

Hòa Hảo Buddhism and the Target of Net-Zero Plastic Waste in the Mekong Delta

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Abstract

Rivers and waterways in the Mekong Delta have become choked with plastic. To address this crisis, Hòa Hảo Buddhism has joined forces with local and national authorities. Devotees mobilized to act against pollution and to reach net-zero plastic waste; lay teachers propagated a green Dharma based on their founder's teachings; and Hòa Hảo leaders formed political networks with state actors. Thus, the plastic crisis has provided Hòa Hảo Buddhism a good opportunity for religious revival after being long marginalized in the Vietnamese religious landscape. The chapter argues that while Hòa Hảo actions have been instrumental in raising environmental awareness, they have been less successful in transforming devotees' behaviours towards sustainable consumption, let alone a future of net-zero plastic waste.

Keywords: Carbon-neutral, zero waste, green Dharma, environmental awareness, religious minorities, legitimacy.

Introduction

In recent years the rivers and waterways in Vietnam's Mekong Delta have become choked with plastic. Plastic waste blocks water flows, suffocates aquatic plants and animals, contaminates water and soil, and causes small-scale environmental disasters across the region.¹ In response, the religious leaders and followers of Hòa Hảo Buddhism have joined forces with local and national authorities to raise environmental awareness and clean up polluted areas.

Hòa Hảo is a Vietnamese Buddhist religious movement that was founded in 1939 by Pontiff Huỳnh Phú Sổ in Hòa Hảo village, Tân Châu district, Châu Đốc province.² The current name of the place is Phú Tân Commune, An Giang Province. It is known as the religion's birthplace, and is an important pilgrimage site in the delta. Rooted in the regional colonial context, Hòa Hảo stands out as a new religion, blending nationalism, ancestor worship, and Buddhism (Taylor 2001).

The Hòa Hảo religion was first associated with the millenarian sectarian movements in southern Vietnam in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Tai 1983; Do

2003; Nguyễn 2017). During the First and the Second Indochina Wars (1939–1975), several Hòa Hảo communities mobilized resources for their own military units and armed forces (Haseman 1976). Their believers had become influential nationalists and activists, and for this reason, the religion was caught up in conflicts with several political regimes in the South. After the wars (1975–1999), the Hòa Hảo religious organization was abolished following its previous opposition to the communist forces (Việt Minh; Tran 2003). On June 11, 1999, the Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs (GCRA) issued Decision No. 21/QĐ/TGCP to acknowledge the organization and activities of the Central Executive Committee of Hòa Hảo Buddhism (*Ban Trị Sự Trung Ương Giáo Hội Phật Giáo Hòa Hảo*; henceforth CEC). Since then, the religion has operated based on the principles of the CEC and its network of priests and lay teachers.³ In its search for a religious revival, Hòa Hảo Buddhism has addressed the plastic crisis in the Mekong Delta as a means for gaining political legitimacy.

This chapter offers an analysis of the methods and strategies employed by Hòa Hảo Buddhist leaders to address the current plastic waste crisis. It seeks to answer two main questions: How have leaders and laypeople responded to this waste crisis? And, how does Hòa Hảo engagement with nationwide environmental programs and campaigns help local residents cope with their daily challenges, which include not only plastic pollution, but also social and political restrictions facing their religion? I hypothesize that Hòa Hảo engagement with waste problems in recent years not only constitutes a response to local environmental problems, but also widens the space for their devotees to increase their religious influence across the country. Consequently, this chapter argues that the plastic waste crisis and national environmental campaigns for solving this crisis present good opportunities to this religious organization for the revival of their tradition.

My research is based on ethnographic fieldwork in 2022 and 2023. Over a total of nine months, I participated in numerous religious ceremonies and festivals in the Mekong Delta, where I observed local involvement with plastic and waste. In addition, I worked as a volunteer at the An Hòa Tự temple near the headquarters of the CEC. In total, I have interviewed twelve leaders, head priests, lay teachers, as well as forty lay members and waste management officers who have experience with plastic problems and have suggested solutions to the waste crisis.

This chapter is divided into three parts. In the first, I analyze the leaders' narratives explaining why they joined state-led environmental programs. In the second, I discuss the methods employed by these leaders to raise environmental awareness and mobilize volunteers among the Hòa Hảo communities in the Mekong Delta. In the third, I contrast these objectives with local grassroots initiatives. I argue that there is a tension on the ground between environmental concerns and popular notions of Buddhist merit generation that prevent lasting behavioral change.

Finally, I conclude that the leadership's concern with environmental issues has contributed to the current resurgence of Hòa Hảo Buddhism, but that the ideal of a zero-plastic society has not been achieved.

Religious Narratives and Hòa Hảo Top-down Participation in National Environmental Campaigns

From 2015 to 2020, the Vietnamese state implemented a new series of environmental policies. State actors have launched environmental campaigns and enlisted a number of religious groups to participate in these programs, asking them to develop their own action plans. The government also encouraged faith-based communities to develop local initiatives for environmental protection. The CEC participated actively in some of these projects. The chair of the committee claimed that environmental concerns were at the heart of the Hòa Hảo religious philosophy. Therefore, he suggested, protecting the environment was an ideal spiritual practice on the path toward personal liberation.

In 2015, a nationwide environmental campaign was launched and led by the Vietnamese Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and the Vietnam Fatherland Front Central Committee (Trung Anh 2016).⁴ It was called the “Promotion of the Role of Faith-based Organizations in Environmental Protection and Climate Change Responses,” which was then shortened to the “Religion and Environment.” Interested groups have been encouraged to sign and participate. On December 2, 2015, leaders of fourteen religious groups were invited to a national conference in Huế. At the conference, the chair of the CEC presented a paper titled “Hòa Hảo Buddhism: Environmental Protection Is a Duty” (Dạ Yến 2015). One can grasp the idea of Hòa Hảo duty from his speech (CEC 2018):

The Charter of Hòa Hảo Buddhist Church [*Giáo hội*] orients our lay members and their religious practices based on the principal “For the Dharma, for the nation.” These practices include studying Buddhism, cultivating self-awareness, and fulfilling the Four Debts of Gratitude ... The ideal practice of Hòa Hảo self-cultivation is to explore supreme beliefs that generate merits, and by all means bring benefits [*phước lợi*] to all sentient beings. Sentient beings [*chúng sanh*] include humans and [other] living species that need to rely on each other in order to survive and thrive. Hòa Hảo Buddhism respects and inherits the Buddhist tradition. In modern language, human beings must maintain biodiversity for a peaceful life and for sustainable development. In summary, the lifestyles of Hòa Hảo adherents are not separated from [their] normal lives. They have duty to protect the environment, assure safety, and strive toward sustainability.

The speech rearticulated traditional teachings using the language of contemporary environmentalism. First, the leader aligned the duty of environmental protection with one of the most important tenets of Hòa Hảo life and thought, “The Four Debts of Gratitude” (*Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa*). This tenet asks worshippers to be grateful to our parents and ancestors; to be grateful to our country; to be grateful to the Triple Jewel (the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha); and to be grateful to our fellow Vietnamese citizens and to humanity as a whole. Cultivating environmental awareness and engaging in environmental protection are righteous actions for paying back the four debts and bringing benefits to humanity and all other living species.

As the speech unfolded, the CEC’s chair linked the Hòa Hảo spiritual objectives to sustainable development goals. Their shared objective, he said, was “to maintain biodiversity for a peaceful life” (CEC 2018, 18). As part of this objective, the head of Hòa Hảo was attempting to connect the goal of sustainability to the moral practices of Hòa Hảo devotees. In order to achieve a rebirth in the Pure Land, Hòa Hảo adherents are supposed to behave in a moral manner that is inspired by their perception and reflection of the physical world (Brown 2024). A balanced and peaceful physical world will, supposedly, influence their reflexivity and thus have a positive impact on their spiritual goals. In other words, worshippers can achieve a Pure Land rebirth by cultivating their own sustainable behaviors. The leader justified this association by stating that “Hòa Hảo Buddhism respects and inherits the Buddhist tradition,” and he tried to protect himself from possible criticism from other Hòa Hảo groups by claiming that these ideas are inherited from the Buddhist philosophy of dependent origination (King 2009, 13).⁵

There are, in practice, several active Hòa Hảo groups who disagree with the CEC’s new interpretation of Hòa Hảo scriptures, its principal “For the Dharma, for the nation,” and especially its governance in seeking compromises with the Vietnamese state (Bourdeaux 2022, 881). However, the CEC, whose headquarters are in the An Hòa Tự Temple in Phú Tân, is currently the officially recognized Hòa Hảo group in Vietnam. It has also been the only management organization of the tradition that arranges religious activities and maintains its official relations with local and national authorities.⁶ Since 1999, the CEC has rewritten the Hòa Hảo scriptures and promoted a social and religious identity based on charity and volunteerism (Vo 2020). The scriptures were first written by Pontiff Huỳnh Phú Sổ, who used poems, verses, and literature texts to build a Hòa Hảo Buddhist Canon (*Sấm Giảng*) between 1939 and 1947. Claiming to be the reincarnation of the Living Buddha Master of Western Peace (*Đức Phật Thầy Tây An - Đoàn Minh Huyền*) from the mid-nineteenth century, Huỳnh Phú Sổ gained popularity and attracted followers using the same methods as the Living Buddha Master: predicting apocalyptic events, preaching religious philosophy, and healing a large number of people (Taylor 2001; Tai 1983). Like other religions within the millenarian tradition, Hòa Hảo worshippers believe

in the idea of the Dragon Flower Assembly (*Hội Long Hoa*), a selection process for salvation on Judgment Day, when morally pure believers will be liberated from suffering after their Pure Land rebirth.

According to the narrative of the chair of the committee, “the ideal practice of Hòa Hảo self-cultivation” is to explore the ultimate beliefs in the Dragon Flower Assembly belief, which were prophesized by the founder and earlier religious pioneers (i.e., the Living Buddha Master). Vo Duy Thanh (2020, 42) summarizes the apocalyptic myth as “the appearance of the Future Buddha, Maitreya, also called the King of Light, or Minh Vương, who would be sitting on a lotus throne to convene the Dragon Flower assembly, where only morally pure people who had survived the apocalypse would gather” (see also Tai 1983, 28). In order to reach salvation and achieve liberation, worshippers fulfill the four debts, carry out uncomplicated rituals with simple offerings at home, live according to the founder’s teachings, and generate Buddhist merits by doing charity and practicing good deeds. Importantly, the leader suggests that their spiritual journey nowadays crucially includes the duty of living sustainably and protecting the environment.

The chair of the CEC has also associated the modern language of climate change and other environmental issues into the Hòa Hảo “supreme beliefs” that are centered on apocalyptic events. Hòa Hảo religious pioneers had predicted a series of natural disasters and misfortunes such as droughts, earthquakes, cataclysms, crop failures, famines, and mass deaths. It was said that these environmental catastrophes would precede the appearance of the Future Buddha, who will descend on the sacred Forbidden Mountain (Núi Cấm). Thanks to the association, the leader brought environmental concerns into the center of Hòa Hảo philosophy and beliefs. This paved the way for new religious practices as environmental actions came to be seen as a means to generate Buddhist merit and, consequently, to achieve personal liberation from worldly suffering.

The speech, thus, represents the “green turn” that has taken place within Hòa Hảo Buddhism since 2016. In response, the Hòa Hảo communal executive committees have been active in mobilizing volunteers to solve pressing environmental problems, especially the current crisis of plastic pollution. The online channels of many local and national newspapers have showed Hòa Hảo environmental engagement. They have taken part in various collective activities, joined environmental campaigns to say no to plastic bags at markets, and cleaned pesticides and plastic bottles in rice fields (Lê Hùng 2021). In fact, in the last few years, the Mekong Delta’s rivers and waterways have become dumping places for plastic and waste. People use organic waste on their farms and gardens but dispose of solid waste in open watersheds. Waste flows into the river and canal systems and then into the ocean. The fluidity of the water helps to push the waste out of sight and out of mind. But not all waste and plastic end up in the sea. Due to the delta’s low elevation, tidal

waves push them back to the terrestrial environment, turning beaches and river mouths into landfills (Rots and Lu Rots 2023).

Because local waste collectors have failed to clean up solid waste and plastic in open dumping places, local and national authorities have joined forces with civil society organizations to deal with the crisis. Many organizations and religions have set up volunteer groups to clean up the polluted areas. Hòa Hảo, in particular, has mobilized volunteers to take part in collective action such as sorting organic, solid, and plastic waste; cleaning up polluted areas and public spaces; planting flowers and trees to create beautiful landscapes; and protecting clean water areas from waste and litter (Trần Thắng 2020, 2022). The chair of the CEC has initiated several local campaigns in Phú Tân, encouraged followers to stop littering in rivers and canals, and distributed rubbish bins to households to separate organic and solid waste (CEC 2017). He also developed a homemade recipe to turn organic waste into fish feed.

Other members of the CEC have refrained from using plastic bags and asked their family members to take baskets made of hard plastic or in alternative materials to the market instead of taking single-use plastic bags from sellers. In addition to raising environmental awareness of plastic use through education, Hòa Hảo leaders have encouraged their followers to make baskets from grass and water hyacinths. These plastic-free products are distributed by volunteers in supermarkets, farmer's markets, consumer fairs, and shopping malls.

Hòa Hảo volunteers have also targeted other harmful waste to the environment (*rác thải độc hại*) such as agricultural substances and pesticides. In these volunteer campaigns, villagers are encouraged to walk around their paddy fields to collect pesticide bottles that are scattered around by the farmers who have used them. After being collected, these bottles are buried in holes or wells. Most local environmental initiatives needed approval from the CEC and the Vietnam Fatherland Front before each operation (Vietnam Fatherland Front 2021).

When the program Religion and Environment was approaching the end of its first stage in late October 2019, the leaders of 43 religious groups signed a new commitment to continue the program until 2030, anticipating international support with the presence of the Nordic Assistance to Vietnam at the signing ceremony (Vietnam Fatherland Front 2019). At the ceremony, a Hòa Hảo temple in Cần Thơ City received a national prize from the Vietnam Fatherland Front for its model “waste management, waste processing plant, tree planting, and fire extinguishing” in December 2019 (Tuấn 2019). The CEC has introduced this model to many Hòa Hảo temples and villages in the Mekong Delta. Thanks to the initiative, another temple in Tân Hòa, Hậu Giang Province received a provincial prize for their model of “waste segregation” (*Hậu Giang Newspaper* 2021).

Built on the success of the first stage of Religion and Environment, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment suggested a new scheme to the prime minister, who launched another national action plan to tackle plastic waste (Prime Minister's Office 2019). The new action plan stipulated different ways to deal with plastic, which also changed the environmental leadership among Hòa Hảo communities. The leaders continued to participate in the program, but with a new viewpoint depending on the geographic locations of their communities.

Since 2019, marine pollution has emerged as the new focus of national action plans. Vietnam aims to reduce plastic in the ocean by 50 percent in 2025, and by 75 percent in 2032 (Vietnamese Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment 2020, 9). This new target, pollution in the ocean (*rác thải nhựa đại dương*) and not on land, defines a clear boundary for plastic problems. Hence, the People's Committees of the coastal provinces are responsible for participation. As a means to enforce local waste management and plastic practices, the Naval Forces, Maritime Police, and Border Guards are mobilized to control and handle "violations [of] laws on the management of marine plastic litter" (Vietnamese Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment 2020, 25). Similar to the first stage, the top-down methods for successful environmental campaigns include "propagating, raising awareness, changing consumption behaviors, and responses toward plastic products and plastics in the ocean" (Prime Minister's Office 2019, 2).

The People's Committee of An Giang Province is exempted from the duty of participation in the new environmental programs targeting plastic pollution because the province has no coastline. This exemption also applies to local authorities in places where large numbers of Hòa Hảo are located. Actually, provinces without coastal areas are liable for waste segregation under a different law from those that border the sea (Law No. 72/2020/QH14 on environmental protection was issued on November 17, 2020). But in all provinces, with or without a coastline, consumers are responsible for their use of plastic products, especially single-use plastics and plastic bags. This means that they should refrain from accepting these products, or they must pay more for them at marketplaces.

In order to reduce plastic use, many supermarkets all over the nation have switched to eco-friendly bags and charge more for single-use plastics. Consumers are given shopping baskets made of hard plastic or materials with bio-alternative solutions. Billboards, panels, and warning signs for plastic litter have become present in many places including the Seven Mountains, a sacred space for Hòa Hảo and many other religions. Nevertheless, these plastic interventions have negligible effects on people and rely heavily on top-down propaganda or media outreach icons (figure 4.1). Such interventions for behavior change also distract public concerns about plastics from the main actors who need legislative management such



Figure 4.1: A billboard inside a Buddhist temple with slogans, such as: “Say NO to single-use plastic and plastic waste,” “Clean up polluted waste wherever you are,” and “Protecting the environment is protecting our lives.” (Photo by Nhung Lu Rots)

as plastic manufacturers and packaging businesses (Muposhi, Mpinganjira, and Wait 2022; Pathak and Nichter 2021).

The new emphasis on plastics culminated in July 2022 when the Vietnamese prime minister signed a decision to achieve net-zero plastic waste by 2050 and decided to opt for reusing, recycling, and treating 85 percent of the plastic waste generated. In order to succeed, since then the state has sought to employ a plastic neutral strategy, and encouraged producers to utilize materials made of carbon-negative polypropylene (plant-based PP), which are biomaterials and bio-degradable plastics (Quế Chi 2023; Vinh Tho and N. An 2022). While such policy shifts have affected the daily rituals and practices at Hòa Hảo temples, my field observations show a contradictory dynamic emerging within the Hòa Hảo communities, in which formal teachings and policies call for a reduction in the use of plastic, while daily religious routines and practices continue to rely on a considerable consumption of plastic. The next sections analyze this contradictory dynamic.

The CEC and Its Environmental Action Plans

In 2016, after attending several national conferences and environmental training programs for faith-based communities, the CEC proposed an action plan to the Vietnam Fatherland Front in An Giang Province. As part of the plan, the committee implemented various methods to raise public awareness of plastic pollution and the negative impacts of climate change. These consisted of combining sermons with environmental courses, inserting religious texts into environmental education materials, and promoting behavioral change as a type of self-cultivation. By taking a leading role in propagating environmentalism, the CEC has not only strengthened their followers' beliefs in millenarianism, but also built a strong political network in the Mekong Delta.

In 2017, the CEC invited a former local official who had run state-sponsored propaganda programs to take charge of an environmental program and working agenda for the religion. That official has prepared environmental action plans, training materials, and speeches for Hòa Hảo's religious leaders. He is a dedicated Hòa Hảo Buddhist and a loyal member of the Communist Party who worked for the Propaganda Department of Phú Tân for many years. In an interview in January 2023, the official told me about success in organizing twelve classes with 2,186 participants, mainly Hoà Hảo priests, lay members, and lay teachers when he was working directly under the CEC.

The retired official was also the main environmental teacher in the classes. In his lectures, he reinterpreted the Hòa Hảo scriptures and founders' teachings, which were written based on millenarian movements in the south in the nineteenth and twentieth century. According to his teaching materials, local challenges include plastic waste in rivers and canals, toxic agricultural substances and food safety, soil erosion on the riverbanks, and ineffective water management due to rising saltwater levels (CEC 2018). Most importantly, these teaching materials justify the new alliance between Hòa Hảo and the Vietnamese state that was established for the Religion and Environment campaign in 2015.

Similar to the speech of the CEC chair, the retired official interpreted modern climate science in accordance with Hòa Hảo practices and beliefs by citing and quoting the poems of the founder, Pontiff Huỳnh Phú Sổ, from the 1940s. By doing so, he directly linked current regional environmental challenges to environmental disasters in the Mekong Delta in previous periods, which at the time were interpreted as signs of the Buddhist Low Era (*Hạ Ngươn*)—a time of turmoil that the founder had prophesized in his lifetime (McHale 2004, 3). In sum, leaders and Hòa Hảo priests had inserted millenarian ideas, their founder's teachings, and his predictions of apocalyptic events prior to the Dragon Flower Assembly, into their environmental action plans and teachings.

During my fieldwork, I had conversations with several priests who interpreted recent apocalyptic events as signs that we are currently in the final phase of the Low Era (*Mạt Pháp*). These events include disease outbreaks, wars and world conflicts, and natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, and tsunamis. According to them, the Low Era is coming to an end, and the Dragon Flower Assembly is about to begin. Interestingly, the environmental propaganda documents mentioned above refer to these same events. In the education materials, however, this series of apocalyptic events is explicitly associated with the “current status and consequences of climate change” (CEC 2018, 8). They even claim that Pontiff Huỳnh had already predicted climate change during his lifetime, based on his poems about extreme weather in the scriptures (CEC 2018, 1).

In addition to training courses, the CEC issued guidance documents to all Hòa Hảo temples to explain the consequences of climate change, mixing scientific language with their reinterpretation of Buddhist philosophy and founder teachings. When I asked some worshippers at the An Hòa Tự temple during the New Year holidays about their notions of environmental change, they recited the poems from these guidance documents. Many talked about their Buddhist belief of the Low Era and good merits needed for their afterlives. Survival after the pandemic was one of the positive signs of good merits. Therefore, they continued to generate good deeds, do charity works, cultivate the self, and perform the everyday rituals of Hòa Hảo Buddhism. For example, many worshippers recited two sentences from a poem written by Huỳnh Phú Sổ in 1940 with the title “In Conversation with the Kitchen Gods.” Below is the poetic description of natural disasters that have left a lasting impression in the Vietnamese collective memory.

*The many rainstorms in 1940, the Yang Metal Dragon year,
Forced bitterness and grief on humankind.*

They also memorized another poem in “Teachings on the Non-Action of the Spirit” in 1939 (CEC 2011, 99)

*The weather is stormy and out of control
Unlike the past, rain and sunshine change
Trivial matters should be of no concern to the living
In order to spare time for fulfilling their duty.⁷*

By reciting these poems, Hòa Hảo believers remind each other of the teachings of their religious founder who stressed the role of self-cultivating practices, doing good deeds, and fulfilling religious duties in challenging times. Some believers compared unruly weather in the past (during the first phase of the Low Era) to

the COVID-19 outbreak and recent landslides along the Hậu riverbank in An Giang and Đồng Tháp provinces (considered as signs of the last phase of the Low Era). Several priests used the poems to stress that time is running out, urging listeners to convert to the Hòa Hảo religion. They said that no time should be wasted before the Dragon Flower Assembly opens. In short, Hòa Hảo notions of environmental change directly link to millenarian ideas, in sermons and oral conversation, as well as in written propaganda documents.

The CEC educates its followers not only about Buddhist philosophy and doctrines, but also teaches them the guidelines and policies of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front and Government Committee of Religious Affairs. From 2017 to 2019, they combined training courses for Buddhist lay teachers with lectures on environmental protection and responses to climate change. The training courses lasted from one week to a month, and environmental lectures were inserted into the curriculum on several days. Hòa Hảo priests called for religious devotees to take responsibility for protecting the environment, telling them that their behavior should move toward responsible consumption and the cautious use of plastic at marketplaces.

As the prepared propaganda documents suggested, trainees in classes for lay teachers of Hòa Hảo Buddhism were taught good consumer behavior such as using fewer plastic products, bringing bio-material baskets when they went shopping, and refusing single-use plastic bags. Lecturers encouraged Buddhists to “say no to plastic” (*nói không với rác thải nhựa*). The priests also explained the consequences of climate and environmental change, in addition to introducing grassroots models of food safety, organic farming, and waste segregation, all of which had been carried out successfully in areas with large number of followers.

After passing the exams at the end of training courses, attendants are certified as lay teachers of Hòa Hảo Buddhism by the CEC. Thanks to the certification, the priests can carry out sermons and attract followers at their local temples. Many Hòa Hảo communities have a temple as one of their communal meeting places. These temples have no abbot: only leaders, certified priests, lay teachers, and registered members of the CEC can disseminate the founder’s teachings and Buddhist philosophy. Furthermore, Hoà Hảo priests are not Buddhist monks whose religious practices and rituals adhere to Buddhist monastic systems (*tu xuất gia*). The priests, lay members, and lay teachers practice their religion mainly in the home (*tu tại gia*) and occasionally at Hòa Hảo temples, many of which have been built after 1999. In these temples, social gatherings for sermons and religious activities are organized twice a month, and the local authorities and police are always present to supervise the activities.

In order to amplify religious activities and environmental performance, the CEC assembled a communication team consisting of a group of media experts, reporters, and vloggers who take photos, make films of religious devotees’ activities,

and write news for the Hòa Hảo website. The team has written enthusiastic online articles about Hòa Hảo temples, their religious initiatives, volunteer events, and environmental prizes. However, this idealized online image created by Hòa Hảo did not always correspond to what I observed during volunteer work at temples and communal places and, as I will return to, there is a large gap between local practices on the one hand and environmental education action plans on the other.

Importantly, however, participation in national environmental programs have provided Hòa Hảo leaders with an opportunity to enhance the standing and status of their religion in the Mekong Delta. As I have noted, Religion and Environment is one among many national programs that Hòa Hảo Buddhism participated in, in which religious leaders collaborated with the Vietnam Fatherland Front. Partaking in national programs helps the organization build good relations with the Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Home Affairs in An Giang Province. These provincial state bodies write reports on Hòa Hảo Buddhism, and a positive report helps to legitimize further religious activities and practices. Thus, the CEC has used the state-led environmental program as an opportunity to act against environmental destruction and, at the same time, to position themselves as one of the most powerful religions in the Mekong Delta.

For example, national participation in the program Religion and Environment from 2015 to 2022 put the CEC in a leading position in terms of collaboration with the state. Good collaborative reputation legitimizes other religious activities and raises social status for Hòa Hảo lay members in the Mekong Delta. Legitimacy and status also help to compete against other religions for membership and influence (Ngo 2018; Roszko 2020). Seen in this light, waste management models, grassroots activities, and local and national environmental prizes are noticeable good performances, which bring the CEC's leadership into focus and attracts the positive attention of the Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs.

Hòa Hảo Buddhism has also built a broad political and religious network in the region thanks to their cooperation with local authorities and state bodies. Among different religious groups in the Mekong Delta, the provincial Vietnam Fatherland Front can rely on the Hòa Hảo role model to execute regional agendas, programs, and campaigns for civil society in An Giang Province. In exchange, the Government Committee of Religious Affairs has allowed the religion to have one more day for nationwide religious celebrations (25 November). In this way, the religious practices and activities of Hòa Hảo Buddhism are legitimized by the state, and in pursuing the stamp of state approval, Hòa Hảo Buddhism is not alone. Other religious groups such as Cao Đài also came up with a model to “use hygienic water, clean stagnant ponds, collect waste, and process waste hygienically” (Trần Thắng 2020, 2022).⁸ Similar to Hòa Hảo, this minority religion has actively participated in the national program Religion and Environment since 2015.

In addition to having a strong network, the CEC has successfully created two official days for their members to meet in large numbers (GCRA 2022), thanks to their leading role in the execution of environmental action plans. The first is the anniversary of Hoà Hảo Buddhism's inauguration day (18 May), and the second is Pontiff Huỳnh Phú Sổ's birthday (25 November). On these two occasions, worshippers are allowed to meet in masses not only at the birthplace of the founder, but also in temples and locations marked with Hoà Hảo Buddhist flags in south and central Vietnam. The religious flag is rectangular and maroon-brown, flying proudly in Hoà Hảo temple yards, in the working places of the executive committees, and in locations where believers can gather for organized festivals and pilgrimages. Some years the number of participants can reach to more than 100,000 in Phú Tân and nearby villages. Villagers generously offer the participants free food, free accommodations, and meaningful talks about their beliefs as ways to enrich their spiritual lives.

It is therefore no surprise that Hoà Hảo is currently one of the most influential religions in the Mekong Delta region. The CEC has set up 369 communal executive committees from southern to central Vietnam (from Cà Mau to Bình Định Province). There are also organizations for Hoà Hảo that have been established in Houston and Atlanta in the United States, and in 2021, the religion reported 1.2 million followers in Vietnam (GCRA 2022). Hundreds of thousands of people go on pilgrimages to Phú Tân every year. However, as I elaborate below, in these annual celebration as well as monthly festivals, Hoà Hảo believers paradoxically worsen the waste crisis due to the mass use of plastic for generating Buddhist merits. Despite the broader “green turn” in the religion, Hoà Hảo devotees rely heavily on plastic materials in their everyday rituals for doing good deeds and generating merit.

Hòa Hảo Lay Members and Their Grassroots Initiatives with Plastic Waste

In this part, I examine the discrepancy between top-down and bottom-up approaches in dealing with plastic waste within Hoà Hảo. I examine the importance of mass consumption and mass plastic production in religious rituals and Buddhist practices for merit generation. By juxtaposing national ambitions and leadership narratives with what actually happens on the ground, I demonstrate that while top-down methods may be effective in forging performative engagement with waste and temporary initiatives for reducing plastic, they have been less successful in transforming lay Buddhists' consumption at an everyday level.

During my fieldwork, I observed excessive plastic use at Buddhist festivals in the Mekong Delta, and the festivals at Hoà Hảo temples are no exception: neither

religious leaders nor lay members showed much environmental awareness of the plastic litter at the mass gatherings where plastic was often ubiquitous. As Brox and Williams-Oerberg (2023) observe, plastic has now become part of religious experience because it accommodates excessive consumption as a Buddhist practice (see also Abrahms-Kavunenko and Maud 2024). I made similar observations at the Hòa Hảo temples. Furthermore, my own conversations with leaders and donors suggest that the materiality of plastic helps religious followers generate Buddhist merits faster. For example, in my first interview with a member of the CEC in April 2022, the issue of plastic came up. At the committee's headquarter in Phú Tân I was served mineral water in ceramic cups and reused bottles. Looking at the transparent bottles, I wondered what material they were made of. As if reading my thoughts, the member said that the reused bottles were of hard plastic (tritan), donated by a producer in Saigon in 2019. Since then, receptionists at his office had washed the bottles and cups when meeting days ended. In a later meeting with the same executive member in 2023 at the same location, however, I was served mineral water in PET bottles. The Committee, I was told, had ended the initiative because the program Religion and Environment was no longer on their working agenda. Now, they were busy with other programs led by the Vietnam Fatherland Front in An Giang province.

During these two meetings, I also asked about the environmental engagement of Hòa Hảo Buddhism in the national program Religion and Environment. In the first meeting, the member was proud to name the aforementioned award-winning temple in Cần Thơ City. When I asked about his leading role, he answered: "We approve good initiatives from our Communal Executive Committees and support them by doing the paperwork needed for each operation." In the later meeting, however, he diverted my attention to other charity works such as those in which Hòa Hảo devotees had engaged during the COVID-19 pandemic, including rice kitchens, ambulance services, and charity clinics (Lu Rots 2025). He said that the CEC tried their best to convince their followers to use fewer plastic products. But, he added, the material was cheap and convenient for their practices as single-use plastic could be easily thrown out in order to save time.

My brief and perhaps somewhat anecdotal experience with the reused plastic bottles and my conversations with the Hòa Hảo leader appeared to be at odds with the kind of representations I had earlier seen on mass media. One possible explanation for this is that Hòa Hảo leaders had fewer incentives to continue their environmental action plans after the legislative change in 2019. This was, in fact, confirmed during my interviews with other leaders, donors, and volunteers in 2022 and 2023.

For example, when I visited the award-winning temple in Cần Thơ City in February 2023—the temple that received a national prize in 2019 for its model of

waste management and waste processing plant—I discovered that the processing plant was an incinerator to burn single-use plastic such as bags, lunch boxes, and plastic utensils, something that affects the environment negatively by emitting toxic smoke, burning more trees, and inducing more plastic waste consumption. In the temple's front yard, I saw firewood drying under the sun, covering the whole yard. In the temple kitchen, the chef was busy preparing lunch in styrofoam boxes for the volunteers who were searching for firewood in the nearby areas. Incidentally, my visit occurred three weeks after Vietnamese New Year (*Tết*) and one week after the lunar year's first full moon festival (*Tết Nguyên Tiêu*), two of the biggest Buddhist festivals of the year; no wonder that the temple had to refill its firewood supply and continuously feed the waste processing plant for weeks on end. However, as I learned in a later interview with a waste management officer, incinerators for plastic waste must have two processing systems: a primary process for treating the waste, and a secondary process for treating the smoke, but as far as I could see, the Hòa Hảo incinerator had no secondary system.

During my fieldwork, I also found myself in situations where I too used substantial amounts of plastic as a matter of routine. One example is the serving of free congee that I engaged in at the An Hòa Tự temple on Vietnamese New Year's Eve in 2023. The temple offered the congee meal after a ceremony of praying for a peaceful and prosperous year. For my volunteer work, I was delegated to work on the final process of serving food, adding green shallots, black pepper, and plastic spoons into steaming hot congee bowls. Not far from my spot, single-use utensils and plastic cups began to accumulate and fill up huge plastic bags, while the used eating bowls were constantly being washed and dried for reuse in feeding the congee to thousands of people.

People came to enjoy the free food and drinks and the festive atmosphere; before heading home, they donated money to the temple and thanked the Buddha for his blessings. While some noticed the huge amount of plastic waste, no one had thought about ways of reducing the excessive plastic use while serving the masses. Rather, for an event on a scale such as this, plastic was found to be a cheap, fast, hygienic, and convenient solution. These material qualities of plastic are important reasons why many temples and donors continue to rely almost exclusively on plastic materials: serving a large number of people with food and drinks in plastic containers simply helped them to accumulate merit by doing good deeds faster, in a context in which it is believed that the Dragon Flower Assembly will soon open (figure 4.2).

Thus, plastic-enabled consumption on a large scale facilitated swift merit generation through doing good deeds. For example, one donor told me that being able to serve the masses tea and coffee during the festivals at Hòa Hảo temples helped her family to generate Buddhist merit, a concrete sign of which was her



Figure 4.2: Serving free drinks in single-use plastic cups at a Hòa Hảo temple.
(Photo by Nhung Lu Rots)

family's prosperity. Several family members had also seen Pontiff Huỳnh Phú Sổ in their dreams. The family continued to do good deeds and show their generosity by using their wealth to supply drinks in small single-use plastic cups to thousands of people. Mass consumption and plastic use, therefore, enable Hòa Hảo devotees to continuously generate merit on an expanded scale, given that Buddhist festivals are organized twice a month and all year round at Hòa Hảo temples.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined how Hòa Hảo leaders, priests, and lay teachers have taken up and promoted the environmental cause initiated by the Vietnamese state. While leadership statements, training programs, and network building have been instrumental in raising environmental awareness among Hòa Hảo communities, their grassroots initiatives and ritual practices appear to have at best an ambiguous relationship to plastic use. I have also suggested that contemporary activities such as cleaning the streets, picking up plastic, and segregating waste can all be seen as leaders' efforts for gaining more social, political, and religious legitimacy. These environmental actions have largely helped to increase the public

influence of the CEC and contributed to Hòa Hảo gaining new popularity in the region. Thus, being seen as addressing the plastic crisis provided Hòa Hảo leaders with a legitimate cause and an opportunity to form political networks with state actors and local authorities. It enabled priests to call for action against pollution, organize training courses to raise environmental awareness, and propagate a green Dharma based on their founders' teachings. However, while such actions have indeed been instrumental in forging a performative environmentalism rooted in volunteerism, they have so far been less successful in creating a transformation in members' consumption behaviors in which the use of plastic is deeply embedded.

More broadly, national environmental campaigns such as those described in this chapter are unlikely to succeed without sufficient local support and grassroots implementation. As we have seen, religious leaders' speeches spearheaded a temporary interest in environmental issues among Hòa Hảo communities. Top-down propaganda methods have been effective for mobilizing local groups to tackle urgent environmental challenges, but more substantial initiatives are needed to raise long-term awareness, transform deep-rooted behaviors, and offer longstanding solutions. That this has not yet been achieved is evident from how local Buddhist practices of charity and notions of Buddhist merit-making continue to depend on the mass production and consumption of plastic. Although some attempts were made by religious leaders to align environmental activism with millenarian beliefs, popular notions about the importance of merit-making through material practices ultimately proved more resilient and have so far thwarted attempts to reduce plastic waste at the local level.

Notes

- ¹ I would like to thank Dr. Nguyễn Võ Châu Ngân, who helped me with access to the field and invited me to Can Tho University. I value the insights and guidance he provided on waste management in the Mekong Delta. The academic events that he and his colleagues organized in 2023 have also been a great source of inspiration in writing this chapter. I would also like to thank my colleagues in the Transsustain project who read earlier versions of this chapter. Their feedback and comments have been very helpful. I am also deeply grateful to my anonymous interlocutors, who kindly shared their lived experiences with plastic and waste with me.
- ² Hòa Hảo adherents call their religious founder by different names. In addition to 'the Pontiff Huỳnh' (*Đức Huỳnh Giáo Chủ*), he is also known as 'the Prophet Huỳnh Phú Sổ, and 'the Venerable Teacher' (*Đức Thầy*) in various types of literature.
- ³ "Hòa Hảo priests" and "lay teachers" are used interchangeably in this chapter.
- ⁴ The Vietnam Fatherland Front is an umbrella group of mass movements and civil society organizations in Vietnam, which operate in alignment with the Communist Party of Vietnam.
- ⁵ Dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) is a basic Buddhist teaching in which no phenomenon exists independently. This means that one phenomenon arises because of factors and conditions made by other phenomena.

- ⁶ There are three levels in the organization of Hòa Hảo Buddhism: the CEC (*Ban Trị sự Trung ương Giáo hội Phật giáo Hòa Hảo*); communal executive committees in towns, wards, districts, and communes (*Ban Trị sự xã*); and representative offices in cities and provinces (*Ban Đại Diện Phật Giáo Hòa Hảo tỉnh, thành phố*; CEC 2020).
- ⁷ The author translated from the Vietnamese verses: Năm Canh Thìn nhiều trận gió mưa, Cho nhưn loại trăm cay cùng ngàn đắng (in *Trao Lời cùng Ông Táo*, 1940); Trời đông gió sái mùa sái tiết, Nắng cùng mưa cũng khác xưa rồi, Khuyên dương gian bỏ các việc tội, Đặng lo liệu cho tròn phận sự. (in *Giác Mê Tâm Kệ*, 1939).
- ⁸ Deriving from the same Buddhist tradition, the Strange Perfume from Precious Mountain religion (*Bửu Hương Kỳ Sơn*), Hòa Hảo Buddhism shares both similarities and differences with Cao Đài. The two religions are currently competing for power and influence in the Mekong Delta. In one interview with me, a Hòa Hảo leader expressed his envy of Cao Đài's position in getting the attention of the Vietnamese government. In particular, Cao Đài leaders have received more visits from higher ranking state officials than Hòa Hảo has.

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