adopt Buddhism – the most important religion in the mainstream syncretist Vietnamese pantheon? If it has to be Christianity, then why not Catholicism, which is politically slightly less controversial in Vietnam, and not seen as an expression of U.S.-inspired "peaceful evolution" [*diên biên hòa bình*] putatively designed to undermine the Communist regime.

A completely different question has to do with the political context. Can conversion to Protestantism be seen as an act of resistance against the Communist regime, as many commentators would have it? This interpretation ignores the widespread movement of Christian conversion which is taking place all over Southeast Asia and even parts of East Asia and South Asia. Such conversion takes place primarily among tribal minority groups, mostly in remote

upland areas that have only recently been drawn into the orbit of national states. Though some states with Christian minorities, like China and Laos, can be called Communist, the same cannot be said about India, Bangladesh, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines – with Burma perhaps occupying a political middle ground.[5] The question is why the Garo in Bangladesh (Bal 2000), the Karen in Burma (Hayami 1996), the Akha in Thailand (Kammerer 1990), the Tobaku on Sulawesi (Aragon 1996, 2000), the Sumbanese (Keane 1997, 1998), the Karo on Sumatra (Steedly 1993), or the Higaunon on Mindanao (Paredes 1997) would convert to Protestantism in the absence of a Communist state governing their lands? Few observers would deny that these countries take a capitalist rather than Communist road to development. When capitalism enters the equation it seems to indicate that the motivations for conversion are more diverse, and the situations more complex than a simplistic opposition between Communism and Christianity would suggest.

In this essay I shall argue that the situation in Vietnam is indeed more complex, because the patterns of governmentality, resistance and conversion tend to be transnational rather than uniquely Vietnamese. Both capitalism and Communism tend to impose a particular moral order on people with a radically different ethic, and whose bodies and lands are integrated into national and transnational spaces. In order to understand the attraction of Protestantism I shall conceptualize capitalism and Communism as religious phenomena comparable to Christianity in terms of methods, faith and visions of salvation, and indeed competing with Christianity. It is nothing new to analyze capitalism and communism in terms of religion. It is, however, not common to analyze their systems of discipline and surveillance in terms of conversion. Nor is it usual to qualify these civil religions as fundamentalist, if they impose their moral order with an irresistible force and a totalizing discourse leaving hardly any space for autonomous action or thinking, even in the most private domains of life. In other words, whereas such processes of national integration and internal colonization tend to be described in terms of appropriation of bodies and resources, I like to turn our attention to the colonization of minds that attends such processes.

In so doing, I build on my previous work on the tribalization, ethnicization, territorialization and gender transformation in the Central Highlands of Vietnam (Salemink 1999; 2002) which suggest a loss of practical, cultural autonomy within Highlander villages through decades of colonization, warfare and nation-building. But I am taking the analysis one step further by conceptualizing the main ideological systems shaping their experienced reality as religious efforts aiming to convert Highlanders to a particular way of thinking and a particular lifestyle. These efforts at conversion do not allow for alternative discourses and leave hardly any space for autonomous action in the village and even in private domains. This allows us to reconsider the various discourses around Protestant conversion in the Central Highlands, and re-situate that movement in transnational processes of capitalist integration rather than – exclusively – in a difficult relationship between a Communist regime and U.S.-inspired Protestantism.

In the following section, I shall deal with conceptualizations of Communism and capitalism as religious phenomena imposing a particular ethic on the people under its authority, and seek to understand their projects of reform as forms of conversion. A third section deals with the campaign of Communist conversion before the *Doi Moi* reforms. *Doi Moi* – literally meaning 'changing into something new' – is often translated as 'Renovation'; it is a set of comprehensive and ongoing market reforms that were formally adopted in 1986 after the economic bankruptcy of Socialist collectivization became undeniable, and that turn Vietnam into just another capitalist state. A fourth section deals with the campaign of capitalist reform and the consequent conversion of Highlanders. In a fifth section, I use these analyses as a backdrop for understanding

the massive Protestant conversion taking place in Vietnam's Central Highlands. By way of conclusion, I hope to debunk some preconceived notions about the nature of Communism, capitalism and Protestantism and their mutual relations, and suggest a more plausible interpretation of the Protestant conversion movement in Vietnam's Central Highlands.

2. Re-creating man in our image: Pathways of conversion

Ever since Max Weber's study of the connections between the ethic of Protestantism and the spirit of capitalism (1976), it is almost a truism to state that capitalism and religion as moral systems are interconnected (see also Keyes n.d.). The 'Asian Values' debate which sought to connect the performance of the Asian miracle economies to a 'neo-Confucian' ethic is a case in point (Pertierra 1999), but also shows clearly that the nature of the interconnections is not undisputed. In an interesting fragment probably dating from 1921, Walter Benjamin makes a case for regarding capitalism not just as conditioned by religion, but *as* a religion – a thesis which has recently been picked up and elaborated by Uwe Steiner (1998) and Christoph Deutschmann (2001). Benjamin describes capitalism as an essentially religious phenomenon characterized by its cultic nature, the absence of dogma, and the uninterrupted condition of worship. As a cult, it creates indebtedness rather than absolution, and it has the tendency to make this indebtedness universal (Benjamin 1985: 100). Although Benjamin does not refer to this aspect of Marx' analysis, the cultic aspect of commodity fetishism ('Warenfetischismus') in *Das Kapital* [*Capital*] seems a prelude to Benjamin's analysis. Deutschmann emphasizes the creative destruction of capital growth, necessitating the altercation of destabilization and restabilization and – hence – the continuous need for new hunting grounds, new myths, and new promises: the religious promise of absolute wealth (Deutschmann 2001).

Rather than subscribing to the Weberian rationalization thesis and the consequent notion of secularization – i.e. the assumed ultimate incompatibility of 'irrational' religion and 'rational' capitalism – Benjamin posits a collusion which goes far beyond Weber's theory of Protestantism as creating the ideological conditions for the emergence of capitalist calculation. But other contemporary analysts of religion and capitalism have independently from Benjamin noticed the same similarity. It almost seems that for a number of them religion, market and development become almost interchangeable. In an introduction to a volume on the connections between religion and development, Quarles van Ufford and Schoffeleers (1988) note the simultaneous changes in the parallel discourses of religion and development, and contend that development as concept and as a social movement can be studied as a quasi-religious phenomenon. In an essay on religious revival in Southeast Asia, Bernhard Dahm (1996: 46) quotes a former high-ranking official of the Thai Ministry of Education as saying that "capitalist economy, materialism and consumerism came to Thailand in a package as if it were a new religion" – thus posing a challenge to Thailand's official religion, Buddhism. In an article on the globalization of religious markets focusing on Malaysia, Raymond Lee observes that secularization turns religion into an individual choice, to be catered to by competing religious institutions providing religious services in a globalizing religious market (Lee 1993: 35-61; see also Hefner 1998: 87). In other words, whereas capitalism itself takes the shape of a religion, religious beliefs are marketed according to capitalist principles.

In a similar vein, Communism can be and has been considered a religion as well. Whereas most commentators juxtapose the religious and the secular and differentiate between secularization and religious revival, a recent textbook on the sociology of religion devotes a section to 'political religion' in the former Soviet Union in a chapter entitled 'the sacralization of

modernity' (Aldridge 2000: 153-7). Writing before the fall of the Iron Curtain, Christopher Binns (1979- 1980) documented the development and uses of ritual, ceremony and festivals in the Soviet Union. Binns concluded that from an ideological point of view, the attempt at 'sacralising the incumbent' (1980: 184; see also Lane 1981) was largely a failure, and that the emphasis on form actually led to more pluralism. For Laos, Grant Evans analyzed the re-creation of a politically expedient past in the service of contemporary political ritual and cultic activity (1998). For Vietnam itself, a number of authors have documented State suppression and re-construction of ritual (Luong 1993; Malarney 1996), but Hue-Tam Ho Tai's volume *The Country of Memory* squarely addresses the uses of ritual and commemoration for political purposes (Ho Tai 2001). These cultic and ritual aspects of Communist regimes place these squarely in the category of civil religions, along with American, French or British civil religions (Aldridge 2000: 140-159). However, in all these instances the cults tend to focus on the celebration of the nation-state, and the political regime governing that state, rather than a political ideology as such. In other words, the sacralization of the nation and of the political regime governing that nation could be described as primarily a nationalist project.

In this essay I would like to go one step further. Walter Benjamin was not speaking of civil religion focused on a particular nation, but of an economic system, i.e. capitalism, as a religion with cultic aspects. Similarly, I would contend that Communism – as the political and economic form of 'real existing socialism' before the fall of the Soviet Union and the economic reforms in China and Vietnam – can be and has been conceptualized as a religion. Throughout the Cold War, Dutch Christian writers attacked Communism as a 'socio-political world religion' (Banning 1951) or as 'pseudo-religion' having all the outward characteristics of a religion: faith, dogma, salvation, impending cataclysm, a Messiah, judgment, organizational hierarchy, and an ethic (Veenhof 1978). In Vietnam, American Cold Warriors conceived of their anti-Communist mission as a crusade, while Christian missionaries in Vietnam would conflate Communism with atheism and paganism in their crusading zeal for conversion (Salemink 2002). Early on, a similar point was made by Charles Keyes in *The Golden Peninsula* (1977), where he describes the attributes of 'Communism as a popular ideology' as involving "a commitment comparable to religious faith" because the authority of cadres with the force of historical determinism behind them would be comparable to the authority of bonzes or sorcerers who claimed to know the future (1977: 223-4).

On the Vietnamese side, similar equations were made when Communists would borrow Buddhist concepts like *giac ngo* to denote their enlightenment (Taylor 2001: 58). In the novel *Past Continuous*, the Vietnamese novelist Nguyen Khai portrays the multiple relationships between Communist revolutionaries and a Catholic priest, looking backward to the war and forward to reconciliation. When discussing the relations between the various religious confessions and the Communist revolution, one of the Communist protagonists puts Buddhism, Christianity and Communism on a par when stating that "from the day I joined the Communist Party I've had another faith." (Nguyen Khai 2001: 109). Philip Taylor relates a conversation with a journalist who said that "communism was our religion. We believed in the utopian paradise of Stalinism." (Taylor 2001: 58). One Vietnamese critic painted the religious contours of Vietnam's Communist Party very sharply:

> Marx' philosophical opposition to religion has been turned into a policy against monotheistic religious systems: all types of *transcendental religion* are suppressed and criticized in order to raise to the status of state creed a sort of *atheistic religion*, that is "science" and "revolution" […] used to consolidate *a state based on heavenly authority.*

> […The Party] was able to develop a *new clerical class*, which used the state apparatus to appropriate privileges for itself… (Lu Phuong 1994: 3)

The most compelling argument for perceiving socialism as religion, however, can be found in the statements of Vietnam's national hero, Ho Chi Minh. In a statement published in China, June 1946, Ho explains his inspiration as follows:

> The philosophy of Confucius has the advantage of cultivating the individual morality. Christianity has the advantage of a high degree of mercy. Marxism has the advantage of the dialectical method. The ideology of Chiang Kaishek has the advantage that its policies are adapted to the conditions of the land. Have Confucius, Jesus, Marx and Chiang Kaishek nothing in common then? They all wish for the happiness of humanity, for the welfare of society. If today they would all still live and would come together in one place, I believe that they would certainly coexist perfectly as close friends. I try to be a student of these gentlemen. (Dang Nghiem Van et al. 1998: 185 – my translation)

While Walter Benjamin's point above treats capitalism as a political religion rather than as a civil religion with a nationalist agenda, the second point to which I like to draw attention is his conception of capitalism as a cult requiring uninterrupted worship that creates debt:

> Capitalism is probably the first example of a cult that does not absolve but creates guilt/debt [verschuldend].[6] Here lies the religious system in the free fall [Sturz] of a monstrous movement. An enormous feeling of guilt/indebtedness [Schuld] that cannot be absolved embraces the cult – not to reconcile the debt/guilt this way but to make it universal and hammer it into the consciousness… (Benjamin 1985: 100).

This quotation speaks of the universalization of capitalism – a process subsumed in the present-day concept of globalization – but, given the religious nature of capitalism, also implies conversion at an individual level, as is brought out in the work of Michael Taussig (1977). This brings us back to Max Weber who connected the Protestant *ethic* with the *spirit* of capitalism – both moral categories with behavioral implications. My point here is that the "conversion to capitalism" (cf. Taylor 2001: 61) has moral dimensions which find their way in myriad policies and practices, and which extend into various domains of life, including the most private ones. In their seminal work on Christian conversion in South Africa, Jean and John Comaroff describe Christian conversion during colonial times as a project of comprehensive reform – "a revolution in the habits of the people" that extended beyond the religious domain aiming at a different "kind of being and consciousness" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991: 199) and instilling "a time sense and social self-control well-suited to the disciplinary demands of the ascendant industrial order" (Hefner 1998: 88). Conversion, then, was "a process involving the removal of difference and distinction [and the] assimilat[ion] into the moral economy of civilized man" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991: 244). In the sections that follow, I would suggest that the concept of conversion holds currency for understanding the events in Tây Nguyên after 1975 in two ways. First of all, by applying the religious concept of conversion to both capitalist and socialist transformation it becomes possible to start showing the comprehensive character of social and cultural transformation as a project of deliberate reform. Second, in line with Walter Benjamin's notion of *Verschuldung*, it is possible to understand the almost intrinsic need for universalization of the cult.

3. Vietnam's Central Highlands before *Doi Moi*

Rather unfair, this section begins after 1975, glossing over two of the three consecutive Indochina Wars. The new, reunified Socialist Republic of Viet Nam embarked on a number of interrelated policies under the banner of what it regarded as Communist orthodoxy. Regarding the Central Highlands region, there were a number of assumptions underpinning these policies. A first assumption was that the Central Highlands was an integral part of Vietnam, despite colonial attempts at dismemberment. A second assumption was that the border area separating Vietnam's Central Highlands from Laos and Cambodia was not secure – an assumption which was grounded in the Revolution's use of these porous borders to get troops and supplies to the South via the famous Ho Chi Minh trail. A third assumption was that the comparatively thinly populated highlands were "empty" and that the available resources were not exploited rationally. A fourth assumption was that the indigenous ethnic groups were technologically and culturally backward; for instance, the rotational shifting cultivation system that many indigenous groups traditionally practiced was equated with a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle characterized by instability, recurring hunger and "wanton destruction" of the forests when clearing land. A fifth assumption, then, was that development, improvement and civilization among highlanders could be brought by the culturally more advanced lowlanders introducing "science and technology" to the Highlands in a fraternal act of ethnic solidarity – the Vietnamese nation being represented as a family of ethnic groups [*dai gia dinh cac dan toc Viet Nam*].

These assumptions almost naturally invited a number of interlocking policies that have been the topic of various research programs and conferences in the 1980s.[7] One policy program can be described as aiming at resettlement of population groups – resettlement of migrants from the lowlands or the North in so-called New Economic Zones, and the sedentarization of the indigenous population through a program called "Fixed Cultivation and Settlement". These two programs were in fact interdependent. Resettlement of Kinh migrants in the Central Highlands could only be justified if the extensive traditional land claims based on rotational shifting cultivation systems were ignored (branded primitive or harmful) or made redundant by development programs (read: sedentarization). And if shifting cultivation is seen as a sign of backwardness, then sedentarization could only be expected to succeed if technically advanced lowlanders came to live among highlanders and help them "catch up". Such concepts were around in colonial and neo-colonial times, but after 1975 the impact became much more real. Already in the pre-*Doi Moi* era the New Economic Zones program resulted in considerable migration, over-exploitation of natural resources, and conflict over resources. It is important to note, however, that before *Doi Moi* the sedentarization program was combined with collectivization, as part of the process of Socialist transformation. This meant that all the land and resources were formally owned by the State, and managed by agricultural cooperatives (*hop tac xa*), state farms (*nong truong*) and state forest enterprises (*lam truong*). I have described the imperfect execution and rather poor results of the sedentarization program and its consequences for indigenous ethnic communities in some detail elsewhere (Salemink 1997; 2000; 2002).

Another important program from our point of view was the policy of "selective cultural preservation" (*giu gin van hoa chon loc*) which arrogated to state officials the authority to decide which aspects of minority cultures should be preserved, and which aspects are to be eliminated. The late vice-minister of culture and information in charge of minority culture in Vietnam, Nông Quôc Chân, compared a plural Vietnamese culture to a garden of scenting, colourful flowers (Nông Quôc Chân 1977).[8] However, Mr. Chân might not have realized to what ends his metaphor might be used. For, though beautiful flowers are a gift of nature, beautiful gardens seldom grow by themselves. In gardens, flowers are sown or planted, cultivated, manured, weeded, tended, arranged and presented in a careful manner; some people - among them many Vietnamese -

would even say that gardening is not a skill, but an artform. Thus, the idea of Vietnamese culture as a garden of flowers presupposes a subject cultivating, arranging and presenting the flowers in the desired fashion. And this is exactly what happened in Vietnam, where the Party and state decide which aspects of minority cultures are valuable enough to retain, which aspects should disappear, and which aspects should be transformed.

Culture (*van hóa*) in Vietnam is taken to mean the immaterial aspects of life, like language, religion, education, and manners and customs. In the socialist transformation of society, not all of that can be retained. After all, the cultural "level" of Vietnam's minorities is seen as "lower" than that of the Kinh, and, according to the guiding principle of mutual assistance, the latter should help the former in "catching up" with the latter to assimilate into a new Vietnamese culture (see Nong Quoc Chan 1978a and 1978b, and Vi Hong Nhan et. al. 1987). Miraculously, the Party cadres knew exactly what should be preserved as valuable, and what should be done away with. Valuable are folklore, dances, music, handicrafts, and these are renovated for presentation to the "masses". Grant Evans described this policy of "selective preservation" as a "peculiar process of dissolution/ preservation of traditional cultural forms (1985: 142).

In spite of all professions of equality between various ethnic groups, the introduction of Socialism required a new kind of people. In the words of the Political Report of the Central Committee to the 4th Congress of the Communist Party:

> "The Party's policy consists in practicing full equality in all respects between various ethnic groups, in creating conditions for the complete eradication of all differences in economic and cultural levels between small and large ethnic groups, in making the mountain regions catch up with the plains…" (Nong Quoc Chan 1978b: 57)

However, building a new socialist regime required fostering new, socialist men, or, in Mr. Chan's words: "New system, new men" (Ib.: 57-8). New Socialist Men (M/F)[9] is a term attributed to Uncle Ho and was elaborated on in 1970 by the former Secretary-General of the Communist Party Le Duan (1977: 119-122). According to Le Duan, New Socialist Man was the both the subject and the result of the 'cultural revolution' ['cach mang van hoa'] which had to accompany the revolution in relations of production and the technological revolution in Vietnam if the country was to transition directly to socialism without going through the stage of capitalism (1977: 120). 'New socialist man' had a high cultural, scientific and technical level, could comprehend and apply the laws of society and nature, and could pass on and build on the cultural and scientific achievements that humankind had accumulated over the course of thousands of generations. Besides, 'new socialist man' was unselfish in his love and willingness to sacrifice for the nation and for his fellow men (1977: 121-2). Creating this new type of man required "a process of reform of man, a change in ideological consciousness" [viec cai tao con nguoi, su thay doi y thuc tu tuong cua con nguoi] (1977: 129) which was the product of a cultural revolution.

What New Socialist Men meant in the Central Highlands was explained by Prof. Dang Nghiem Van in a paper submitted to the conference on the Tay Nguyen II Program, Pleiku, February 1985, in which he compared "traditional men" with "new socialist men" in Tay Nguyen.[10] Compared with "traditional man", "new socialist man" has expanded his or her horizon and his or her loyalty from the family to the Party, from the village to the nation; s/he moved from low-technology, collective, subsistence production based on "slash-and-burn" agriculture to equally collective but large-scale, high-technology commodity production; new socialist man has shed ignorance and backwardness to acquire knowledge, labor discipline, patriotism and socialism; and s/he exchanged belief in spirits and superstition for self-confidence, trust in the collective and a socialist lifestyle (Dang Nghiem Van 1984: 47-8; 1986: 57-9). I

would like to emphasize that this was not the private opinion of Prof. Van or of a group of Hanoi-based scholars; leading provincial officials participated in the research programs and conferences, which echoed an earlier article by the powerful President of the State Council, Truong Chinh, entitled "Let us take the ethnic groups in Dak Lak straight to Socialism" (Truong Chinh 1983). The clergy preaching this Socialist Gospel consisted of Party and State cadres holding key positions in political, economic and cultural institutions.

The effort at imposing a socialist ethic and lifestyle on ethnic minorities can be interpreted as an effort at conversion. Socialism promised the creation of paradise on earth – a workers' and farmers' paradise – but apparently required that the chosen people would reform thoroughly before entering that paradise. Similar to the way that – in Weber's analysis – the Protestant ethic created the cultural and psychological conditions for the emergence of (the spirit of) capitalism in 16th and 17th Century Europe, this project of psychological and cultural reform was to prepare the human ground for the creation of a socialist paradise, albeit more deliberately. Contrary to Traditional Man, New Socialist Man emphasizes production rather than consumption, has a high level of productivity and labor discipline, is economical rather than wasteful, and accumulates funds in order to enlarge production in the future. In other words, s/he is willing to defer gratification till paradise come, because s/he has *faith* in the Party and the Revolution (Dang Nhiem Van 1984: 47). Even though Socialism is an ideology of liberation and this-worldly salvation, like any religion it required people to conform to a particular ethic in order to be able to generate the benefits and in order to be worthy of reaping the benefits. Needless to say, this campaign of reform had deep cultural and psychological aspects because it was intended to guide "backward" ethnic minorities into a socialist modernity. Their ethnic identities were simultaneously in need of preservation, because respect for cultural difference was enshrined in the Constitution – hence the concept of selective preservation which was intended to combine a "modern", socialist lifestyle with "beautiful" (*tot dep*) traditional customs. The resulting focus on outward, aesthetic aspects leads to what I have called the folklorization of culture, "that is creating an image of culture as an aesthetic survival from the past, detached from the present cultural context" (Salemink 1997: 498).

The attempt at imposition and enforcement of the new socialist ethic was real, and the methods many, targeting groups of people and individuals with campaigns of 'mobilization' [*van dong*] and propaganda [*tuyen truyen*]. Some methods could be called seductive, e.g. the provision of "modern" services like education and health-care, or the celebration of traditional cultural expressions, for instance through the organization of competitive "gong festivals" (*le hoi cong chieng*). In the process of selective preservation, various cultural expressions were transformed to fit the new socialist ethic; the Department of Culture of Gialai-Kontum province, for example, saw it as its job to change the lyrics of traditional folksongs, and teach these at schools.[11] On the other hand, there were more heavy-handed methods of coercion, for instance when "out-moded habits" and "obsolete and backward practices" were to be "wiped out" and "eradicated" (Nong Quoc Chan 1978a: 53). Usually, such "bad habits" refer to religious practices – superstition, "groundless taboos", (accusations of) sorcery, which are considered to be contrary to modern science – and feasts and sacrifices accompanying life cycle rituals - such as burials and marriages, deemed unhygienic or wasteful. In the words of Nong Quoc Chan, "priests" are "unmasked" and made to sign an agreement to the effect that they will subject themselves to disciplinary punishment if they relapse to backward practices; the quantity of wedding gifts is fixed by cadres who "advise" the families involved. A particularly frightening method of disciplining was "re-education" in special camps, where people were held prisoner and subjected to classic "brainwashing" techniques characterized by hard physical labour, repetitive

propaganda, writing autobiographies and confessions, and (self-)criticism sessions. When interviewing former FULRO supporters both in Tay Nguyen and in the diaspora, many told me that the moment that they took to the jungle to resist the Communist government after reunification was when they were summoned to re-education camps for the second time in 1977 or 1978.[12]

Although the results of this Socialist reform may have been imperfect and sometimes different from intended, there was an impact throughout the Central Highlands during the era of collectivization, most visible and tangible in the policy of breaking up the longhouses as part of the sedentarization program. For the villagers concerned, sedentarization implied a completely new lifestyle. One of the aims – and results – of the program is the breaking up of the longhouses. Traditionally, most Central Highlanders lived in longhouses. In precolonial days, longhouses of fifty to one hundred meters could be found, containing many households belonging to one lineage and their dependents. A long longhouse was a token of wealth. Under colonial rule, the length of the longhouses had gradually diminished. This process was sped up under the former South-Vietnamese regime, which implemented an assimilation policy forcing nuclear families to live separately from each other. The present regime also has a policy of breaking up the longhouses, considered a survival of "the familial communes [...] of the primitive society" (Mac Duong 1993: 7). Thus, breaking up the longhouses is conceived as a necessary and progressive step toward Socialist development. According to one ethnographer, the construction of a new culture and new Socialist man in the Central Highlands depended on the construction of a new type of family, which "is the splitting of families from the longhouse, with each family possessing its own house, its own garden, its own means of production, its own labour power" (Hô Lê 1984: 64). Thus, the policy of breaking up the longhouses, justified as a precondition for economic development, is simultaneously a deliberate attempt to change the minorities' lifestyle.

Although all the longhouses I visited when doing field research were no longer inhabited by entire lineages – at most by an extended family spanning three generations - informants reported that many Highlanders resented being forced to abandon their longhouses. But what was resented even more, was the new village lay-out. This implied a great distance between the houses, now surrounded by fenced gardens for (cash) crop production. Many informants complained about the decline in sociability and communality in the new village, and professed to regard the sedentarization program as an attempt "to make them live like lowlanders".[13] During the 1980s there were two types of resistance against these policies in the Central Highlands. One type was the armed resistance waged by FULRO which did not recognize Vietnam's sovereignty over the Central Highlands and aimed at setting up an autonomous zone in the Central Highlands. The guerrilla resistance was militarily and politically defeated during the 1980s, and in 1992 the last remnants of FULRO surrendered to the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia. Another act of resistance is what I describe in 'The King of Fire' (1997: 520) as "voting with the feet" – i.e. moving the hamlet to a more remote location out of reach of the cadres (usually farther away from the road, deeper into the forest or higher up the hill). Collectivization in the Highlands was not defeated by these acts of overt or covert resistance, but by economic failure and consequent demoralization – the unraveling of the socialist ethic, if you will – in the lowlands and cities. *Doi Moi* started as a grassroots movement in the mid 1980s and was officially adopted in the late 1980s (depending on geographic region and economic sector) but came late to the Highlands.

4. Vietnam's Central Highlanders during *Doi Moi*

Doi Moi was a painful but necessary recipe for Vietnam to survive and grow economically. It is an ongoing process of market reforms, leading to what the Communist regime euphemistically calls a 'Socialist market economy'. (I think Karl Marx would turn over in his grave if he exposed to such logic.) Cooperatives were dismantled, and production was shifted to the so-called household economy and to the fledgling private sector, while the state-owned sector was (and is) being restructured in order to be more competitive in the domestic and international markets. *Doi Moi* brought about the international integration of Vietnam's economy and polity, first of all in the region. Politically, Vietnam has become the darling of the international donor community – both bilateral, multilateral and non-governmental donors – and its policies are the target of much international advice and support. Many projects have policy reform or capacity building as their objectives, and planeloads of foreign consultants with money on their fingers are roaming the country. The international agency which is taking the lead in advising Vietnam is the World Bank, which has a fully staffed and equipped representative office in Hanoi. In Vietnam, the World Bank not only gives loans and the occasional grant, but convenes policy meetings with other donors and Vietnamese government agencies; commissions or conducts research; and collects many of the most widely used statistics in Vietnam, like the Vietnam Living Standards Surveys (VLSS).

At a national level, the results have generally been impressive. Vietnam's economy has experienced impressive growth since the early 1990s, doubling the per capita income from around $200 to $400. According to VLSS statistics, from 1993 to 1998 poverty (as measured by the – low – Vietnamese poverty standards) has decreased from 55 to 36%. Given the low GDP, the provision of social services is at a comparatively high level, pushing Vietnam's human development ranking up. Examples are the accessibility of education (overall literacy is high) and health care. Yet, the progress noted in the general statistics obscures a situation of continued poverty and high levels of socio-economic differentiation along ethnic lines in the upland areas, especially in the Central Highlands (Van de Walle & Gunewardena 2001). In contrast with the national figure, the percentage of poor ethnic minority households in the Central Highlands remains very high at a more or less stable rate (1993: 92%; 1998: 91%). Illiteracy, malnutrition, endemic diseases, and low life expectancy continue to plague the indigenous minorities in the Central Highlands. Aware of these problems, the Vietnamese Government and international donors are investing heavily in poverty alleviation programs targeting the 1700 poorest communes – mostly in the upland areas. However, the effects remain limited because funds continue to be channeled to programs like the Fixed Cultivation and Settlement Program which has demonstrated its ineffectiveness for over 30 years now because it is based on erroneous assumptions. Also, funds tend to be siphoned off through corruption, as the infamous case involving the Committee for Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas (CEMMA) showed.[14] But this is not the place to speak about failing policies and development programs, although they form the backdrop for what follows.

In the lowland rural areas, the market reforms have had marked effects as well. The de-collectivization meant that production was shifted from cooperatives to the individual households. Land tenure is individualized as well, as long-term land use rights were allocated to the households – often to those who could claim ownership before the Revolution. The Land Law of 1993 enshrined long-term land use in so-called "red books" and put in motion a longer term program of land allocation, with enormous cadastral and social implications. Farmers are encouraged to produce cash crops for the market, rather than engage in subsistence agriculture.

These transitions to a full-fledged capitalist agriculture are applauded and actively supported by foreign donors, which celebrate Vietnam's integration into the international market even though the mechanisms of international trade (import and export of agricultural commodities) are still dominated and regulated by state-owned enterprises. In a matter of a few years, Vietnam became self-sufficient in rice production, and climbed to second place among the world's rice exporting countries. Despite continuing problems with child malnutrition in the countryside, the average living standards rises sharply. Vietnam's uplands convey a different picture, though. In the following I shall focus on the Central Highlands rather than the northern upland regions.

In the Central Highlands, the introduction of the household economy (*kinh te ho gia dinh*) in agriculture focuses the interests of entrepreneurial farmers on cash crops that can do well on some of the basaltic soils on the plateaus: rubber, tea, pepper, cashew, cocoa, and especially coffee. Given its relatively high price in the world market, coffee became a crop with which one could make a fortune during the early and mid-1990s. Individuals and families with capital, technical know-how and marketing skills have acquired vast assets. Some areas, especially in Dak Lak province, experienced a veritable "coffee boom" and have become known as a new Eldorado, where "brown gold" (coffee) could be mined. This wealth has attracted millions of fortune seekers from other regions in Vietnam, especially the poorest provinces in the North, at a time when the state-organized transmigration into New Economic Zones slowed down. The new type of migration, usually called "spontaneous migration" (*di dan tu do*), follows patterns formed by networks of family and community ties. Often, local authorities in sending communities or provinces of origin still give a premium to departing households (despite the problems which migration is causing in receiving provinces). Households often simply start clearing land, or claim already cleared land or old swidden fields to plant coffee, and trust that their land claim will be recognized by the local authorities – which usually happens. This spontaneous migration has taken on massive proportions. Between 1976 and 2001 the population of the four provinces of the Central Highlands more than tripled from 1.2 million to over 4 million, with the indigenous population growing from 600,000 to approximately one million (Writenet 2002: 10-16).

In terms of land tenure, the Central Highlands were (and are) a kind of limbo. As in the lowlands, the local population brought their lands into the agricultural cooperatives during collectivization, and expected to receive more or less the same portion back by the time the cooperatives were dismantled and the land reallocated to individual households. However, there is a number of complicating factors in the Central Highlands. Traditional concepts of land ownership and land use in the Highlands differ greatly from the notion of private property which is the hallmark of the return to capitalist forms of production in Vietnam. Though forms of land tenure varied among ethnic groups and local groups in the Central Highlands, many practiced some form of rotational shifting cultivation because most of the highland topography and soil is not suitable for permanent irrigated rice cultivation. Rotational shifting cultivation (or swidden farming) was practiced by individual households or extended families, but on land within the village boundaries which was usually claimed by a village community and managed by village or clan elders. For centuries this system has been sustainable and compatible with the existence of healthy primary and secondary forests, the more so because ecologically important sites were often considered 'sacred' and left untouched. This tenure system, grounded in strong communities and shared ritual prescriptions, is hardly compatible with the notion of land as commodity implied in the concept of private property. Besides, with the growing population density because of natural growth and in-migration, the traditional system of shifting cultivation is no longer sustainable in most places, because of lack of suitable land and of fallowing times

that are too short to allow the forests to return and restore the fertility of the soil, and because the ritual prescriptions surrounding the use of land are no longer shared and enforced.

In present-day Vietnam, traditional Highlander concepts of land ownership have been regarded as backward, primitive and harmful; shifting cultivation is seen as part of a subsistence type of agricultural economy and hence not conducive to commodity production and development. Therefore, claims on the basis of communal land tenure concepts have not been recognized as valid. But even if such claims were recognized, there would be a problem when transforming a system of communal land tenure into private land ownership, because there would not be a pre-existing model of individual or household plots. Besides, the situation in the Highlands is confounded by the massive migration which has taken and is taking place. If we limit ourselves to land allocation to members of the former cooperatives, then it is clear that while only indigenous highlanders brought in their land, both indigenous and migrant households were eligible for land use rights embodied in so-called "red books". Another feature of the Central Highlands is the persistence of state enterprises in agriculture (*nong truong*) and in forestry (*lam truong*), as compared with the lowlands. State farms continue to occupy and manage vast tracts of fertile land for profitable coffee and rubber production, and lease out portions of land to local households to manage as sharecroppers on a 60/40% basis. For indigenous households this system is even more risky than the normal allocation of agricultural land because if they fail to generate sufficient profits the state farm can break the contract and lease the land to others with more capital or expertise. As these 'others' are often more successful migrant farmers, indigenous households are at high risk of becoming landless peasants. Finally, land is *de facto* claimed by 'spontaneous migrants' who often clear land with little regard for previous uses or existing claims, and whose presence is usually tolerated or officially accepted by the authorities.

State forest enterprises continue to protect and exploit the many domains which were designated as forest land – even if such forest land had been used for shifting cultivation in the past and/or was claimed for shifting cultivation in the future. While state forest enterprises used to be notorious for clear-cutting the forests, new forest and nature reserves and national parks are established to protect the existing biodiversity and watersheds, thereby displacing population groups that may consider those lands their domain. The establishment if nature parks and forest reserves is a phenomenon which began in earnest in the 1990s with international support, thus prolonging the dominant role of state forest enterprises. While forest land is also supposed to be allocated to individual households, this process is even slower than the allocation of agricultural land, especially for those forests which still contain valuable timber. Besides, the benefits of allocation of barren land to be reforested under Program 327 (Decree 327 was issued in 1992) are limited, because households are supposed to protect "their" forest for a fee (US$ 3-4 per hectare per year) and not exploit forest land – let alone clear it for swidden farming. Program 327 has been superseded by the Five Million Hectare Program which aims to induce peasants to reforest "barren hills" in return for certain usufruct rights contained in "blue books" but which are far from certain. An additional problem is the allocation of land use rights to men – considered as household heads under Vietnamese law – in communities that traditionally had matrilineal kinship and inheritance, thereby disenfranchising women. Many interlocutors told me that they now lack forest resources which they used to have in abundance: timber, thatch, non-timber products, game. Many indigenous farmers in the Central Highlands do not wish to participate in this program, and instead move away to remote areas to continue swidden farming outside of the control of the authorities. But given the massive in-migration, the rapid rate of deforestation, and the degradation of land and water resources, this swidden farming is no longer the rotational

shifting cultivation system, which used to be sustainable in areas with low population densities, but often a pioneering-type of shifting cultivation system which will contribute to the degradation of the natural resources in the area. Despite these setbacks and despite the lack of results of the Fixed Cultivation and Settlement program, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development reported in May 2001 that "nomadic lifestyles" (the reference is to shifting cultivation, not to migration) are to be phased out by 2005.[15]

Whereas the above processes have to do with loss of access to – not officially recognized – ancestral lands, indigenous minorities were eligible for agricultural land allocated according to the 1993 Land Law. Many refused or were not interested in receiving official titles contained in "red books" for fear that this involved increased land-based taxation. But when indigenous households did receive and accept "red books" they often lack the knowledge, skills and capital to grow demanding and resource-intensive cash crops. In a situation where land has become commoditized they often lack the concept of individual land ownership, being accustomed to the communal land ownership with periodic reallocation of land by clan elders in their traditional system of shifting cultivation. To make things worse, the coffee price fell steeply from January 1999, bankrupting many of the poorest and least skilled farmers.[16] From 1995 to 1999, Vietnam tripled its coffee production and became the world's second coffee exporting country (climbing from rank 6 in 1995). In an insightful article on 'regulation, markets and consumption in the global coffee chain' Stefano Ponte (2002) attributes the recent fall of the coffee price to three main factors: (1) the enormous increase of production in Vietnam; (2) the collapse of the International Coffee Agreement and consequent deregulation of the international coffee trade after the end of the Cold War; and (3) the consolidation of the coffee industry. These factors tilted the power balance in the market in favour of the industry in the consumer countries, which was reflected in a steady decrease of the price paid to growers and of the value added in producing countries as a proportion of the coffee price from 1971 to 1995. In the words of Ponte, "this represents a substantial transfer of resources from producing to consuming countries, irrespective of price levels" (2002: 1106-7).

Through coffee and other cash crops the economy of Tay Nguyen was integrated extremely fast into the international market, generating both wealth and dependence. Vietnamese farmers have invested in a product which they thought was "brown gold" but which offers diminishing profits, partly because of the scale with which they themselves have contributed to the overproduction of coffee on a global level. Depending on the caprice of the market, the poorest households are going under first. Indebted and bankrupted, indigenous households are often lured or forced to sell off their lands to newcomers or to rich farmers. For their survival they often return to subsistence swidden agriculture by clearing fields in the forest. But the availability of forest land has diminished as a consequence of the massive in-migration and clearing of forests by migrants for coffee and pepper gardens as well as for swidden farming. The agricultural conversion of forests to coffee gardens which turned Vietnam into the world's No. 2 coffee exporting country, came at the price of an annual loss of 30,000 hectares of forest in Tây Nguyên, soil erosion and depletion and pollution of water resources. The loss and closure of forest resources contributed to the increased dependence of Highlanders on single products for their livelihoods. As one interlocutor stated, "timber and thatch have been exhausted by newcomers, cattle is stolen regularly, fish is depleted by the use of electrocution, explosions or poison – we have less and less." Admittedly, there are so-called community-based natural resource management and community forestry projects that seek to restore a role for communities in economic life, but these projects are predicated on state ownership of land and resources and

on a conservation logic which dictates a separation between agriculture and forestry so that they do not meet the livelihood needs of the communities involved.

The net effect of these interlocking processes has been a gradual dispossession and displacement of indigenous highlanders, not because of any deliberate vicious scheme cooked up in the capital city but because traditional communal ownership is not recognized – as is the case in most countries – and because various trends concurred and reinforced each other. In fact, the dire situation of Highlanders is acknowledged by the Party and the State at a central level. Relief through support from the state, for instance through the Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction programme, may not be very effective as it is typically channelled through sedentarization (Fixed Cultivation and Settlement) programs which indigenous communities are trying to avoid. One Vietnamese anthropologist has described a typical case of a number of Ede villages that had been *in situ* for five generations but which were "sedentarized" (relocated) in a new village in order to "stabilize" and "develop" their lifestyles. In the process, however, Kinh in-migrants have become the most enthusiastic participants in the resettlement and attendant poverty alleviation programs because it allows them legitimized access to lands that once were considered Ede property. If we were to analyze this process of dispossession and displacement in Marxian terms, then it is obvious that Central Highlanders are being alienated from their means of production (land) through a process resembling the enclosures of the commons in 18th Century Britain. In the context of commercialization of agriculture and commoditization of land, the enclosures of common grounds impoverished the peasants and made them ripe for factory work (Hobsbawm 1996: 153) – a process called proletarianization by Karl Marx. There is profound irony in the fact that enclosures and proletarianization take place under a Communist regime in Vietnam's Central Highlands.

This process has inevitably resulted in conflicts over land and resources, which also fuelled the protests in 2001. In the international discourse, the process by which Highlanders gradually lose their land is often attributed to official ethnocentrism, whereby ethnic Vietnamese (*Kinh*) and Central Highlanders are often depicted as mutually antagonistic and even hostile. According to this view, the situation is aggravated by the unrestrained implementation of Communist policies in the Central Highlands which would be detrimental for the indigenous population. But I would suggest that the situation is more complicated than this, for the land tenure situation was less of a problem before *Doi Moi* than after the reforms had started, and has become increasingly unmanageable ever since. When coffee started to be grown and sold individually, "free" migration and illegal land clearing reached epidemic forms. Highlanders, on the other hand, have much more difficulty in coping with the concept of private ownership of land, and with capitalist forms of commodity production and trade. In other words, the predicament of Vietnam's Central Highlanders in terms of land is not so much caused by socialist policies of collectivization, but by de-collectivization and capitalist reforms enacted by a Communist government advised and funded by the international donor community led by the World Bank. In Vietnam's Central Highlands there was much less for local economic initiative and entrepreneurship than in upland Sulawesi, where Tania Li attributes agrarian differentiation to 'indigenous transformation' in the context of the 'cocoa boom' (Li 2002).

When the World Bank was accused of supporting coffee production in Vietnam thereby undercutting the global coffee market, it felt compelled to issue a press release refuting that the Bank had anything to do with expansion of coffee production in Vietnam, because coffee was not part of its loan portfolio, and lending to the agricultural sector in Vietnam had started in 1996, i.e. when the coffee expansion was well underway.[17] But I would submit that the situation is more complex than can be inferred from the existence of direct loans to a particular sector. Ever since

Vietnam started the reforms, it was urged by international advisors, donors, and foreign and (increasingly) domestic investors to speed up the reforms. Throughout the 1990s, international press coverage of Vietnam tended to focus on a putative running conflict between reformers and conservatives in terms of reforms – an image which is captured by a recent article on Vietnam's Communist leadership in *The Economist*, entitled 'Vietnam's reluctant capitalists' (March 14, 2002). Even Philip Taylor, in his trenchant critique of the discourse of 'modernity' in Vietnam, caps his book with an epilogue in which he refers to foreign news reports and 'observers' quoted by Reuters to lend his support to further reforms (Taylor 2001: 197-201). One rare exception to this trend is Gabriel Kolko (1997) who chided Vietnam's leadership for abandoning Socialism and yielding to capitalism.

As with Communism before *Doi Moi*, the project of macro-reform in capitalist direction implies a sudden shift in economic realities and requires the reform of people and the imposition of a new ethic, a new discipline, and new aspirations. Whereas the Communist clergy were the cadres of Party and State, the capitalist clergy is more diverse, including not only cadres but also development agents (within Vietnam) and (transnationally) the media, tourists, coffee traders and ultimately WTO protagonists – after all, we have seen how the deregulation of the coffee market contributed to the conversion of Vietnam's Central Highlands into coffee plantations and simultaneously to the reduction of the coffee price and profit. The methods of conversion to 'New Capitalist Man' in the Central Highlands – perhaps akin to Samuel Popkin's 'rational peasant' – can be characterized as a combination of attraction and attrition. Above, we have described the enclosures which prevent the continuation of traditional forms of subsistence. With de-collectivization, the household economy was introduced which made individual households responsible for their own income as actors in the market. While individual plots of officially allocated land are no longer sufficient for subsistence farming, peasants are suddenly encouraged to become cash crops farmers producing for the global market. As with other entrepreneurial activities, this requires investment capital, technical know-how and skills, and trade connections. In order to meet this need new agricultural extension services have been set up whose staff are underpaid by the State and are moonlighting as agents for chemical industries selling fertilizer and pesticides. As part of poverty alleviation programs a rural road construction program has been initiated in order to connect communities with markets. With the individual responsibility for household income, poverty has become individualized as well. In a study of poverty reduction in the Northern Highlands, Bent Jørgensen found that the recent reforms in terms of the local impact of roads, markets and land allocation have generally created better economic opportunities for most better-off households in the communities. However, for already poor and vulnerable households the situation has actually become worse in absolute terms (not just relative to other, better-off households) because of the erosion of traditional social arrangements that offered social security in terms of shared wealth or shared poverty: poverty is deepening and becoming individualized (Jørgenson 1999).

Programs and propaganda campaigns in other sectors, like family planning, discursively and materially connect compliance with economic fortune. Materially, because there are economic incentives to comply. Discursively, because ethnic minority households with more than two children are told that family size was the cause of their poverty. With the slashing of State subsidies in the social sector as part of the economic reforms, official and unofficial fees have been introduced for other social services like education and health care. This is euphemistically called the "socialization" (read: privatization) of the sector, meaning that "society" has to contribute for the provision of services. In all these sectors, foreign donors are prominently present in giving aid and advice. The combined result of such processes is similar as elsewhere in

Vietnam and beyond, namely the commoditization of goods and services, and the commercialization of exchanges. Along with these measures forcefully pushing Central Highlanders to become small entrepreneurs who are increasingly integrated in the local, national and global markets, and who become increasingly dependent on goods and services, there is simultaneous seduction: the promise of wealth and consumption. As global citizens, Central Highlanders are being addressed as potential consumers as well. The coffee boom of the mid-1990s made many ethnic Kinh residents in the Central Highlands rich almost overnight, conveying the notion that a life of wealth and luxury is within grasp. International and domestic tourism bring relatively small but increasing numbers of people with money in their pockets and plenty of time to spend it, and who come to gaze at the exotic traditional lifestyle of Central Highlanders. New media project images of bourgeois, urban lifestyles, interspersed with advertisements seducing people to buy products which promise their consumers that they can be just like the stars in the films, soaps, shows, or music industry. Compared with actual economic conditions and lifestyles, the lifestyle created and marketed by late capitalism seems like heaven on earth – and even within reach because there are people who partake in it. The market gospel dictates that consumption is possible if one produces the right products for the market.

This seductive part of capitalist conversion is subtle but very effective. During the encounters I have had in the Central Highlands – from 1991 until 2002 – I have not come across a single person who did not want to partake of the signs of modernity – Vietnamese style: motorbikes, videos, beautiful houses. Though still out of reach for many, I noticed that those who could pay for such commodities would purchase them eagerly. At the same time, the commoditization of land and commercialization of the economy means that many families and communities no longer have the resources to engage in feasting or to organize traditional life cycle and agricultural rituals. Dry upland rice (from swiddening) was used for making the rice wine for ceremonial occasions, but is hardly available, leading many to buy their jars in the market. Traditional wooden houses cannot be maintained let alone built anew, as timber had to be bought from far away. Precious ritual objects like bronze gong sets, drums, ancient Chinese jars, wooden funerary statues or intricately woven cotton fabrics have become prize objects in the international art market, and are sold by poor Highlanders in order to make a living. In short, the capitalist reforms of *Doi Moi* have succeeded in disenfranchising Central Highlanders in terms of assets and access to resources, and in uprooting their traditional lifestyle. In terms of the use of scarce assets and resources there is thus a very real competition between traditional ritual requirements and demand for commodities. At a generic level, they have been far less successful than lowlanders in acquiring a capitalist ethic that would make them successful farmers and entrepreneurs. While they are touched by the thirst for capitalism's consumer paradise and share the appetite for commodities with others, they don't seem to be able to cope successfully with capitalist modernity. Borrowing Walter Benjamin's concept, the capitalist integration of the Central Highlands has succeeded in the '*Verschuldung*' of Vietnam's Central Highlanders – both in the sense of creating a very real indebtedness and in the sense of creating guilt, i.e. individual responsibility for their own situation.

The usual explanation offered is that Highlanders are mired in tradition, culturally immobile and conservative. In the discourse of development of the Vietnamese State and of international aid agencies alike, Highlanders have been portrayed as isolated; living in remote areas; mired in tradition; and hence unchanging. In the past, the story goes, civilization had passed them by; the lowland cultures of Indochina – influenced by the Indian and Chinese civilizations – formed the basis of the states in the region, and were better able to embrace modernity. With their material culture that superficially resembles the *Dong Son* culture of pre-

Sinitic Vietnam, they are often regarded as the contemporary ancestors of the ethnic Vietnamese. Yet, there is historical evidence that in precolonial times, Highlanders occupied a prominent position in regional long-distance trade. Lists of commodities for international trade in the lowland states, and gifts contained in tributes, often involved products found or made in the Highlands, like bee wax, honey, precious woods, ivory, rhinoceros horns, or cinnamon. On their part, Central Highlanders acquired salt, fabrics, but also large Chinese ceramic jars or prized bronze gongs from Burma (Li Tana1998: 133-8; Salemink 2002: 28-39). For centuries, Central Highlanders have been active traders in the commercial networks that were part of Wallerstein's world system – the precursor of present-day capitalist globalization. The question then becomes why they were successful traders then, but poor entrepreneurs now, as actors in an encompassing, long-term globalization process? I hope to be able to contribute to an answer in the next section.

5. Highlanders choosing their own religion

Above I have analyzed both Communism and capitalism as systems that are – among many other things – religious in nature. Both Communism and capitalism have historically been associated with particular idealized ethics, which were imposed on the populations that came under their respective influence. I have described these processes as efforts at conversion, comparable to religious conversion in their moral dimensions. While much global attention today is focused on the 'clash' between religious and secular (democratic, or economistic) value systems, between Jihad and McWorld (cf. Barber 1995), between *mythos* and *logos* (cf. Armstrong 2000), I like to stress the convergences in terms of totalizing practices. I see convergence between the capitalist and communist projects of reform and religious campaigns of radical conversion in the following points:

(1) The promise of salvation in the form of paradise – in the afterlife; in an unspecified future (the Socialist workers' paradise); or in the attainment of a consumer's paradise on earth in the present.
(2) The vilification of the old or at least previous lifestyle as pagan, evil, backward, unhygienic, unproductive, bourgeois or feudal.
(3) The attempt to remake society and reform man by erasing the past and by introducing a new ethics that should lead to a new ethos conforming to a new orthodoxy.
(4) The disciplining and even totalizing effect of the new ethics by the denial of private or local space – without refuge or the possibility of escape.
(5) And the expansion of people's horizon by their integration into national and transnational networks and inclusion into their discursive domains.

Benjamin Barber (1995: 205-7) noted the tendency of religious 'fundamentalisms' to expand aggressively because they tolerate no alternative. Its system and its ethic are forcibly imposed on each community, without chance of refuge or avoidance, and in that sense it is expansive and inclusive. We have seen such mechanisms at work in the Central Highlands.

As said before, Walter Benjamin (1985: 100) noted the unique universalizing tendency of capitalism in terms of creating (both moral and financial) indebtedness rather than salvation. In a very literal sense we can see this happening in the enclosures of the commons in the Central Highlands and in the bankruptcies forcing households to sell their land – as commodity. But in a metaphorical, moral sense we can see the *Verschuldung* (indebtedness) to the *Yang* – the spirits and gods of the community religions of the Highlanders. Whereas the Communist conversion attempted to root out any traces of 'superstition', the capitalist conversion makes traditional, 'animist' religious beliefs meaningless, and religious practices redundant. During my last trip to

the Highlands, many interlocutors would motivate their (recent) conversion to Christianity – either Protestant or Catholic – by claiming that the old rituals have become too "heavy" or simply too burdensome in terms of sacrifices or ritual exchanges and compensations. One Jarai informant phrased this as follows:

> We don't have enough buffaloes, pigs, chickens, rice and alcohol for the rituals anymore so we do not pray for the *yang* anymore. We need a buffalo, a pig or a chicken to sacrifice for the ritual if somebody is sick, but we don't have that anymore so now we go to the health station if we are sick.

Agrarian rites linked to clan- or village-based swidden agriculture cease to have meaning when the land is taken away and converted into coffee gardens or tree plantations owned and managed by others. Spirits inhabiting specific natural sites leave if these sites are appropriated by others. Rituals and festivals become problematic if the resources to organize them are lacking, or if the relevant ritual objects have been sold to peddlers, art collectors or tourists. Ritual feasts are less fun if the lay-out of the resettled village has changed completely, with houses are far apart, and communal houses are no longer in use. Life-cycle rituals become unsettling rather than comforting if State cadres intervene in the length of the ritual, thus making participants fear that they don't pay due respect to the spirits. Reconciliation between groups of people and between people and spirits through customary law becomes difficult to enforce and if it exists next to and competes with statutory law. Finally, not much can be done to uphold traditional practices if a locality is populated by people of different ethnic backgrounds and religious creeds. In such a situation, one can never pay due respect to the spirits, meaning that one is always morally (and often materially) indebted. During my last trip informants repeatedly invoked the issue of moral deficiency and loss of morality as an occasion for conversion – which then becomes an act of restoration of the moral order. One Bahnar informant expressed this as follows:

> I got in touch with Christianity through my wife and converted in 1998 with the help of God. I still participate in the village rituals but find these too cumbersome and exacting, and there is too much drinking. Men become drunk and violent and beat their wives and children. I don't want that. The Christian religion is much better.

Other interlocutors would lament the increased incidence of theft and the incapacity of customary law and ritual to deal with this as a sign of the breakdown of the old moral order.

In short, while Communism preached the moral bankruptcy of the traditional – religious, cultural and economic – ethic, capitalism caused the moral bankruptcy through economic means, tightly connecting the religious with the economic bankruptcy of traditional lifestyles. In an introductory article to a special issue of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* on Protestant Christians in Southeast Asia, Charles Keyes describes this phenomenon as follows:

> "Peripheral peoples living in outer Indonesia and the highlands of Thailand have increasingly found that the practice of localized animistic religions is markedly disjunctive with the world in which they now live." (Keyes 1996: 288)

As this observation resonates with my earlier analysis of religious change in Vietnam's Central Highlands (Salemink 1997: 520-3), this seems to indicate that the processes taking place in the Central Highlands of Vietnam have a great degree of similarity with other countries in Southeast Asia. In his analysis of Protestant conversion among marginal groups in Southeast Asia, Keyes mentions a number of factors for conversion, based on cases in Indonesia and Thailand. Protestant conversion is in a way a form of religious 'modernization' which allows marginal groups to ally themselves with a prestigious world religion. The occasion for conversion is often a collective and/or personal crisis, but (though conversion can be an instrumental decision) it is also a "deeper resolution to a crisis of order" (Keyes 1996: 288). The 'indigenization' of the

gospel and the clergy after decolonization made Protestantism more attractive than during colonial rule. Protestant conversion was often attended by efforts at developing minority scripts and promoting literacy, thus meeting a widespread mythical expectation among peripheral minorities in Southeast Asia to find the lost script one day. Finally, Protestantism is nowhere the main or state religion in Southeast Asia, so conversion to Protestantism perpetuates religious difference and reaffirms ethnic boundaries distinguishing them from the dominant population.

All these factors play a role in the conversion of Central Highlanders in Vietnam. The context of moral and material crisis and of incompatibility of the traditional religion with the requirements of modernity have been sketched clearly above. In the words of Guérin et al. (n.p.: 36), the Central Highlanders face "such troubles that the sacrifices can no longer restore the order of the world, [and] Christianity – analyzed politically – constitutes a religion of collaboration coupled with a spirit of resistance." (Guérin et al., n.p.: 36). The indigenization factor is also quite clear. There no longer are foreign missionaries present in the Highlands, but there are local pastors and there are international broadcasts in vernacular languages.[18] In an earlier work I alluded to the effort at modernization while retaining ethnic difference:

> "What Protestantism does provide […] is an organizational and ideological autonomy which allows space for a separate Montagnard (Jarai, Edê) ethnic identity in a context of increasing discipline, surveillance and governmentalization. This ethnic identity is not maintained because Protestantism has much in common with the traditional Jarai and Edê religions and cultures. In fact, missionary activity attempted to transform Montagnard lifestyles to conform modernity as much as any foreign interference […]. In line with the observation that the essence of ethnicity does not lie in its cultural substance, Protestantism reconstructs a sense of Montagnard ethnicity by redrawing ethnic boundaries along religious lines." (Salemink 1997: 523).

Since I did the research for that article and wrote these lines, much has changed in the Highlands. In the early 1990s it was already clear that the numbers of Protestants in the Central Highlands were growing, but the pace of conversion picked up since the beginning of *Doi Moi*, growing from approximately 50,000 in 1975, to some 200,000 in 1990, to perhaps 400,000 now.[19] The Protestant missionary society that was most active and influential in the Central Highlands before 1975 was the Christian and Missionary Alliance, an interdenominational evangelical society that adheres to a Christian fundamentalist doctrine.

In the Human Rights Watch report mentioned above, interviews with a number of Montagnard refugees – many of them Protestants – have been quoted.[20] Two things stand out in these quotes. First, the Protestant religion is increasingly being equated with Highlander culture:

> "We want our own religion. It's our culture – if you kill it, our soul will still live." (HRW 2002: 63)

Second, religion is being equated with political opposition by some believers:

> "If we didn't have Christianity and the holy spirit with us, we would still use violence to oppose the Vietnamese, and we would all be dead." (Ib.: 61).

In the Central Highlands region itself I have met informants who complained of the suppression of Christianity or who were politically opposed to the Communist government, but I have not come across this unequivocal association of religion with political opposition in conversations with people of five ethnic groups in three provinces (Kontum, Gia Lai and Dak Lak). This equation between religion and politics, however, is also made by the Vietnam Communist Party and the Vietnamese security apparatus which seem to see '*Tin lanh Dega*' as a continuation of FULRO and a foreign-inspired tool of political subversion. In 1999 and 2000 a number of secret documents of central and provincial authorities and party agencies were leaked, which contained

analyses and recommendations dealing with the spread of evangelical Christianity in Vietnam. It is evident from these documents that Christianity is seen as antithetical to Vietnam's religious traditions and national security, and the foreign support for conversion as an attempt to undermine Vietnam's security.[21]

For the Central Highlands, the evangelical movement was associated with "evil influences", "manipulations" and "intrigues" by American missionaries associated with the US intervention and with FULRO:

> ".. before 1975 a part of the Protestant movement in the south was manipulated and taken advantage of by evil influences, especially some missionaries working in the Western Highlands who colluded with the American government and their Vietnamese lackeys in order to fight against the Revolution. […] After 1975 …. in Tay Nguyen the FULRO group exploited Protestantism in the hope of restoring the rebellious force. […] "Protestantism in our country has been influenced directly by a scheme of exploiting the religion to oppose and undermine Vietnam by 'peaceful evolution' – both by the United States and other international reactionary forces."[22]

This analysis is magnified by a media offensive in the provinces and beyond. The 'Gialai Security Programme' [Chuong trinh An ninh Gialai] of Gialai Radio & Television of October 5, 2002, for instance, featured a Jarai farmer from Ia Grai who expressed his happiness and gratitude with the results of the Sedentarization programme and of the policy of ethnic solidarity. The closing commentary said that Vietnam guarantees freedom of religion but called for vigilance as the enemy abroad uses religion to undermine the authority of the State and Party.

The suspicion works both ways because the official suspicion is recognized as harassment by believers, thus making the Protestant confession a political statement:

> "The Communists will not let us pray. They say that Christianity is an American and French religion, so we came to live in the jungle." (HRW 2002: 56)

As reported in the HRW report and other reports, the experience of especially Protestant Highlanders is one of continuous surveillance, repeated harassment, sometimes arrest, and frequent destruction of churches as measures of suppression. Ironically, the religious-inspired troubles make the Communist regime long for the good old days of manageable 'superstition': "Some documents advocate a return to the traditional religious beliefs which had been suppressed as 'superstitious' before" (Writenet 2002: 20; see also Salemink 1997: 530). This half-hearted policy change is mirrored in reports that "in recent years highlanders who have converted to Christianity have complained about local officials forcing them to reinstall traditional ancestral altars in their homes and take down the sign of the cross" and that the police force converts to participate in 'pagan' rituals (HRW 2002: 60).[23] A visible sign of this new policy is the recent spate of constructions of *nha rong* communal houses and other traditional sites, with encouragement and financial support from the authorities.

From the documents, statements and reports cited above it seems clear that there is a profound mutual antagonism between Communists and Protestants. Though the authorities attempt to make a conceptual distinction between Protestantism as a religion with 'sincere believers' and with elements constituting a 'reactionary political force', what transpires through the official documents is a profound sense of competition between Communism and Protestantism as mobilizing discursive practices bent on conversion. Reasons cited in one Government report for the conversion of minorities are the resources of missionary organizations, the weakness of the political apparatus in the highlands, and – especially – the persistent poverty and hardship among minorities, which would then point to a Communist counterstrategy of

propaganda, exposing evil schemes and giving permission to "sincere" believers, combined with economic development.[24]

Yet, it is also clear that Protestantism started to spread more rapidly after the introduction of the *Doi Moi* reforms. The HRW report observes that…

> "Christianity among highlanders was largely dormant from the installation of the Communist regime in 1975 until the late 1980s, when reforms were implemented under *doi moi* and the FULRO resistance movement finally fell apart." (HRW 2002: 60)

As we have analyzed above, *Doi Moi* is a euphemism for capitalist reforms, which impose a new economic reality, a new moral regime and a new discipline that are profoundly different from the previous, collectivist period. The Central Highlands were integrated very rapidly into the world economy, sending social, economic and cultural shockwaves through society. We have seen that the consequences of the 'socialist market economy' in the lives of Highlanders have entailed the enclosure of their lands, a rapid, inescapable change in lifestyle combined with economic depression and ecological deterioration of their environment. The full-blown localized effects of global capitalism have created the kind of crisis which Charles Keyes (1996: 287) saw as the occasion for Protestant conversion in two non-Communist countries in Southeast Asia, Thailand and Indonesia. But this pattern can be extended to many other – capitalist and Communist – countries in South, Southeast and East Asia (cf. Aragon 1996, 2000; Bal 2000; Elkins 1994; Hayami 1996; Hefner 1998; Kammerer 1990, 1998; Keane 1997, 1998; Paredes 1997; Zehner 1996; Van Schendel et al. 2000). The profound irony in Vietnam is that a (nominally) Communist regime has been in charge of the capitalist integration of its ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, unleashing a campaign of capitalist reform which simultaneously dispossessed them and tried to turn them into small entrepreneurs. As in a Greek tragedy, the failure of this capitalist conversion comes back to haunt both Highlanders and the Communist regime.

It is interesting to summarily compare this Protestant conversion among Vietnam's Highlanders with the Baha'i conversion among the indigenous Temiar population in Malaysia's Kelantan state, as described by Geoffrey Benjamin (1996). The Temiar speak an Austro-asiatic language, like the majority of the Central Highlanders, are traditional swidden farmers in the uplands who have experienced guerrilla war and sedentarization. With their traditional 'animist' religion subject to erosion and under pressure to convert to Islam, most Temiar have resisted because they feared that they would become Malays. Instead, local youngsters stumbled upon Baha'i religion and translated the main text and liturgy into vernacular languages, right at the time when large-scale government-sponsored relocation programs and increased dependence on cash had completely changed Temiar lives. Benjamin asks why the Temiars did not turn to Christianity or Islam:

> Christianity has not been a significant option among most of the indigenous populations of Peninsular Malaysia, where the Malay (and hence Muslim) presence is much stronger. […] As for Islam, the Temiars have probably avoided this in the past because conversion would almost certainly have made them not just Muslims, but Malays. (Benjamin 1996: 21)

Though Temiar adherence to Bahai'i seems to have been short-lived, this brief digression allows us to move away from the Communist-Protestant antithesis. As an indigenous group the Temiar are subjected to similar policies and pressures as the Central Highlanders in Vietnam, but Malaysia is both capitalist and Islamic. The conversion was not a response to external missionary activity but resulted "from the autonomous initiatives of some younger Temiars" (Ib.: 22). The Temiar appropriated a modern, transnational religion which happened to be at hand, and seemed a match for Islam.

I have labeled the Communist and capitalist campaigns of conversion religious projects. But why would Vietnam's Central Highlanders turn to Christianity to give new religious meaning to their shattered lives, if this conversion brings them so much additional hardship? One important factor mentioned before is the move towards modernization where the old religious practices have become impossible to continue. This new Protestant religion imposes a discipline and morality which is – *à la* Weber – in line with the requirements of capitalism (and, I would suggest, not so different from the description of New Socialist Man either!). Protestant modernity is underscored by the transnational associations which tie this local movement to a world religion with its center in the U.S. Yet, while allowing to partake of visions of modernity, the conversion to Protestantism reaffirms ethnic boundaries with the majority ethnic group along religious lines because Protestantism is perceived as politically antagonistic with Communism through its putative association with foreign interventions and with ethnonationalist tendencies. However, there is another factor that has not yet been mentioned but which is relevant in this discussion of triple fundamentalisms.

In his essay 'Multiple Modernities: Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism in a globalizing age', Robert Hefner argues that 19th Century Methodist converts in Britain "looked to their new faith as a 'free space' offering opportunities more egalitarian than those available in mainstream church and society" (1998: 95). The concept of 'free space' or 'private space' where people can create and enjoy some degree of discursive autonomy is relevant for the Central Highlands as well, given the degree to which Communist and capitalist reform campaigns have intervened into the most local and private domains, and constrained people's speech and action.[25] In an earlier publication I hinted at this issue as follows:

> "By redrawing the boundary between the *Yuan* (Kinh) and themselves (*Dega*, Montagnards) in the one field where the current regime leaves some space in the form of a theoretical freedom of religion, Montagnards reclaim agency after their political defeat in the construction of a Montagnard homeland with a fixed territory and *statut particulier*." (Salemink 1997: 523)

As I may have been wrong about the freedom of religion available, I would now suggest that Highlanders do not *use* space left by the regime, but *create* such space.

One significant element in the Protestant movement in the Central Highlands is the use of so-called house churches, i.e. unregistered, hence illicit churches where people gather to meet, talk and pray out of earshot of the agents of the state. Such house churches are regularly demolished by the authorities, but that is hardly an effective measure because any house would do as religious meeting ground. Many informants in various places spoke of the need to worship in secret, to read the Bible at home, as the construction of churches or even the gathering for worship is forbidden. Though there are opportunities to officially register as a recognized religion and to get a license to build a church (at least for Kinh Lowlanders), that is not what Highlanders are interested in. Official recognition implies an official association with the Communist Party's Fatherland Front. Recognition and license will be contingent on a strict separation of 'sincere belief' and politics as defined by State and Party, and will bring in security agents to monitor what is being said. In another profound irony, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam met for the first time after 1975, and was subsequently officially recognized as one of the admissible religions by the Fatherland Front right at the time that the Highlands were in a state of effervescence occasioned by church burnings and other harassments (Writenet 2002: 17). The message was clear: Official recognition was given to the Protestant church in the lowlands comprising of ethnic Kinh congregations, but was not extended to *Tin lanh Dega* (Dega

Protestantism) and the house churches which were considered 'political'. On their part, many Highlanders were equally uninterested in the possibility of official recognition:

> "We call our church 'Dega'. The reason we want our own religion is because in the past there were [ethnic – OS] Vietnamese leaders who controlled the church. They would come into our villages and take photographs of poor people in the Central Highlands to raise charity money from abroad. None of that money ever reached us. We started Dega religion in 2000. We wanted to make our own church to contact directly with international supporters, not through Vietnam. The authorities charge that we believe in political and that it's not religion we are doing." (HRW 2002: 62-3)

In other words, house churches allow Highlanders to meet and speak their own language, with their own pastors and read the Bible in the vernacular language.[26] The Gospel is preached in the vernacular language by an indigenous clergy. This indigenization tactic is part of the effort to create their own autonomous space – both in physical and discursive terms – which is simultaneously plugged into transnational networks of support. The tragedy of Vietnam's Central Highlanders is that they have lost – or are rapidly losing – such autonomous space in the context of their village community and even their family which have increasingly become contested spaces during the Communist and capitalist reforms. In other words, the modernist detour of Christian fundamentalism allows Highlanders to reclaim some degree of agency which they lost as objects of Communist and capitalist conversion.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to come to grips with the mass conversion to Christianity among Vietnam's Central Highlanders. I have identified a number of different factors but basically interpreted the conversion as an attempt to create autonomous space, and hence as an attempt to recapture agency. With autonomous space, I mean the discursive and practical autonomy to determine their life in their immediate living environment at the local and private levels – in particular within the village and within the family. It is explicitly not the same as political autonomy, which groups like FULRO seek. Limiting my analysis to the period after 1975, I have argued that the Central Highlanders have lost such autonomous space as a consequence of campaigns of Communist and – with *Doi Moi* – capitalist conversion. This analysis was grounded in a conceptualization of both Communism and capitalism as religious systems which are inclusive in the sense of expansive, and exclusive in terms of benefits and influence. The way this worked and works out with regards to the Central Highlanders is that they have been subjected to a succession of campaigns of conversion in the form of Communism and capitalism, but willingly subject themselves to another religious creed – i.e. evangelical Christianity – in order to create autonomous space.

As an anthropological exercise I have started out by stretching the meaning of certain concepts that belong to the staple of social science discourse. Sticking with the accepted definitions would have meant reinscribing a discourse grounded in simplistic dichotomies fuelled by assumptions of historical antagonism between tradition and modernity, between Communism, capitalism and Protestantism. Therefore, I have deliberately expanded the meaning of religion, conversion, Communism and capitalism because it became clear that an analysis along the accepted fault lines would not yield sufficient insights in order to begin to understand what drives the massive conversion to Protestantism in Vietnam's Central Highlands. This perhaps unusual step has allowed me to analyze a number of issues more clearly. First, it has created the

possibility to see Communism, capitalism and Protestantism as competing discourses and practices that are mutually exclusive because of their totalizing nature. It has allowed me to debunk a common notion in Vietnam, namely that the capitalist economic reforms known as *Doi Moi* are necessarily and automatically liberating. The reforms may be liberating for some, but not for others, and certainly not for the indigenous population of the Central Highlands where their common lands are being enclosed, and their lives are being regimented by a new capitalist ethic which makes individual households responsible for their own economic well-being (but usually poverty). In an explosive situation where protagonists from both camps as well as most outside observers tend to focus on the mutual antagonism between Communism and Protestantism, my analysis has also allowed me to connect Protestant conversion to the capitalist reforms as a primary factor in creating the kind of economic and moral crisis which has been conducive for Protestant conversion in other Asian contexts.

I started this essay with a quote from the Bible, namely that God created man in his image. It seems that those who stake a claim to orthodoxy – be it religious or secular – also seek to re-create their fellow men in their image. In this effort at reform – which I called conversion – Communism, capitalism and Christianity in their totalizing forms converge. In order to escape from orthodoxies which are imposed on them and which they experience as detrimental for them, Central Highlanders embrace a religion which feels antithetical to the Communist regime they think is responsible for their predicament. It is one of the many tragic ironies in this story that Protestantism is linked – both in the Weberian sense of Protestant ethic and in terms of actual transnational networks – with global capitalism which is imposed worldwide, but in Vietnam under the auspices of a Communist regime. Protestantism, then, creates space for them but this autonomous space is temporary and transitory; in time, Protestantism is bound to turn them into citizens and consumers in a globalizing capitalist system.

NOTES

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[1] The ethnonym for the groups which are often glossed as "Montagnards" in the international media is a topic of considerable disagreement. There is no historical ethnonym with which the variety of local groups now known as Montagnards understood themselves. In colonial times, the French adopted from lowland states pejorative local labels like *Moï, Kha* or *Phnong* – labels that had connotations of savagery and slavery. When French ethnologists and administrators wished to coopt these groups in their struggle against Vietnamese nationalism, the label "Montagnard" was adopted, a generic term signifying "highlander" which was specified in reference to a geographic location. After 1954, many Americans adopted the term Montagnard, turning it into an ethnonym (although Gerald Hickey [1982] used "Highlander"), and the South-Vietnamese regime translated Highlander into Vietnamese (*dong bao thuong* – highland compatriots). After reunification in 1975, the Socialist state dispensed of a generic ethnic label in favor of "tribal" identities, but the Highlander diaspora in the U.S. continued to use the term Montagnard along with a new ethnonym, *Dega*. In 1999, the "Great Montagnard debate" erupted in the e-mail list of the Vietnam Studies Group of the Association for Asian Studies, betraying considerable disagreements about the use of politicized ethnonyms. This debate has been analyzed in-depth by Leif Jonsson (2001). Salemink (1991, 1999, 2002) has discussed the processes of identification and classification (tribalization, ethnicization and territialization) with respect to the "Central Highlanders" of Vietnam.

[2] For the sake of protection of informants during my most recent trip I refrain from giving any names of individuals, groups or locations.

[3] After a number of successive French moves from 1946 onward, designed to undermine Vietnamese cliams to sovereignty over highland areas and to create a "homeland" and hence a motivation for tribal militias in the colonial army, the idea of autonomy took root in the Central Highlands. In 1955, thousands of Highland intellectuals followed the Viet Minh to the north of the military demarcation line along the 17th Parallel. In 1957, leaders of

Bahnar, Jarai, Rhadé (Ede) and Koho groups established the Bajaraka movement against oppressive South-Vietnamese policies, but most of the leaders were arrested. In 1961, the newly founded National Liberation Front (of South Vietnam) established the Highland Autonomy Movement under the leadership of NLF Vice-President Y Bih Aleo as one of its constituent parts. In 1964, tribal militias fighting with the US Special Forces revolted in their camps, and established the *Front Unifié de la Lutte des Races Opprimées* (FULRO) headed by Y Bham Enuol. FULRO was reconstituted after 1975, in response to oppressive policies of the new Communist regime. The last FULRO groups made it to the U.S. in the 1990s, where some groups worked toward a common "Dega" identity with the Central Highlands as their homeland (see Hickey 1982b; Salemink 2002).

[4] See http://www.freedomhouse.org/religion/country/index.htm#vietnam; http://www.hrw.org/press/2002/04/vietnam0423.htm

[5] See Aragon 1996, 2000; Bal 2000; Elkins 1994; Hayami 1996; Hefner 1998; Kammerer 1990, 1998; Keane 1997, 1998; Keyes 1996; Paredes 1997; Zehner 1996; Van Schendel et al. 2000

[6] The German word *Schuld* has both meanings – of (moral) guilt and of (financial) debt.

[7] See, for instance, Dang Nghiem Van (1984); Ho Le (1984); Nghien cuu Kinh te (1984); Uy ban KHXH Viet Nam (1986); Scientific Forum (1986); Luu Hung (1987); Vi Hong Nhan (1987); Scientific Forum (1988); Dang Nghiem Van and Chu Thai Son (1989).

[8] This and the following section have been based on Salemink 1997: 516-7.

[9] The usual English translation of *Con nguoi xa hoi chu nghia* is Socialist Man but it has to be noted that *con nguoi* in Vietnamese has no gender.

[10] See Dang Nghiem Van 1986. An English summary of that had been published earlier in *Viet Nam Social Sciences* (see Dang Nghiem Van 1984).

[11] This paragraph is based on Salemink 1997: 517-8. One special way of adapting old songs to new uses was embodied in the Edê troubadour Y Dol, who toured the villages with songs calling for reconciliation under the present regime. While the authorities considered this to be effective propaganda against FULRO, the latter organization left the troubadour alone because of his popularity (Dang Nghiem Van, personal communication). Changing the lyrics of existing songs for political reasons had already been tried by the French and the South-Vietnamese regimes.

[12] For reasons of protection of informants I cannot give names.

[13] For more details about the results of my field research I refer to Salemink (1997, 2000, 2002).

[14] This paragraph is for the most part based on Writenet (2002) which is abundantly sourced.

[15] These sections are based primarily on Writenet 2002: 14-18.

[16] Average price paid to producers for 1 lb.of robusta coffee in Vietnam slumped from US$ 0.65 to US$ 0.16 from January 1999 to December 2000, according to statistics from the International Coffee Organization, http://www.ico.org/asp/statschoice2.htm [accessed 24 January 2002].

[17] World Bank press release 2002/244/S, March 18, 2002: 'No World Bank role in Vietnam's expansion of coffee production.'

[18] The Far Eastern Broadcasting Corporation in the Philippines; see www.febc.org.

[19] These are very rough estimates, as no reliable figures are available. Sources are Nguyen Xuan Nghia (1989: 62); Weggel (1993: 466-7); Salemink (1997: 521) ; HRW (2002: 59-60); and the website of the Vietnamese Communist Party http://www.cpv.org.vn/hotnews/religious/index.htm. On top of these numbers, there are many Catholics as well, in particular in Kontum province which is 80% Catholic.

[20] These are refugees who were held in camps in Cambodia, protected by UNHCR. These people will probably represent a more activist stance in the spectrum of opinions.

[21] English translations of a number of such documents have been posted on the Internet at Freedom House, Center for Religious Freedom, *Vietnam: Secret Documents Reveal Religious Persecution Plan*, http://216.119.117.183/religion/country/index.htm#vietnam [accessed 24 January 2002]. It is impossible to verify the authenticity of these documents.

[22] Steering Committee 184 (top secret), Hanoi, 5 March 1999, Program 184A, Development of policy on Protestantism in some provinces and cities, pp. 2, 4. http://216.119.117.183/religion/pdfdocs/vietnam_doc2.pdf. The accusation that during the 1960s and '70s American missionaries were engaged in an anti-Communist crusade in Vietnam was partly justified, certainly for the Christian and Missionary Alliance (see Salemink 2002: 213-20).

[23] There is no independent confirmation for the claims made in the HRW report, nor is it clear how general the suppression is. In geographic terms it is clear that the twin movements of conversion and repression are quite wide-spread. However, the reference to reinstalling altars for ancestor worship – which is a culturally alien practice for

Central Highlanders – makes little sense, unless ethnic Vietnamese cadres impose their own religious concepts on the indigenous population.

[24] See Steering Committee 184 (top secret), Hanoi, 5 March 1999, Program 184A, Development of policy on Protestantism in some provinces and cities, http://216.119.117.183/religion/pdfdocs/vietnam_doc2.pdf. See also Writenet (2002: 20).

[25] One measure taken by the authorities after the protests of February 2001 was stationing security agents in villages and even suspected households on a semi-permanent basis (HRW 2002: 100-8; 144-9).

[26] The from the late 1950s until 1975 the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) – a.k.a. Wycliffe Bible Translators – did linguistic research in the Central Highlands (Salemink 2002: 213-220); after they left, the work of linguistic analysis and bible translation did not stop, and with *Doi Moi* many bibles translated into vernacular languages were smuggled back into the country. The Far Eastern Broadcasting Corporation (FEBC) also build upon the work of the SIL for its programs in vernacular languages.

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