

# Vietnamese, not Vietnamized

by Cecily Hastings

It seems to be axiomatic, in most discussions about Vietnam, that the only important questions about that country's future are ones relating to the Americans. To what extent are Vietnamese capable of efficiently taking over American policies and operations (i.e. just how good a substitute for an American is a Vietnamese)? How worthy of American support is the Vietnamese Government? Will it survive American departure long enough to save American faces?, etc. During a seven-week stay in Vietnam last summer, I was lucky enough to avoid getting stuck in that foreign way of life in which Vietnam is seen simply as a function of American policy, and to meet some people and groups whose work and ideals vigorously make nonsense of the habit of defining everything Vietnamese in terms of American plans and expectations.

Not, that is to say, orphanages with teams busily arranging adoptions as a salve to Western consciences, in implicit denial that Vietnamese children have any Vietnamese future. Not relief organizations where the question is only *what proportion* of these supplies is being sold for private profit. Not the world on which a Vietnamese academic, met in circumstances of free and friendly discussion, commented bitterly, 'We drink American drinks, drive on American petrol, fire American bullets and have our governments changed by American coups'. I saw that world too: you can't miss it. But, luckily for me, I saw some very different things as well.

I met, for instance, some members of a team of people, the keyword in whose programme is 'New Life' (not to be confused with the once-notorious 'New Life Hamlets' of one of the pacification programmes). They have been transforming the shoddy, chaotic world of Saigon's sixth, seventh and eighth districts—or, rather, which is the real point, stimulating that world to transform itself. It started a few years ago with a group of people (they happened to be mostly Catholics, but it's not an official Catholic work, nor is its membership specially Catholic now) who wanted to set about doing something against the despair which threatens to choke Vietnamese life. Somehow Premier Ky, as he was then, was got to take an interest, and the group started with quite vigorous Government backing, authorizing them to act as a 'parallel hierarchy', independent of the normal government machinery of the eighth district (where they began), and giving them access to building materials, etc. This backing has all more than faded away now, for reasons which it seems hard to make clear-cut and explicit in answer to questions, but which are not, I think, very hard to understand in general terms, as will be seen.

The group has houses, bits of road, bridges, a school and I don't know what else to its credit, all on the self-help principle as achievements in co-operation and practical democracy. I remember specially one of the new groups of houses, along one of the branches of the river. The river bank had been a clutter of damp, crowded hovels—there are plenty of the same sort still on view elsewhere. The people had got together and planned a pattern of streets and squares, accommodating every one on agreed principles (best sites for oldest inhabitants, etc.) and providing not only pleasant houses and room to breathe, but a cleared, attractive river frontage restored to everybody's use.

The footbridge was particularly exciting, over a branch of the Saigon River which people living there have constant need to cross for work and shopping. There had been a ferry, owned by a real old-fashioned robber-baron exploiter, charging astronomical sums to these people whom he had, as he thought, at his mercy. He fought the bridge, of course. Being rich he was influential, and brought in the local government (this wasn't within the original eighth district set-up) and the police, but the group stuck to its project through threats and interference, and the battle of the bridge was won.

The days of being a parallel hierarchy and having privileged access to building materials are over. The friend who was showing me round said that the right thing now, in any case, is for people in the group to get elected to local and national government in the regular way, and they've started on this already. (I can't help wondering how far it will get them—would get such a group in any country, not just South Vietnam.) But the group certainly isn't a Government pet any more. I gathered that it would feel little surprise, at this stage, to find itself being turned out of its premises and, if possible, repressed. I wondered why, and tried to find out. There was a certain vagueness, but the story of the bridge seems instructive. It had produced the kind of enemy who proves to be linked up with those who hold power at every level. I gathered something like this: if you're really building houses, and all the rest of it, you tread on the toes of people who officially should be, but aren't, and are making a good thing out of diverted materials and so forth. In general, anything vigorous and honest is not only a challenge but a competitor and a threat to a corrupt system; and, in the end, the enemies you make go right up to the top.

'But they couldn't close us down now', my informant said. 'We'd simply be meeting and working in homes all over the districts. It's too late to stop it now.' This is the real point, more than the houses or the bridge or the school. The District 8 project hasn't been a matter of a group of do-gooders performing services for the under-privileged. It's been the discovery by apathetic people that they could change their world themselves, they could plan their lives, locate and analyse their problems and solve at least some of them by

democratic decisions and co-operation. The flourishing and multiplying discussion groups are as important as the house-building, and not likely to be much loved by a Government like that of President Thieu.

I asked a question in the end about competition and hostility in the other direction. One gathers that the Communists have some sort of organization almost everywhere: also, that what they are least willing to tolerate is anything really popular and vigorous that is not part of themselves. Had the group come up against anything from that quarter? When they first started, my friend told me, the Communists spread leaflets against them, saying that they were Government stooges and that the houses that had been demolished as a preliminary to re-building had been knocked down to make room for a new American installation of some sort. Events refuted the lie, and they had no further trouble of that sort. Fairly recently, a team-worker was kidnapped; but he came to no harm. The Communists only wanted to know just what the group did, and how. After a very detailed interrogation, the man came home safe and sound.

This incident makes a link with the other, somewhat similar group, I was privileged to meet. This one was rural, working in one hamlet of a village as a pilot project. It is an official Buddhist social service work—An Quang Buddhists, of course: no one seems to belong to the Government-established version of the Buddhist Church. An Quang Buddhists are branded, in Government eyes, as neutralist or even pro-Communist. I dare say most of their adherents may not be specially interested in the political implications of their preaching and work, but there seems to be a good deal of agreement that An Quang Buddhism is the nearest thing that there is to a representative voice of the general mass of people in South Vietnam.

The hamlet was a delightful picture of what a Vietnamese village can be, with shady trees and pleasant thatched houses. Team-work, besides a dispensary, of course, is concerned with things like septic tanks, a causeway across the paddy-fields to the road, health education, general education, improved agricultural methods, village industries and so on. There is an impression of life and hope springing up on a shoe-string budget, depending mostly on sheer hard work.

I asked my question about Communist interference again, and drew the astonishing answer, 'We have had a great many assassinations, but we know that they were not done by the Communists'.

There was one specially bad killing when one of a small group taken down to the river-bank and shot was left for dead but in fact survived, and saw how the murderers, after getting into a boat ostensibly to cross to the Viet Cong side of the river, in fact slipped back to the Government-held side. Every one had felt, in any case, that the village meeting officially summoned on that occasion to denounce the atrocity could not have been organized so promptly

without advance knowledge. Then there was a kidnapping involving some Buddhist team-workers and some Government officials: the Buddhists were murdered, the Government officials returned alive, which just wouldn't happen with real Viet Cong. Finally, there were two team-workers who were kidnapped by real Communists, but came home safe and sound. They were treated rather roughly at first, I was told, but the interrogation changed as the picture clarified, and ended, to quote the words transmitted to me, as 'a friendly exchange of views'.

The people I met were not Communists, nor could they be accurately described as Communist sympathizers. My guide to District 8, a Catholic, could never, he said, identify himself with a movement which uses assassination as a policy (even if, I think I might add for him, its assassinations *do* amount to only a fraction of those credited to it by its enemies). The Buddhists are non-violent on principle. But the Vietnamese Vietnam which I have been privileged to glimpse, humane, generous, doggedly creative, seems open to possibilities of reconciliation which are simply not allowed to that un-Vietnamese Vietnam which is defined purely in terms of American aims and American legacies: the one led by a President who has publicly declared that no one who advocates a coalition Government will be allowed to offer that alternative to the voters in what are still called 'free' elections; the one that is to be kept in existence indefinitely if possible, it seems, by an irreducible army and, above all, air force presence of 100,000 Americans.

## **A Third Reformation?:**

**R. C Zaehner and Charles Davis  
on World Religions**

**by Adrian Cunningham**

'... the old certainties are gone, and so departments of religion are springing up like toadstools throughout our demented Anglo-Saxon world. The less we believe, the more we talk about what other people believed. Are we really interested, or are we just kidding ourselves?'

Thus, forcefully, the Spalding Professor of Eastern Religion and Ethics at Oxford.<sup>1</sup> Certainly the fashionable currency of quasi-religious mysticism, the resort to the private and aggressively anti-modern can, along with aestheticism and sexual liberation, remind one of the 1890s. Incense and beads abound; the lush, the

<sup>1</sup>*Concordant Discord: The Interdependence of Faiths*, by R. C. Zaehner. Clarendon Press: Oxford University Press, 1970. 464 pp. £4.