



From Control to Governance: The Transformation of Religious Policy in Vietnam (1986-2025)

Phan Thi Huyen Tran

PhD, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam

Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM), Vietnam

* Corresponding Author: **Phan Thi Huyen Tran**

Article Info

ISSN (online): 2583-8261

Volume: 04

Issue: 06

November – December 2025

Received: 04-10-2025

Accepted: 05-11-2025

Published: 03-12-2025

Page No: 133-141

Abstract

Since the Đổi Mới (Renovation) reforms in 1986, Vietnam's religious policy has undergone a profound transformation, shifting from a post-war administrative control model to a governance-based approach grounded in rule of law, dialogue, and multi-actor coordination. This article aims to analyze the evolution of these policies during 1975–2025, identify the ideological, legal, and socio-economic drivers behind the transition from administrative control to religious governance, and evaluate key outcomes and remaining challenges. The study employs a historical–policy approach, combining qualitative document analysis of Party resolutions, legal instruments, and governmental reports with secondary data from scholarly works and official statistics. The analytical framework draws on governance theory, emphasizing legality, transparency, accountability, and participation across state and non-state actors. The findings indicate four major stages: (i) post-war administrative control (1975–1986); (ii) cognitive and methodological renovation in religious affairs (1986–2003); (iii) institutionalization through the 2004 Ordinance on Belief and Religion (2004–2015); and (iv) comprehensive legalization and gradual formation of a modern religious governance model following the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion (2016–2025). This trajectory has facilitated the expansion of religious freedom, strengthened the social role of religious organizations, and enhanced state governance capacity. However, challenges persist, including uneven local implementation, unresolved religious land issues, and risks of religious exploitation in the digital media environment. The article contributes a long-term case study of religious governance in a socialist, post-conflict, and internationally integrating context.

Keywords: Religious Policy, Religious Governance, Đổi Mới (1986), State–Religion Relations, Governance

1. Introduction

Throughout Vietnamese history, religion has played a crucial role in spiritual life, community structures, and broader social processes. The continued presence of multiple religious traditions—such as Buddhism, Mother Goddess worship, Confucian–Daoist teachings, Catholicism, Caodaism, and Hoa Hao Buddhism—shows that religion is not only a system of beliefs but also a cultural and social space with far-reaching influence. Consequently, religious policy has always been a key component of national governance and social stability in Vietnam.

In the pre-Đổi Mới (Renovation) period, under the impact of prolonged war, the priority of consolidating the political system after 1975, and limited legal and economic conditions, religious policy was largely “managerial–control oriented,” privileging social stability over the expansion of religious freedom.

Although the 1946 Constitution and several decrees issued by President Ho Chi Minh affirmed the principle of respecting freedom of belief, these principles were not yet fully institutionalized or consistently implemented under a centrally planned economy and an incomplete legal system. The 1986 Đổi Mới reforms marked a profound turning point. Renovation did not only restructure the economy but also encouraged a broader rethinking of social policy, including views on religion. In the context of a socialist-oriented market economy, deepening international integration, and the strong revival of religious life, the Vietnamese state was compelled to adjust its mode of governance. Religion increasingly came to be understood as a cultural, ethical, and social resource that could positively contribute to sustainable development, rather than merely as a security or public order concern.

From 1986 to 2025, religious policy in Vietnam has undergone a significant transformation that can be captured by the notion of a shift “from control to governance.” While the pre-Đổi Mới model emphasized one-way administrative management, the post-Đổi Mới trajectory shows a clear move toward rule-based approaches, more structured dialogue, greater procedural transparency, and expanded room for religious organizations to operate within the law. This process is reflected in institutional reforms, the widening of religious space, improvements in state management, and growing cooperation between the state and religious organizations in social and humanitarian domains. Studying this trajectory is important both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it helps illuminate the evolution of religious policy thinking in the context of state modernization, digital transformation, and social change. Practically, a long-term review of the 1986–2025 period provides a scientific basis for further improving Vietnam’s model of religious governance in line with new development and integration demands.

This article addresses three main questions: (1) How has Vietnam’s religious policy changed between 1986 and 2025? (2) What ideological, legal, and socio-economic drivers have propelled the shift from “control” to “governance”? (3) What outcomes, limitations, and future implications arise from this transformation?

The study draws on party documents from successive National Congresses, resolutions of the Politburo, key legal texts (the 2004 Ordinance, the 2016 Law), central-level summary reports, official statistics, and scholarly works on religion in post-Đổi Mới Vietnam. A historical–policy approach allows simultaneous analysis of continuity and change in state regulation of religion.

Based on this empirical and documentary analysis, the article proposes a three-stage framework to capture the logic of policy evolution: (1) a phase of perceptual renewal (1986–2003); (2) legal institutionalization (2004–2015); and (3) comprehensive legalization (2016–2025). Clarifying this process not only contributes to scholarship on state–religion relations in Vietnam but also suggests policy implications for improving religious governance in the current development context.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Research Methods

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study situates Vietnam’s transformation of religious policy within the governance framework, an approach that highlights the coordinated roles of the state, market, and society in public administration^[1, 2]. Rather than viewing the state as the sole decision-maker, governance emphasizes four core features: (i) the participation of multiple actors (polycentric actors); (ii) network-based coordination; (iii) rule-based accountability, transparency, and the rule of law; and (iv) dialogue, negotiation, and co-governance. Applied to the religious field, this framework helps trace the shift from “administrative control” to “religious governance,” in which religious organizations are no longer treated solely as objects of management but increasingly as actors involved in social activities.

In international scholarship on state–religion relations, many studies stress the importance of legal frameworks and governance structures in shaping religious life^[3–5]. These works suggest that the way a state designs religious governance regime has a direct impact on levels of conflict or cooperation between religion and politics. Using a governance lens for Vietnam thus enables a broader dialogue with global debates on religious governance.

On this basis, the article mobilizes three major theoretical pillars that have shaped Vietnam’s religious policy orientation after Đổi Mới: (i) Marxist–Leninist theory; (ii) Ho Chi Minh’s thought; and (iii) the policy line developed since the Sixth National Party Congress (1986).

First, Marxist–Leninist theory conceptualizes religion as a form of social consciousness rooted in socio-economic conditions and community psychology. While critical of religion’s “illusory” aspects, the classical authors did not advocate its suppression by coercive measures. Instead, they emphasized improving people’s material and cultural life as the fundamental way to address religious issues. This provides a theoretical foundation for a flexible, persuasive, and non-extremist approach to religious policy.

Second, Ho Chi Minh’s thought adds a strong humanistic and practical dimension. He consistently regarded religion as a “legitimate spiritual need” of the people, emphasized unity between believers and non-believers, and placed freedom of belief on a par with the struggle against the abuse of religion. This approach has been a guiding thread in Vietnam’s handling of state–religion relations.

Third, the religious policy line formulated during the Đổi Mới era has been the core reference for the entire 1986–2025 period. Since the Sixth National Congress, religion has been recognized as a long-term social phenomenon with both positive and negative dimensions; freedom of belief has been affirmed as a fundamental right of citizens; and religious work has been defined as the responsibility of the entire political system. Landmark documents such as Politburo Resolution 24-NQ/TW (1990), Resolution 25-NQ/TW (2003), the 2013 Constitution, and the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion clearly articulate a legalist, human-centered, and dialogue-oriented approach to state management of religion.

Building on these foundations, the article employs four analytical concepts: (i) religious policy—as the set of principles and norms regulating religious life; (ii) policy implementation—as the process of translating policy into action; (iii) state management of religion—as organization, oversight, and licensing based on law; and (iv) religious governance—as a rule-based, transparent, multi-actor model in which state and religious organizations interact as partners in social development.

Combining governance theory with Vietnam’s indigenous ideological pillars makes it possible to explain the logic of policy evolution: from administrative control → legal institutionalization → legalization under a modern governance model.

2.2. Research methods and approach

The study adopts an interdisciplinary social-science approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analysis with a historical–policy perspective to capture the transformation of religious policy in Vietnam between 1986 and 2025.

First, the historical–logical method is used to reconstruct the formation and evolution of religious policy over time, thereby identifying key stages and the shift from “perceptual renewal” to “institutionalization” and then to “legalization.”

Second, the article undertakes documentary and legal analysis based on official texts, including party resolutions, constitutions, ordinances, laws, and implementing decrees in the field of belief and religion. This approach makes it possible to assess the degree of legalization and institutional sophistication across different periods.

Third, secondary sources—such as scholarly works, dissertations, local reports, and survey data—are synthesized to compare policy provisions with the actual dynamics of religious life. This comparison helps identify gaps between “policy on paper” and “policy in practice.”

Fourth, comparative analysis is employed to clarify the characteristics of policy models corresponding to four stages: (i) pre-1986 administrative control; (ii) 1986–2003 perceptual renewal; (iii) 2004–2015 institutionalization; and (iv) 2016–2025 legalization along modern governance lines.

Fifth, quantitative indicators, including numbers of believers, clergy, religious establishments, recognized religious organizations, and administrative reform indexes, are used to illustrate trends and the effects of policy changes.

Taken together, this multi-method design not only enables an accurate description of policy transformation but also provides a basis for explaining the drivers of reform and deriving implications for refining Vietnam’s religious governance model in the context of ongoing modernization.

3. Overview of Religious Characteristics and Religious Policy in Vietnam before 1986

3.1. Characteristics of religion in Vietnam

Religion in Vietnam displays both general features common to East Asian societies and specific traits shaped by a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural context. Over the long term, at least three major characteristics can be observed: (i) religious diversity and syncretism; (ii) close links between religion and village/regional communities; and (iii) strong adaptive and restructuring capacities under conditions of reform and integration.

First, religious and belief practices in Vietnam are highly diverse and syncretic. Alongside world religions such as Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam, there are indigenous religions like Caodaism, Hoa Hao Buddhism, Tu An Hieu Nghia, and Tinh Do Cu Si, as well as a wide spectrum of popular beliefs, including ancestor worship, Mother Goddess worship, tutelary deity cults, and local spirit cults. Syncretism is evident in the way individuals and communities participate in multiple belief spaces at once, combining elements of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism—and in some cases Christian or new religious elements—in their everyday spiritual lives.

Second, from a quantitative perspective, religious life has expanded rapidly since the onset of Đổi Mới, highlighting the vitality and potential of religion in Vietnam. In 1986, the country had around 10 million believers, nearly 20,000 clergy, more than 22,000 religious professionals, and roughly 15,000 places of worship. By 1996, these figures had risen to about 15 million believers, over 24,000 clergy, nearly 35,000 religious professionals, and some 17,000 places of worship. In 2006, the number of believers reached around 20 million, with more than 34,000 clergy, 44,000 religious professionals, and over 22,000 worship facilities ^[6]. According to the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (2022), by 2021 Vietnam had 43 organizations representing 16 recognized religions, with more than 26.5 million believers, over 56,000 clergy, 148,000 religious functionaries, and nearly 30,000 places of worship. The 2022 White Paper on Religion and Religious Policy in Vietnam reports that for 2023–2025 there are still 43 religious organizations from 16 religions, with over 27.7 million believers, more than 54,500 clergy, nearly 145,000 functionaries, and 29,890 worship facilities; about 95% of the population is connected to some form of belief or religion. Compared with 1986, the number of believers has grown from roughly 10 million to over 26.5–27.7 million (an increase of more than 160%), while worship facilities have increased from about 15,000 to nearly 30,000 (an increase of approximately 100%) ^[7].

Table 1: Estimated numbers of believers, clergy, religious professionals, and worship facilities in major religions in Vietnam, 1986–2023 ^[7]

Year	Believers (est.)	Clergy	Religious professionals	Worship facilities
1986	~10,000,000	~20,000	>22,000	~15,000
1996	~15,000,000	>24,000	~35,000	~17,000
2003	17,400,000	34,200	–	>20,900
2006	~20,000,000	>34,000	44,000	>22,000
2021	>26,500,000	>56,000	–	~30,000
2022	27,700,000+	>54,500	–	29,890

Third, beyond numerical growth, religious life in Vietnam has been undergoing restructuring and new forms of syncretism under globalization and digital transformation.

Recent research has pointed to shifts in belief and conversion—such as a trend among some Buddhists and Catholics toward Protestant denominations; the emergence of

“strange” or new religious movements such as Falun Gong, Yiguandao, the Supreme Master Ching Hai movement, or the “God Mother” group; as well as the rejuvenation of clergy, diversification of pastoral practices, and extensive use of social media and digital platforms for evangelization and community organization ^[8]. These developments show that religion is not merely a traditional legacy but also a “dynamic field” that is constantly restructured in interaction with markets, media, and cyberspace.

Fourth, religious organizations are increasingly involved in “secular” activities such as education, healthcare, charity and humanitarian work, environmental protection, new rural development, social welfare, and climate change adaptation. Many programs on poverty alleviation, care for vulnerable groups, disaster relief, and community cultural development benefit significantly from the contributions of religious organizations. This confirms religion as a tangible social resource, not just an abstract system of beliefs.

Fifth, in the context of international integration, religious life in Vietnam is subject to dual pressures: on one hand, the rise of new religious groups and transnational missionary activities; on the other, the influence of international discourses on democracy, human rights, and religious freedom. Since the 1990s, reports and recommendations from organizations such as USCIRF and HRW have repeatedly raised questions regarding religious freedom in Vietnam, at times placing the country on the list of “Countries of Particular Concern” (CPC). This context requires religious policy to both safeguard human rights and maintain political stability and national sovereignty ^[9].

These multi-layered religious structures, the trend of recovery and expansion, and emerging challenges together form a critical backdrop for understanding how Vietnam has adjusted its religious policy and moved from an administrative control model toward a modern governance-oriented approach in subsequent periods.

3.2. Religious policy in Vietnam before 1986

To explain the logic of the shift “from control to governance” in 1986–2025, it is necessary to revisit the structure of religious policy in the pre-Đổi Mới period, which was strongly shaped by war, national partition, and the task of building a socialist state.

Before 1975, religious policy operated in two distinct institutional contexts. In the North, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam affirmed freedom of belief through Decree 234/SL (1955) and the 1959 Constitution, while emphasizing unity between believers and non-believers as part of the national unity strategy. However, under wartime conditions and the goal of building socialism, the state remained vigilant about potential religious manipulation for political or counter-revolutionary purposes. In the South, the Republic of Vietnam (1955–1975) both recognized religious freedom and used religion as a political and social tool to bolster regime legitimacy and wage war. Some major religions enjoyed relatively broad autonomy, but episodes such as the Buddhist crisis of 1963 reveal intense conflict and direct state intervention in relations with certain religious communities ^[10]. These deep institutional differences made it extremely difficult to unify religious policy after 1975.

Following reunification, top priorities included consolidating the political system, unifying administrative management, and dealing with the legacy of the former regime. Religious

policy from 1975 to 1986 thus bore a pronounced administrative-control imprint. The state focused on: (1) establishing religious management bodies from the central to local levels; (2) reviewing religious organizations, activities, and properties, especially in the South; (3) mobilizing clergy and believers to participate in building the new government; and (4) preventing and handling cases where religion might be used to oppose the regime ^[11]. Decree 297/CP and related documents emphasized “unified management,” seeking to minimize potential instability from religious networks associated with the old regime or external forces.

Although influenced by the view of religion as a “illusory” form of social consciousness whose negative impacts should gradually be overcome, policy in this period did not follow an extreme path of religious suppression. Ho Chi Minh’s emphasis on religious unity and respect for freedom of belief continued to be invoked, helping maintain the principle of “respecting freedom of belief within the framework of the law” ^[12]. The 1980 Constitution reaffirmed freedom of belief, providing a general legal basis for the pre-Đổi Mới phase ^[13]. During this time, the state also encouraged organizational consolidation and national alignment of religious communities; a key example is the founding of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha in 1981, uniting nine organizations and schools, alongside efforts to strengthen Catholic, Protestant, and Caodai organizations under the motto “good religion, good citizenship.”

From the early 1980s, policy thinking on religion began to soften. Party documents recognized religion as a long-term social phenomenon that should be addressed through persuasion, mobilization, and protection of legitimate rights, rather than relying solely on rigid administrative measures ^[13]. In practice, religious life gradually stabilized; dialogue between state agencies and religious organizations increased; and views on the ethical and social functions of religion became more pragmatic. These subtle yet important shifts were the immediate precursors to Politburo Resolution 24-NQ/TW (1990), which opened the phase of renewed thinking on religion (1986–2003) analyzed in later sections.

In short, before 1986, Vietnam inherited both a diverse, dynamic religious landscape and serious security–political challenges from wartime and its aftermath. The dominant policy paradigm was “administrative management and control,” but early signs of dialogue-oriented and persuasive approaches had begun to emerge. The combination of multi-layered religious structures, the vitality of religious communities, and gradually evolving policy perceptions created a launching pad for the subsequent transition toward governance-based religious management resting on the rule of law, multiple actors, and dialogue.

4. The transformation of religious policy in Vietnam (1986–2025)

4.1. Renewal of perceptions and working methods in religious affairs (1986–2003)

The period 1986–2003 marks a major shift in thinking and policy on religion in Vietnam, closely associated with the Đổi Mới reforms launched at the Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam. The move toward a socialist-oriented market economy, post-war reconstruction, and the pressures of international integration compelled the state to re-examine the role of religion in social life. Whereas pre-Đổi Mới religious policy had been shaped by an administrative–

control model prioritizing political stability and the prevention of religious manipulation, post-1986 thinking gradually moved in a more flexible, human-centered, and pragmatic direction.

Within this context, religious life underwent notable changes. The number of believers increased rapidly from over 10 million in 1986 to more than 21 million in 2005^[14], indicating a growing demand for religion in post-war society. Many religious organizations and denominations were restored or re-established; while only three major religious organizations had official recognition before 1986, by the early 2000s there were 16 organizations representing six different religions nationwide. This diversification generated a pressing need for new governance arrangements beyond earlier administrative control.

Politburo Resolution 24-NQ/TW (1990) became the turning point in rethinking religion. It was the first Đổi Mới-era document to set out a comprehensive set of principles: recognizing religion as a long-term spiritual need; affirming religious believers as part of the national unity bloc; and defining religious work as the responsibility of the entire political system. The resolution also acknowledged the positive moral and cultural values of religion, thereby opening the way for a shift from treating religion primarily as a security concern to recognizing its social roles^[15].

This perceptual change was soon reflected in practice. From the mid-1990s, officials in charge of religious affairs increasingly moved from a “manage and handle” approach to one of “mobilize, persuade, and engage in dialogue,” strengthening contact with clergy and believers and proactively addressing legitimate needs of religious organizations. Long-standing post-war issues—such as religious land, leadership personnel, and pastoral activities—were handled more flexibly and with greater sensitivity to local conditions.

To implement the Party line, the state issued a series of legal documents to ease procedural obstacles and create more favorable conditions for lawful religious activities. Decree 69-HĐBT (1991) represented an important effort to standardize religious management and better reflect respect for freedom of belief. According to the Government Committee for Religious Affairs’ 2000 summary report, procedures related to ordination, the organization of religious festivals, and the repair of worship facilities were improved, made more transparent, and gradually stripped of the old “petition–approval” character^[16].

Alongside these administrative reforms, religious life experienced a strong revival. Hundreds of places of worship were restored or newly built; many religious training institutions reopened after long interruptions. By the late 1990s, more than 1,200 Buddhist and Catholic clergy had been ordained or consecrated^[17]. Religious activities became more vibrant, and many traditional festivals were revived, signaling a clear improvement in the environment for religious practices.

The social role of religion was also highlighted. Religious organizations actively participated in disaster relief, poverty assistance, orphan care, and support for vulnerable groups. The value of charitable and humanitarian activities between 1995 and 2000 reached hundreds of billions of VND annually^[17], indicating that religion was becoming an important actor in social welfare and the broader socialization of public services.

At the level of doctrine and policy, the Communist Party continued to refine its approach through Directive 37-CT/TW (1998), which stressed the protection of freedom of belief, the promotion of religion’s ethical contributions, and firm opposition to the misuse of religion against national interests. In 2003, Resolution 25-NQ/TW again affirmed religion as a long-term spiritual need of the people and laid the groundwork for a unified legal framework^[18], paving the way for the 2004 Ordinance on Belief and Religion.

Despite these advances, the 1986–2003 period had certain limitations. The legal framework for religion remained incomplete and relied heavily on sub-law documents; implementation varied across localities; and issues such as religious land or recognition of new organizations were often handled slowly. In addition, uneven capacity and differing speeds of perceptual change among officials meant that the shift from control to softer, more dialogic administration was not fully uniform nationwide^[14].

Nevertheless, 1986–2003 undeniably laid the decisive foundations for the emergence of modern religious governance in Vietnam. Renewed perceptions, the expansion of religious space, stronger dialogue, and administrative reforms helped move religious work beyond rigid administrative control toward a more cooperative, transparent, and law-respecting model. This provided the immediate basis for the institutionalization (2004–2015) and comprehensive legalization (from 2016 onward) of religious policy.

4.2. Institutionalization and the expansion of religious freedom (2004–2015)

While 1986–2003 focused on renewing perceptions and gradually dismantling the constraints of a centrally planned system in religious affairs, the 2004–2015 period marked a deeper phase of institutionalization, in which a more coherent and unified legal framework for state management of religion took shape. During this time, Vietnam’s religious policy moved from fragmented administrative management to rule-based regulation that was more transparent and predictable. Alongside reaffirming religion as a legitimate spiritual need, policy increasingly emphasized religion as a social resource that could contribute to national development^[19].

The first turning point was the review of Resolution 24-NQ/TW (1990) and the adoption of Resolution 25-NQ/TW (2003) on religious affairs in the new context. The 2003 summary report concluded that most religious organizations had developed orientations consistent with the law, were closely tied to the nation, and followed the motto “good religion, good citizenship.” On that basis, Resolution 25 articulated three core directions: (i) guaranteeing freedom of belief and religion; (ii) promoting religion’s ethical and cultural values; and (iii) proactively addressing the misuse of religion to sow division or violate the law. This doctrinal platform directly drove the subsequent institutionalization process.

In 2004, a major breakthrough occurred when the Standing Committee of the National Assembly enacted the Ordinance on Belief and Religion—the first specialized legal text comprehensively regulating the religious field in Vietnam^[7]. The Ordinance clearly defined the rights and obligations of religious organizations and individuals, the principle of equality among religions, conditions for registration, and the responsibilities of state agencies. This signaled a shift from

fragmented sub-law regulations to a unified legal framework. To implement the Ordinance, the government issued Decree 22/2005/ND-CP, detailing procedures for registering religious activities, recognizing organizations, appointing clergy, constructing or repairing worship facilities, organizing festivals, and managing religious travel ^[20]. These procedures helped replace the previous “petition–approval” mechanism with more transparent, time-bound legal processes. In 2012, Decree 92/2012/ND-CP further amended, supplemented, and systematized relevant regulations, expanding the scope of registration and simplifying administrative procedures ^[21], thereby improving the legal framework.

In addition to the Ordinance and its implementing decrees, various thematic documents were issued to address specific issues. One important example is Prime Minister Directive 01/2005/CT-TTg on Protestantism, which acknowledged the historical particularities of the Protestant community, provided guidance on registering congregations, and gradually regularized religious activities while consolidating organizational structures ^[20]. This illustrates the state’s flexibility in handling sensitive religious matters.

Parallel to institutional reforms, the Eleventh (2011) and Twelfth (2016) National Party Congresses continued to emphasize the need to refine religious law and policy in line with new conditions; to create conditions for religions to operate according to their charters and statutes once recognized; and to resolutely address abuses of religion that threaten stability ^[22]. This process linked the perceptual renewal of 1986–2003 with increasingly comprehensive legal development in 2004–2015.

In practice, this period saw strong growth in religious life. The number of worship facilities, clergy, religious functionaries, and believers all rose steadily; many religious festivals were revived and institutionalized; and numerous organizations and denominations obtained legal recognition ^[23]. By the mid-2010s, there were more than 50 religious training institutions nationwide, helping improve the quality of clergy and religious personnel.

Religion’s social role became more prominent. Religious organizations intensified charitable and humanitarian work, health care, disaster relief, support for vulnerable groups, and environmental initiatives. Some reports indicate that the annual value of religious charity reached several trillion VND ^[24], underscoring religion’s importance as a resource in the state’s social welfare strategy.

The mechanisms for state–religion dialogue and coordination also advanced. Regular meetings between political leaders and religious dignitaries became more common; many disputes over land, personnel, and order in religious establishments were resolved in ways perceived as “reasonable and humane,” helping strengthen social consensus and stability in areas with large religious populations.

Nevertheless, 2004–2015 still exhibited limitations. Some provisions in the Ordinance and its decrees remained general, leading to divergent interpretations and applications across localities ^[9]; administrative procedures in certain places still bore a heavy pre-approval character and were slow to process; and the capacity of officials, particularly at the grassroots level, did not always meet new demands. Instances of religious abuse to incite unrest or localized tensions also persisted.

Overall, 2004–2015 was a period of deep institutionalization in Vietnam’s religious policy. The Ordinance on Belief and Religion, its implementing decrees, and guiding party documents collectively moved religious work from an administrative management model toward rule-based regulation that was more transparent and consistent. Religious life grew in a stable manner; the trust of religious communities was strengthened; and the conceptual and legal foundations were laid for comprehensive legalization through the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion.

4.3. Comprehensive legalization and the emergence of a modern religious governance model (2016–2025)

The years 2016–2025 mark a phase of “highest institutionalization” in Vietnam’s religious policy, as the state promulgated the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion—the first fully fledged specialized law regulating this field. This milestone reflects the maturity of the policy system after more than three decades of *Đổi Mới* and signals a commitment to building a model of religious governance grounded in the rule of law, transparency, expanded religious space, and deep international integration. Against the backdrop of the 2013 Constitution’s stronger emphasis on human rights, expanding international commitments, and increasingly diverse religious life, the need to refine the institutional framework for religion became more urgent than ever.

The 2016 Law on Belief and Religion introduced three systemic changes. First, it codified freedom of belief and religion as a constitutional right and specified the conditions under which this right may be limited to protect national defense, security, and public order. This provides a legal basis for protecting religious rights not only through policy but through enforceable law. Second, the Law established, for the first time, a clear regime for religious legal personhood through stepwise procedures for registering religious activities, registering religious organizations, and recognizing religious organizations—previously regulated mainly by administrative guidance. Third, the Law covers nearly all areas related to religion, including land, construction, international activities, religious education and training, publishing, religious activities of foreigners, and internal dispute resolution, thereby offering a more coherent and stable framework for state–religion relations.

To ensure effective implementation, the government issued Decree 162/2017/ND-CP, detailing documentation, procedures, jurisdiction, and time limits for administrative processes in the religious domain. This represented an important move toward a “service-oriented administration,” reducing discretionary “petition–approval” practices, standardizing procedures, and enhancing transparency. Many localities have since expanded online public services, shortened processing times, and reduced complaints, thereby consolidating trust between religious organizations and government agencies. These developments underscore the shift from administrative management to religious governance that emphasizes dialogue, performance, and multi-actor participation ^[25].

In practice, religious life has remained vibrant and relatively stable during this period. Thousands of worship facilities have been newly built, repaired, or expanded; dozens of religious organizations and hundreds of subordinate entities have obtained legal person status; and thousands of clergy

have been ordained or consecrated under more transparent procedures. Many reports note that since 2016, the number of applications for registering activities, appointing clergy, and repairing worship facilities has steadily increased, reflecting a more enabling legal environment and the system's growing capacity. Legal avenues have also opened for newer religions or denominations that had not previously been recognized, further diversifying the religious landscape.

Religion's social role became particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021). Religious organizations undertook tens of thousands of charitable initiatives, providing food, medical support, and spiritual care; thousands of monks, nuns, clergy, believers, and religious volunteers joined the front line of pandemic response. These contributions demonstrated the social capacity of religion when operating in a stable environment and reinforced the view that religious communities are important ethical, cultural, and social resources in times of crisis ^[26].

Concurrently, the institutional apparatus for religious governance continued to be consolidated. Since its placement under the Ministry of Home Affairs in 2007, the Government Committee for Religious Affairs has functioned as the central advisory agency. At the local level, Religious Affairs Boards under provincial Departments of Home Affairs and district-level Home Affairs Sections implement policy and coordinate with party mass-mobilization bodies, public security, the Fatherland Front, and other socio-political organizations. This inter-sectoral coordination model is a key feature of network-based religious governance, highlighting the expanding role of multiple actors in policy implementation ^[27].

Yet several limitations remain. The application of the Law has not been uniforming across localities; staff capacity varies; and issues such as religious land, new religious movements, and the handling of religious abuse still require more flexible and professional coordination. These challenges reflect historical legacies, religious diversity, and disparities in administrative capacity rather than inherent flaws in the legal framework itself.

Overall, 2016–2025 marks the most advanced stage thus far in Vietnam's legal framework for religion, laying the groundwork for a modern model of religious governance. The combination of legalization, administrative reform, and enhanced dialogue has moved state–religion relations into a phase of “coordination and partnership,” in which the state acts as facilitator and supervisor, while religious organizations emerge as active partners in social development. This represents a long stride in Vietnam's transition from administrative management to rule-based governance and opens up prospects for stable and cooperative state–religion relations in the new era.

5. Structural change, drivers of reform, and governance implications

The trajectory of religious policy in Vietnam between 1975 and 2025 reflects a systemic transformation, signaling the maturation of policy thinking, institutional design, and governance practices in an increasingly diverse and globally integrated society. Viewed through the governance lens, one can observe a clear shift from a centralized administrative management model to a rule-based, multi-actor, and dialogic governance model in which the state acts as facilitator and religious organizations and communities serve as partners.

First, perceptual change has been decisive throughout the reform process. The 1975–1986 period was marked by an administrative, control-oriented approach. Yet after Resolution 24-NQ/TW (1990), policy perceptions of religion evolved in a more human-centered and pragmatic direction: religion came to be seen as a legitimate and long-term spiritual need; religious believers as part of the national unity bloc; and religion as embodying ethical and cultural values that could contribute to national development. This shift in perception enabled the transition from “management and control” to “coordination and support,” widening the space for dialogue and cooperation among the state, religions, and civil society.

Second, the legal framework on belief and religion has been progressively improved, reflecting the rule-of-law turn in religious governance. The 2004 Ordinance on Belief and Religion marked the first step of institutionalization, while the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion ushered in a phase of comprehensive legalization. The new legal framework clearly defines believers' rights and obligations, establishes religious legal personhood, details registration procedures, clarifies rights over religious premises, regulates training and ordination, and addresses international engagement and other specific domains. As a result, state–religion relations have come to rest more firmly on the rule of law, procedural transparency, and accountability, in line with the model of rule-based governance in contemporary public administration.

Third, religious life has revived strongly and become increasingly intertwined with social activities. The growth in believers, clergy, and worship facilities, together with religious contributions to healthcare, disaster relief, education, social protection, and community development, highlights the growing social functions of religion. During the COVID-19 pandemic, religious organizations emerged as key providers of social services, exemplifying “co-production” between the state and societal actors in a governance framework. This marks a shift from viewing religion primarily as an object of management to recognizing it as a development partner.

Nonetheless, the transformation of religious policy still faces challenges. Disparities among localities reflect differences in administrative capacity, social conditions, and readiness for new governance approaches. Historical issues such as religious land, the recognition of new organizations, and the management of new religious movements remain complex. In an era of explosive media and digital communication, cases of religious abuse for purposes of disruption or separatism highlight the need for stronger inter-sectoral coordination and better policy foresight.

Taken together, Vietnam's religious policy over the past five decades has evolved through a logical governance trajectory: (1) administrative control (1975–1986) → (2) perceptual renewal (1986–2003) → (3) institutionalization and legalization (2004–2015) → (4) legalization and modern governance (2016–2025).

This transformation reflects not only goals of social stability and international integration but also the capacity of Vietnam's religious policy regime to learn, adapt, and innovate. In particular, the turn toward rule-based, transparent, dialogic, and multi-actor approaches has laid the foundations for Vietnam to gradually approach a modern model of religious governance suited to sustainable

development and globalization.

From an academic standpoint, this trajectory helps explain the drivers of reform—including demands for social stability, international integration, the robust revival of religious life, and the need for rule-based governance—while suggesting several policy implications: (1) strengthening structured dialogue between the state and religious communities; (2) enhancing the capacity of officials, especially at the grassroots level; (3) further refining legal mechanisms for religious land; and (4) promoting state–religion–society partnerships characterized by transparency, legality, and accountability.

In terms of scholarly contribution, the article demonstrates that applying the governance framework to the Vietnamese case elucidates the mechanisms of transition from “administrative control” to “religious governance” in a post-war, developing, and integrating socialist context. The proposed periodization into three (and in practice, four) stages, combining institutional analysis with observations of religious life, adds a Southeast Asian case study to international discussions on religious governance, the rule of law, and state–religion relations.

6. Conclusion

The formation and transformation of Vietnam’s religious policy from 1975 to 2025 reveals a structurally significant shift aligned with state maturation and emerging governance needs in an era of integration. From a post-war administrative model heavily focused on control, religious policy has gradually moved toward a rule-of-law, dialogic, and multi-actor model, as reflected in milestones such as Resolution 24-NQ/TW (1990), the 2004 Ordinance on Belief and Religion, and the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion. Three (and in fact four) developmental stages—perceptual renewal (1986–2003), institutionalization (2004–2015), and legalization and governance (2016–2025), building on the 1975–1986 legacy—illustrate the shift from administrative control to religious governance in line with the logic of the governance approach.

Fundamentally, this transformation has been driven by two clusters of factors. On one hand, post-war realities and the demands of international integration require an expansion of religious space and more robust guarantees of freedom of belief, in conformity with the Constitution and international commitments. On the other, the strong revival of religious life and the growing role of religious organizations in areas such as healthcare, education, social welfare, and humanitarian relief create objective pressures for a more balanced, cooperative, and transparent model of governance.

Overall, Vietnam has built a relatively comprehensive legal foundation that enables religion to develop stably and contribute positively to society, while upholding core governance principles such as the rule of law, accountability, and multi-actor coordination. Persistent challenges—such as uneven administrative capacity, historically rooted religious land disputes, and risks of religious manipulation in the digital media environment—still need to be addressed to further approach a modern governance model where state–religion relations are based on dialogue, participation, and effectiveness.

In scholarly terms, this article contributes to international debates on religious governance by providing a long-term, Vietnam-based analysis of legalization, institutionalization,

and restructuring of state–religion relations in a transitional context. By combining governance theory with historical–policy data and concrete observations of religious life, it clarifies how a post-war, developing, and deeply integrating country can move from administrative management to rule-based religious governance.

The discussion also suggests several directions for the coming period: consolidating the rule of law in the religious domain; professionalizing institutions and cadres; fostering structured dialogue between the state and religious organizations; and further leveraging religion’s social role as a development partner. With the foundations now in place, Vietnam is well positioned to continue refining its religious governance model in a more modern, effective, and human-centered direction, in line with the demands of a country that is increasingly integrated into the international community.

7. References

1. Rhodes RAW. The new governance: governing without government. *Polit Stud.* 1996;44(4):652-67.
2. Casanova J. *Public religions in the modern world.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1994.
3. Beckford JA. *Social theory and religion.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2003.
4. Fox J. *Political secularism, religion, and the state: a time series analysis of worldwide data.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2015.
5. Pierre J, Peters BG. *Governance, politics and the state.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; 2000.
6. Government Committee for Religious Affairs. *Legal propaganda materials on belief and religion.* Hà Nội: Religion Publishing House; 2006.
7. Government Committee for Religious Affairs. *White book on religion and religious policy in Vietnam.* Hà Nội: Religion Publishing House; 2022.
8. Tran TA. Religious syncretism in contemporary Vietnamese society: an anthropological approach. *J Cult Arts.* 2019;9:56-61.
9. Do QH. *Theoretical and practical issues in contemporary religious studies.* Hà Nội: National Political Publishing House; 2020.
10. Taylor P. *Modernity and re-enchantment: religion in post-revolutionary Vietnam.* Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute; 2007.
11. Government Committee for Religious Affairs. *Report on eight years of implementation of the Ordinance on Belief and Religion.* Hà Nội: Government Committee for Religious Affairs; 2012.
12. Ho Chi Minh. *Complete works. Vol. 4.* Hà Nội: National Political Publishing House; 1995.
13. National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. *Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1980.* Hà Nội: National Political Publishing House; 1980.
14. Nguyen PL. *Religion and religious policy in Vietnam: some theoretical and practical issues.* Hà Nội: National Political Publishing House; 2019.
15. Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam. *Resolution No. 24-NQ/TW on religious affairs in the new situation.* Hà Nội; 1990.
16. Government Committee for Religious Affairs. *Report on state management of belief and religion in 2020.* Hà Nội: Ministry of Home Affairs; 2021.
17. Government Committee for Religious Affairs. *Report on*

- state management of belief and religion in 2005. Hà Nội: Ministry of Home Affairs; 2006.
18. Communist Party of Vietnam. Resolution No. 25-NQ/TW on religious affairs in the new situation. Hà Nội; 2003.
 19. Central Committee of the Vietnam Fatherland Front. Report on religious affairs and mobilization of religious communities, 2000–2005. Hà Nội: Central Committee of the Vietnam Fatherland Front; 2006.
 20. Prime Minister of the Government. Directive No. 01/2005/CT-TTg on some tasks regarding Protestantism. Hà Nội; 2005.
 21. Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Decree No. 92/2012/ND-CP detailing and providing measures for the implementation of the Ordinance on Belief and Religion. Hà Nội; 2012.
 22. Communist Party of Vietnam. Documents of the 12th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Hà Nội: National Political Publishing House; 2016.
 23. Government Committee for Religious Affairs. Report on state management of belief and religion in 2013. Hà Nội: Ministry of Home Affairs; 2014.
 24. Nguyen TX. The 2016 Law on Belief and Religion and prospects for implementation. *Relig Stud Rev.* 2017;1:3-15.
 25. Nguyen TM. Mechanical migration and urbanization in Ho Chi Minh City: social impacts and policy orientations. Hà Nội: Social Sciences Publishing House; 2021.
 26. Government Committee for Religious Affairs. Report on state management of belief and religion in 2021. Hà Nội: Ministry of Home Affairs; 2022.
 27. Le MQ. State management of religion in the context of market economy development in Vietnam. Hà Nội: Political Theory Publishing House; 2016.

How to Cite This Article

Phan THT. From Control to Governance: The Transformation of Religious Policy in Vietnam (1986–2025). *Int J Soc Sci Except Res.* 2025;4(6):133-141.

Creative Commons (CC) License

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.