Research Articles

Punting through a Shallowed World: Master Buddha Đoàn Minh Huyên's Watery Eschatology Amidst the Rising Tides of Climate Change in the Mekong Delta

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Abstract: In the mid-nineteenth century, along the lower Mekong Delta, Đoàn Minh Huyên taught that as humankind's morality shallowed during the receding of the Dharma, the waters of his homeland would rise in stormy deluge, sparing amidst the floodwaters only the high ground of the Seven Mountains, where a renewed cycle of Dharma would begin. Today, Huyên's teaching bears new relevance vis-à-vis climate change. Not only does Huyên's watery eschatology enjoy a significant following in Vietnam, but the lay-oriented, "this worldly" practice of traditions associated with Huyên's teachings, their established organizations and networks—and the fact that much of the millenarian fervor of Huyên's day has since been channeled towards charity and good works—renders such traditions well-poised to face climate change. However, should the delta come to resemble the catastrophic vision of Huyên's "water world" and attempts to attenuate the perils of climate change fall short, then the relatively meek activity of these traditions in recent history would not preclude the resurfacing of the violence and upheaval inspired by Huyên's prophecy in previous centuries.

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Introduction

The potential for Buddhist traditions to adapt and respond to modern crises, including climate change, is conditioned not only by the creativity and energy of present-day practitioners but also by their ties to the past. In this essay, I explore the dynamic between transformation and reinvention on the one hand and historical rootedness on the other by considering Buddhist prophecies endemic to the Seven Mountains region of the Vietnamese Mekong Delta and their relevance for grassroots responses to climate change. I begin by reviewing recent trends in the so-called Eco-Buddhism movement from the latter half of the twentieth century along with its inherent contradictions and shortcomings, namely its philosophical abstraction and detachment from any longstanding, veritable history of climate conscious activity. With these concerns in mind, I then turn to Buddhist traditions endemic to the lower Mekong Delta to explore how they might address some of the weaknesses in the arguments and pronouncements promulgated by Eco-Buddhist ideologues, whose purview extends predominantly from the developed world. Specifically, I discuss the significance of Master Buddha Đoàn Minh Huyên's mid-nineteenth century Buddhist prophecy about the Seven Mountains region in the Cambodian–Vietnamese borderlands for traditions like Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, and Hòa Hảo and their current and prospective soteriological and philanthropic orientations toward climate change in the lower Mekong Delta. I contend that what distinguishes these traditions rooted in prophetic teachings from the more elite philosophically inclined Eco-Buddhists is not only the explicit watery idiom of these traditions, but also their real history of adapting to the capricious, shifting riverscape of the Mekong Delta. Finally, I conclude by considering future prospects for environmental activism among Buddhists aligned with Master Buddha's prophecy, as well as potential challenges vis-à-vis the state should the ecological crisis in the delta continue beyond resolution.

Buddhism and Ecology

Among the currents in global Buddhism over the past half-century is the emergence of Buddhist-inspired environmental activism, ecological ethics, and the so-called "Ecosattva," the environmentally conscious bodhisattva or Buddhist of ecological awakening. These activists and ideologues include luminaries such as Gary Snyder (1930–), His Holiness the Dalai Lama (1935–), and the late Venerable Thích Nhất Hạnh (1926–2022). Mr. Snyder, who is among the earliest progenitors of modern Eco-Buddhism, stroked the cultural sentiments, or rather counter-cultural sentiments of the Beat and Hippy generations with his Zen-inspired wit and literary flourish; the Dalai Lama, on the occasion of his 1989 acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize, suggested transforming the Tibetan plateau into an ecological preserve and has published several essays, forewords, and other works in support of lending Buddhist teachings to the effort of harmonizing nature and humanity.[1] His Holiness's inspiration spawned, in part, the Tibetan-Nepalese Drupka Order's conception, in 2009, of the *Pad Yatra* or "Green Odyssey," an intermittent Eco-Buddhist trek through the Himalayas and around the world.[2] As for Master Nhất Hạnh, he and his teachings about "interbeing" have been particularly influential in worldwide movements toward Buddhist ecology and environmental activism. He has written prolifically on this subject, including his famous essays, "The Sun, My Heart"[3] and "The Last Tree,"[4] nature prayers like "Earth Verses,"[5] and no less than three books on the subject, including *The World We Have: A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology* (2004), *Love Letter to the Earth* (2013), and, one of his final works before passing, *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet* (2021).

Most of these efforts to harness Buddhist traditions for environmental activism have centered on philosophical teachings that might undergird ecological awareness or targeted applications of wider Buddhist practices like mindfulness to environmental work. Looking for scriptural precedent, some

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1 Kaza, "The Greening of Buddhism," 185–86.

2 Lee and Yeoh, *Pad Yatra*.

3 Thích Nhất Hạnh, "The Sun, My Heart," 83–90.

4 Thích Nhất Hạnh, "The Last Tree," 217–20.

5 Thích Nhất Hạnh, "Earth Verses," 446–57.

point out that it was Sthāvarā (a.k.a. Pṛthivī, Vn. An Trú Địa Thần 安住地神), Goddess of the Earth, who manifested herself to bear witness for the Bodhisattva (Śākyamuni Gautama, the historical Buddha) in quelling Māra's demonic armies, thereby conveying that Buddhist awakening is intimately connected to Nature as embodied by Gautama's gesture of touching his hand to the earth with the *bhūmisparśa-mudrā* (Vn. *xúc địa ấn* 觸地印).[6] Others point out *jātaka* tales like the story of the Buddha-to-be extending compassionate gratitude to the forest, commanding, "One should not break the branch of a tree under which one sat or rested."[7] In addition to these scriptural sources found in the Theravāda tradition, Eco-Buddhists invoke Māhayāna sūtras that appear to exhibit ecological awareness, such as the "Dwelling in the Forest" passage of the *Ratnakūṭa* collection [Vn. *Đại Bảo Tích kinh* 大寶積經, Great Compendium of (Dharma) Jewels] and "Dharma Rain" in the Lotus Sūtra (Skt. *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra*, Vn. *Diệu Pháp Liên Hoa Kinh* 妙法蓮華經).[8]

Such environmentalists also invoke Buddhist ethical principles to promote activism and ecological awareness. For example, they appeal to core Buddhist teachings like "no self" (Skt. *anātman*, Vn. *vô ngã* 無我), "do no harm" (Skt. *ahiṃsā*, Vn. *bất hại* 不害), and loving-kindness (Skt. *maitrī*, Vn. *từ* 慈) to elicit an altruistic, selfless, and holistic ecological consciousness consonant with so-called Deep Ecology.[9] As for Māhayāna approaches, Thích Nhất Hạnh has been enormously influential by applying teachings of the *Vairocanasūtra* (Vn. *Đại Nhật kinh* 大日經), *Garland Sūtra* (*Avataṃsakasūtra*, Vn. *Hoa Nghiêm kinh* 華嚴經), and *Indra's Net Sūtra* (Vn. *Phạm Võng kinh* 梵網經) about the interpenetration of worlds and beings—Master Nhất Hạnh's "interbeing"—in which

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6 E.g., the EcoBuddhism Project, One Earth Sangha, and Touch the Earth Forum. See also Stanley with Loy, "Why Buddha Touched the Earth." For the Buddha's summoning of the Goddess of the Earth (Sthāvarā/Pṛthivī), see Penner, *Rediscovering the Buddha*, 35; Strong, *The Buddha*, 94–95. In addition to the Buddha's enlightenment story, the Goddess of the Earth (Sthāvarā/Pṛthivī) appears in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, the final chapter of the *Avataṃsakasūtra* (Vn. *Hoa Nghiêm kinh* 華嚴經).

7 Tilakaratne, "Buddhist Views on Nature and Environment," 118; c.f., Chapple, "Animals and Environment in the Buddhist Birth Stories," 131–48.

8 Kaza and Kraft, ed., *Dharma Rain*, 43–48.

9 The *locus classicus* of Deep Ecology is Arne Naess's seminal 1973 essay, "The Shallow and the Deep," 7–12. See also Curtain, "Dōgen, Deep Ecology, and the Ecological Self," 267–90; Halifax, "The Third Body," 20–38; Henning, *A Manual for Buddhism and Deep Ecology*.

all worlds and all of us within them are endless facets of infinite jewels that reflect and are reflected throughout a cosmic net that, like an infinity mirror, permeates the *dharmakāya* (Vn. *Pháp thân* 法身), the dharma body or Buddhist universe(s).[10] Furthermore, to translate abstract philosophical concepts into real world activism, Thích Nhất Hạnh and others of similar persuasion yoke Buddhist training methods—like mindfulness practice (Skt. *smṛti*, Vn. *chánh niệm* 正念) and Śāntideva's *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life* (Skt. *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*, Vn. *Bồ Đề Hành kinh* 菩提行經)—to the service of environmental action.[11] Some activists have even composed their own apocryphal eco-sūtras, such as Gary Snyder's delightful *The Smokey the Bear Sutra* (1969) and Rick Fields' *The Very Short Sutra on the Meeting of the Buddha and the [Nature] Goddess*.[12]

At the same time, however sympathetic to Buddhist traditions, environmental activism, and ecological awareness, several academics have pointed out the inherent contradictions, flaws, and problematic paradigms latent in efforts to configure or extract environmental philosophies from Buddhist traditions. Without denying the potential or actual efficacy of Eco-Buddhist efforts, they highlight the potential disconnect between such grand, catholic, rationalistic rhetoric, and the concerns and aspirations of Buddhist communities at the local level. Particularly discomfiting, such scholars point out, is that, however noble and sincere Eco-Buddhists' intentions may be, their targeted and arguably narrow application of Buddhist teachings toward environmental causes, the withering righteousness of their galvanizing rhetoric, and the imperative to reach a global audience whittles away the diversity among endemic Buddhist traditions and risks a reductionism that belies high-minded conceit within a shiny halo of feel-good spirituality.[13] Among such scholars is Henrik H.

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[10] King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, 124–30; Barnhill, "Relational Holism," 77–106; Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, 153; Ingram, "Nature's Jeweled Net," 50–64; Ives, "In Search of a Green Dharma," 166–68; Kaza, "Acting with Compassion," 79–90; Kaza, "The Greening of Buddhism," 195.

[11] Curtain, "To Live as a Lotus," 21–40; Edelglass, "Moral Pluralism, Skillful Means, and Environmental Ethics," 8–16; Thích Nhât Hạnh, *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*.

[12] Badiner, *Dharma Gaia*, 5–7; Kaza and Kraft, *Dharma Rain*, 174–76.

[13] Eckel, "Is There a Buddhist Philosophy of Nature?," 327–49; Harris, "Buddhism and Ecology," 122–28; Harris, "Causation and 'Telos'," 45–56; Harris, "Buddhism and the Discourse of Environmental Concern," 377–402; Harris, "Getting to Grips with Buddhist Environmentalism,"

Sørensen, who points out that when Buddhist texts speak of Nature, whether by metaphor or by association, they do so from the soteriological and therefore anthropocentric perspective of achieving enlightenment, advancing on the bodhisattva path toward Buddhahood, and/or becoming good, merit-making laypersons. Ultimately, it is *humans* (and, perhaps, other humans-to-be sentient life) who are to be saved rather than Nature. Moreover, Sørensen notes, the few cases where Nature does seem to be invoked in a manner consonant with the Eco-Buddhism movement appear in an eschatological context.[14] That is, they speak to the final moments of *mạt pháp* 末法, "the end time of the Dharma."

Master Buddha and the "Shallowed World"

One such eschatological teaching is Master Buddha Đoàn Minh Huyên's (1807–1856) prophecy about the transformation of the Seven Mountains, a massif in the so-called Long Xuyên Quadrangle[15] spanning eastern Cambodia and Vietnam's western Mekong Delta, a place Philip Taylor describes as "flooded mountains encircled by water, divided by nations."[16] According to Huyên's prophecy, as the Buddha dharma recedes from the world in response to the sinking of human morality, conditions Huyên described as *cạn đời* or a "shallowed world," the lands of the Mekong Delta will experience drastic climatic and geological transformation that augurs the renewal of the Fountainhead Dharma (Vn. *Thượng nguồn*)—the pristine wellspring of true Buddhist teachings—and the appearance of the Lord of Enlightenment (Vn. *Minh Vương* 明王) or Maitreya (Vn. *Phật Di Lặc* 佛彌勒), the future Buddha.[17] As such, Master Buddha's

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173–90; Inada, "Environmental Problematics," 231–45; James, "Against Holism," 99–115; Kaza, "The Greening of Buddhism," 200–203; Keown, "Animals and the Environment," 39–52; Sponberg, "Green Buddhism," 351–75; Strain, "Engaged Buddhist Practice," 189–210.

14 Sørensen, "Of Eco-Buddhas and Dharma-Roots," 83–104.

15 The Long Xuyên Quadrangle is a tract of land in the delta within the four endpoints of the Vĩnh Tế (built ca. 1824) and Thoại Hà (ca. 1818) canals: Long Xuyên, Rach Giá, Hà Tiên, and Châu Đốc. See Bourdeaux, "Reflections on the Notion of the 'Riverine Civilization'."

16 Taylor, "Flooded Mountains," 162–90.

17 My comments and excerpts concerning Đoàn Minh Huyên's prophecy are drawn from my precious study and translation of Huyên's prophecy, see Quảng Huyền, "Esoteric Tradition," 173–257.

prophecy might speak to the potentially devastating effects of climate change on the delta and may serve as a source of inspiration to the people of the Cambodian-Vietnamese borderlands in their responses to the ecological crisis. This is because, first, Master Buddha's teachings emerged from a landscape historically marked by successive cycles of environmental transformation, including seasonal flooding; second, because of the region's heightened vulnerability to climate change relative to other portions of the delta; third, because of the watery idiom that Master Buddha used to achieve resonance with the region's riverine landscape; and fourth, because of Master Buddha's emphasis on "this worldly" action in his teachings and the lasting impact of this emphasis on Buddhist traditions today.

In the 1840s, Master Buddha Đoàn Minh Huyên traveled throughout the river and canal networks of the Mekong Delta, preaching his message about the "shallowed world." This continued until 1850, when he was compelled by Nguyễn Dynasty (1802–1945) authorities to accept formal tonsure and initiation into the state-sanctioned Lâm Tế Buddhist lineage at a Buddhist pagoda, established just three years earlier, east of the Vĩnh Tế Canal (constructed 1819–1825) beneath Sam Mt. (Núi Sam, Châu Đốc City, An Giang Province), which the Khmer, the historical inhabitants of the region in prior centuries, called Phnom Svam. In the Khmer imaginary, the twenty or so hills that spanned the Seven Mountains region constituted a "pan-ethnic mythic geography" that reflected the mountains' confluence of land, water, and climate along with the cultural and spiritual aspirations of their inhabitants.[18] According to one legend, the hills, the tallest of which reaches 700 meters, were formally an archipelago in a vast sea until the Buddha himself, wanting to preach Dharma to local animals, alighted upon one of the islands, which then became Ba Thê Mountain (Kmr. *Phnom Bat Preah Ther*).[19] Such stories reflect a landscape that, before water control projects undertaken from the 1980s to 2000s, was regularly inundated with about three meters (and sometimes up to five meters) of water for several months of the rainy season. During these months of incessant flooding, only the hills of the Seven Mountains and the alluvial apron that surrounded them remained consistently above the high-water mark.[20] Yet, in

18 Taylor, 'Flooded Mountains', 165.
19 Taylor, 'Flooded Mountains', 165–66.
20 Taylor, 'Flooded Mountains', 162.

striking contrast, once the floodwaters receded in the dry season, these same lands turned arid, such that the only water available to local residents had to be found in wells beneath the sandy soil surrounding the hills.[21] Even with modern mitigation efforts, these parts of the delta remain highly susceptible to extreme weather events and the projected threats of climate change appear severe.[22]

This vivid physical transformation of the land and the experience of living in such a place became the stuff of Master Buddha's prophetic visions. Whereas the Khmer legends spoke of past origins, Master Buddha envisioned a future in which, with the coming visitation of a future Buddha, the lands would once again return to the sea with only the mountains as refuge. In anticipation of this event, Master Buddha exhorted the people of the Mekong Delta to "cross over to the other shore," that is, journey westward across the Bassac River (Vn. *Sông Hậu* or in Huyên's idiom *Bảo Giang*, "River of the Jewels [of the Dharma])" to the sanctuary of the Seven Mountains, where Maitreya and Buddhist faithful would establish a Pure Land or Western Paradise at the Fountainhead of the Dharma (Vn. *Thượng nguồn*), the renewed dispensation of the Buddha dharma.

To help us imagine how Master Buddha's prophetic message resonated with the fluid "water frontier"[23] of the Mekong Delta, we might consider a legend about the geological transformation of his birthplace, Hổ Cứ–Tòng Sơn islet. Formerly, the islet lay close to the right (southern) bank of the Mekong's Anterior Tributary (Vn. *Sông Tiền*). However, during the course of a particularly torrential rainy season, the islet was utterly washed away and, come the dry season, had resurfaced by the river's left (northern) bank. According to local lore, members of a rival village on the river's left bank conspired with a

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21 Taylor, 'Flooded Mountains', 173.

22 Biggs et al., "The Delta Machine," 203–25; Chapman et al., "Adaptation and Development Trade-offs," 593–608; Evers, "Adaptation to Climate Change," 1–11; Gustafson, "Merging Science into Community," 91–106; Ling et al., "Reducing Flood Risks," 209–22; Le An Ngo et al., "Impact of Reservoir Operation and Climate Change," 107–19; Poelma et al., "Climate Change and Livelihood Resilience Capacities," 1–20; Radhakrishnan et al., "Coping Capacities," 29–41; Rana et al., "Strengthening Climate-resilient Development"; Renaud et al., "Resilience and Shifts in Agro-ecosystems," 69–84; Trong Dinh Tran and Thang Van Nguyen, "Climate Change Adaptation in Vietnam," 217–33; Wassmann et al., "Sea Level Rise," 89–107.

23 Li, "The Water Frontier," 1–17.

powerful geomancer to steal the fertile alluvial soil of the islet from the village on the right bank. Over three successive nights under the cover of darkness, the geomancer bound a female goose to a pole on the river's left bank. The geomancer then took her mate across the river, affixed a talisman to his neck, and set the gander loose to seek out his tethered companion. Sure enough, the geomancer's magic had its effect: the talisman drew the alluvial soils along with the gander's lovelorn flight toward the opposite side of the river, and, once the islet reemerged near the left bank, its rich lands were summarily claimed by the cunning villagers on the left riverbank.[24]

The way Master Buddha Đoàn Minh Huyên's riverine birthplace vanished and reappeared against a volatile, fluid waterscape with the transformative power of cyclic seasonal change—owing in part to the machinations of a wicked geomancer—reflect how for Huyên and the denizens of the delta, the land, waters, human action, morality, and religious beliefs were ineluctably intertwined. From this vantage, Huyên saw in these environmental transformations the consequences of moral degeneration. He foretold "reeling sights" and "scenes of natural disaster" for a shallowed world "teetering on the vast sea, falling away on the banks of a pond" as "mountains split and land crumbles, drifting into the offing."[25]

How might have Huyên and his followers imagined such a waterborne climate catastrophe? A revelation sūtra that was created through vernacular spirit-writing and circulated during the first half of the twentieth century, *Vernacular Exposition of the True Sūtra about Maitreya* (Vn. *Di Lặc chơn kinh diễn âm* 彌勒真演音), offers a glimpse of what some may have envisioned:

> You will see species of numinous ghosts and monsters, who occupy large and small shrines and temples, obstruct the wind and rain, causing calamities of great drought that ruin rice crops and inflict pain and suffering on ten-thousands of people. Moreover, species of demons and monsters beneath the water like dragons, snakes, turtles, otters, whales, water serpents, frogs, crabs, eels, and fish along with oyster, eel fry, clam, snail, mussel, and arca demons will constantly transform their powers to draw in the water to make great rain clouds and flood rains that will cause the rivers and streams

[24] Huyền, "Esoteric Tradition," 173–74.
[25] Huyền, "Esoteric Tradition," 209–13.

to inundate with flood water, destroying dykes and flooding rice crops and fruits of the earth.[26]

At this point, we should pause to consider the religious import of such chimeric and evocative language. In the kōan (Ch. *gongan* 公案, Vn. *công án*) literature, one might come across a passage like "Does a dog have the Buddha Nature?" to which a master might respond, "*Wu!*" If we throw on that a bit of Zen glitter, then we might allow for a Zen expression of the sublime, but when millenarian Buddhists start making claims that do not appeal to reason, then there is somehow a temptation to treat them as mad, confused or, worse yet, self-deluded.[27] However tempting and seemingly natural it might be to characterize them and their movements as "millenarian machines without a real sense of purpose,"[28] such descriptions fail to capture the emotive and affective power of Master Buddha's prophetic verse, especially as it pertains to personal and societal transformation. Master Buddha's declamations may have borne witness to impending calamity, but the soteriological force of his exhortations was rooted in hope, inspiration, and the prospect of change. Master Buddha believed that humanity and the "shallowed world" could *trở*, literally "turn," to be transformed with restitution and renewal.[29] Indeed, the potency of Master Buddha's prophetic verse exuded from the volatile geomantic energy of the Seven Mountain's fluid landscape, which could be harnessed by moral restitution rather than dispensational logic or discursive exegesis.

For example, in describing how, in the face of environmental disaster, Buddhist faithful might traverse the Bassac River to the western massif and find a Buddha-blessed sanctuary, Master Buddha exclaimed:

> Heaven renders a hundred beings to waste,
> Such that ferrying across is arduous with unspeakable toil.
> Mountaintops float on water, and earth builds up,

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[26] *Di Lặc chơn kinh diễn am*, 40a–b. For a synopsis of the *sūtra*, which bears the alternative titles *Di Lặc độ thế chơn kinh, Kinh Đức Phật Di Lặc xuống đời*, and *Kinh quý trọng của Đức Di Lặc*, see Ho-Tai, *Millenarianism*, 31; Ho-Tai, "Perfect World," 164–66.

[27] Chan/Zen encounter dialogue from "Zhaozhou's Dog" in *Wumen guan*, T 2005.48.092c22–24.

[28] Ho-Tai, *Millenarianism*, 128.

[29] Huyền, "Esoteric Tradition," 201.

Dragons lurk at the bottom of the sea as rivers constantly catch the dew…

… As this moment comes, divine dragons descend;
We are as if on a little boat buffeted by the wind on the rivers and lakes.
"Amitābha", with the six words "Nam Mô",
One transmigrates to be born in the Pure Land, coming and going at ease.
Once you escape the sea of suffering, you cross over,
To take shelter from the cycle of mundane dust and avoid the realm of life and death.[30]

With such words, Master Buddha not only spoke directly to the threat of acute environmental transformation latent in the delta's changeable waterscape and inspired hope of overcoming it, he also instructed his followers to respond to such dangers with "humaneness," a moral imperative to human action.

Apocalypse Now?

The three largest traditions in the Mekong Delta that continue to convey Đoàn Minh Huyên's prophetic teachings as part of their religious heritage are Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương,[31] Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, and Hòa Hảo.[32] In his 2001 study of the latter, by far the largest in both Vietnam and worldwide with over a million followers, Philip Taylor asked the irresistible question, "apocalypse now?" He concluded that Hòa Hảo Buddhists are not bizarre crazies from a remote "wild"

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30 Huyền, "Esoteric Tradition," 216–20.

31 Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương ("Marvelous Incense of the Mountain of Jewels" or "Marvelous Homeland within Jeweled Mountains") can refer both to the Buddhist movement inspired by Đoàn Minh Huyên in the 19th century and the present-day tradition that traces its origins back to Đoàn Minh Huyên as practiced in the vicinity of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương Pagoda in Tân Châu Urban District of An Giang Province. The latter modern tradition was approved by An Giang Province's Internal Affairs Office in 2008 and, in 2020, was among the latest religions to be formally recognized by Vietnam's Department of Internal Affairs and Government Religions Committee. Tiến Lên, "Ban Tôn giáo tỉnh An Giang"; Bộ Nội vụ (Department of Internal Affairs), *Công văn số 6955/BNV-TGCP*.

32 According to Vietnam's 2019 census, 2975 people said they followed Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, 30416 followed Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa (Four Indebtednesses, Filial Piety, and Righteousness), and 983079 followed Hòa Hảo. General Statistics Office, "Table 3: Population by Religion," 211.

place in the borderlands who submit to an antiquated and discredited apocalyptic creed, but rather lay-oriented Buddhists who pursue a tradition with roots running all the way back to Vietnam's imperial and colonial history that in practice is normative and engaged in this-worldly affairs.[33]

In this regard, in addition to their iconoclasm, suspicion of clerical institutions, and openness to new ideologies and global trends, Hòa Hảo and other related Buddhist traditions in the delta align closely with Thích Nhất Hạnh's *tiếp hiện*—literally to "come to the here and now"—and "engaged Buddhism" as he originally presented them in his 1964 seminal work, *Bringing Buddhism to Life* (Vn. *Đạo Phật đi vào cuộc đời*), in which he sought to breathe life back into the "dead and dry forms of Buddhism" through mindfulness of the present and compassionate social action.[34] Indeed, "humaneness" is a key tenet of Hòa Hảo Buddhists' lived practice, a concept that harks back to a Confucian sense of becoming fully *nhân* 仁 (Ch. *ren*)—that is, human in the sense of both humane and committed to human society. It is this moral precept that is captured in Hòa Hảo and Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa teachings about "rescuing people and delivering the world" (Vn. *cứu dân độ thế* 救民度世), "learn[ing] from Buddha to cultivate humaneness" (Vn. *học Phật tu nhân* 學佛修仁), and "indebtedness to humanity" (Vn. *ơn nhân loại* 恩人類).

In today's world, adepts who hope to embody *nhân* face acute challenges in the Mekong Delta from rising water levels associated with climate change. But however threatening flooding and rising tides caused by a heating earth might be, and despite human efforts to mitigate these threats, the problem for Mekong Delta residents is only exasperated by the largely overlooked issue of subsidence, the sinking ground caused by poor water management, such as the widespread use of private wells.[35] Concern for the current precipitating crisis for the people of the Mekong Delta is not limited to Vietnam and climate scientists; it has also caught the attention of international media, including the *New York Times*, which published an alarmist report on the global effects of climate change on coastal areas worldwide along with vivid map projections (Figure 1) with images eerily reminiscent of Master Buddha's prophetic visions.[36] The

33 Taylor, "Apocalypse Now?," 339–54.

34 DeVido, "The Influence of Chinese Master Taixu," 436–39.

35 McElwee, "Vietnam Fighting Sea Level Rise."

36 Lu and Flavelle, "Rising Seas Will Erase More Cities."

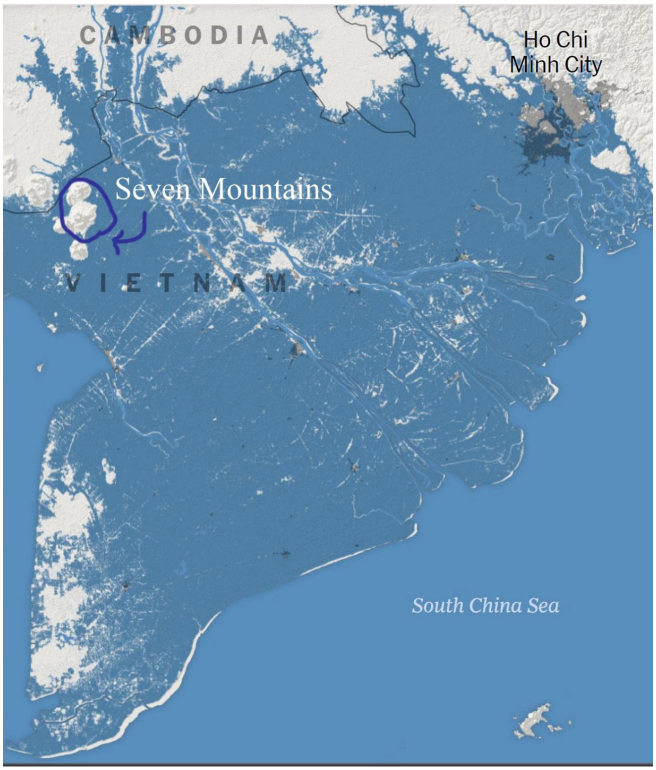

Figure 1 Vietnamese Mekong Delta c.2050 (Source: *New York Times* with marking by author).

scientific study upon which the *New York Times* piece was based projected that, by 2050, nearly all of the Mekong Delta—indeed all of the Vietnamese south—would be submerged at high tide.[37] As the *Times* authors put it bluntly, "Southern Vietnam could all but disappear."[38]

But for the people of the Mekong Delta, the climate crisis is not a distant worry that is still a generation away. It is already here.[39] Anyone who has tried

[37] Kulp and Strauss, "New Elevation Data Triple Estimates of Global Vulnerability." More conservative estimates issued by the United Nations in 2018 reports a worst case scenario in which 40 per cent of the Mekong Delta may be permanently flooded by 2100. *Viet Nam News*, "UN Climate Change Report Launched in Việt Nam."

[38] Lu and Flavelle, "Rising Seas Will Erase More Cities."

[39] McElwee, "Vietnam's Urgent Task," 223.

to ride a motorbike through the flooded streets of Ho Chi Minh City or raced to beat rising or receding tides (Vn. *chạy nước, rút nước*) in the delta's countryside is intimately aware that the climate crisis has very much "come to the here and now." Thus, the pertinent question for Buddhists in the tradition of Master Buddha's prophecies remains: "apocalypse now?"

In his prophetic verse, Master Buddha taught:

My lot is that of a devout layman,
A teacher who teaches people to do good and cultivate.
The Receding Spring in the world approaches![40]
Awaken your heart, realize it for yourself earnestly and quickly.
It is not difficult to abide in cultivation;
The words "devotional charity" should come first.[41]

Faced with a changing "shallowed world", Master Buddha taught us to awaken the heart, act with sincerity and urgency, and, foremost, practice "devotional charity." For a tradition that largely downplayed the role of monastic institutions, "devotional charity" meant kind, societal action by ordinary laypersons on behalf of humanity (*nhân*). This orientation of charity toward ordinary members of society rather than monastic clergy is consistent with Sara Swenson's observation that "devotional charity," *bố thí* 布施 in Vietnamese or *dāna* in Sanskrit, has been reinterpreted by Buddhists in Vietnam today as philanthropy, social work, and charitable infrastructure projects like building bridges. This development follows from the Vietnamese government's effort to recede from welfare and social work while promoting private charity, including religion-inspired philanthropy.[42] Among such non-governmental philanthropic trends, Buddhist charity is the most prominent.[43] Of particular note, Vietnamese Buddhist philanthropists are particularly responsive to environmental and meteorological trauma as exemplified by groups of female petty traders who build bridges and repair homes in the Mekong Delta for people whose liveli-

40 "Receding Spring" is one of Đoàn Minh Huyên's phrases for our "shallowed world."
41 Huyền, "Esoteric Tradition," 220.
42 Swenson, "The Political Spirituality of Buddhist Volunteerism," 2–5.
43 Hoang, Nguyen and Reynolds II, "Buddhism-based Charity," 1076.

hoods were upended by typhoon rains.[44] Although Swenson focused her studies on different lay-Buddhist networks, her observations of laypersons' devotional efforts to address environmental challenges parallel historical and ongoing activities by Hòa Hảo and other millenarian Buddhists motivated by Master Buddha's message about building communities by adapting to the changeable "water frontier" that was (and may well soon be again) the Seven Mountains. Confronted with climate change in an increasingly privatized society, Master Buddha's teachings about practicing humaneness during times of crisis and laypersons' state-approved philanthropy converge.

Therefore, traditions associated with Master Buddha's teachings, like Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, and Hòa Hảo have a role to play in addressing the challenges of climate change in the Mekong Delta. Master Buddha's prophecies with their watery idiom, too, become increasingly significant as the effects of climate change become more palpable in the delta. In addition, as the largest sect that perpetuates Master Buddha's prophecy, Hòa Hảo Buddhism maintains transnational links beyond Vietnam and continues to engage in charitable works both with and without official state sanction.[45] In cultivating these networks, Hòa Hảo Buddhists have also proven themselves to be internet savvy, which positions them well to participate in the kind of informal "pop up" charity Swenson observed among lay Buddhists in Ho Chi Minh City.[46] Such trends are not so much emergent as they are the natural continuation of Hòa Hảo Buddhists' historical interest in engaged Buddhism that traces all the way back to its prophet and founder Venerable Huỳnh Phú Sổ (1920–?).[47] Since the early 1940s, Venerable Huỳnh strove to reorient his followers toward his Buddhist sense of social justice and, during the Second Republic of Vietnam (1964–1975), Hòa Hỏa Buddhists put forth a flurry of charitable social projects that included medical care, agricultural and public works, funerals, and educational programs that culminated in 1970 with the founding of Long Xuyên's Hòa Hảo University, which focused on agriculture

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44 Hoang Anh Thu Le, "Doing Bodhisattva's Work," 14.

45 Bourdeaux, "Phật Giáo Hòa Hảo," 596–99; Bourdeaux, "Réflexions sur l'institutionnalisation," 379–81.

46 Bourdeaux, "Phật Giáo Hòa Hảo," 597–98; Swenson, "Compassion Without Pity," 6; Swenson, "Three Trees Make a Mountain," 10; Taylor, "Apocalypse Now?," 351.

47 Bourdeaux, *Bouddhisme Hoa Hao*, 99–132.

and included a Flood Management Committee.[48] After eventually receiving official sanction in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (1976–present) in 1999, Hòa Hảo Buddhists have successfully negotiated government concerns about security, secularity, and the role of religion to coordinate with the state on a number of philanthropic activities, including those in response to climate change.[49] In light of this history, it must be said that Hòa Hảo Buddhists' recent turn toward environmental activism is entirely in keeping with its history over the past century.

Indeed, Hòa Hảo leaders have evoked this history and the teachings of their prophets in support of coordination with state agencies, namely the Vietnam Fatherhood Front, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, and the Government Religions Committee.[50] In 2015, when these agencies appealed to Hòa Hảo and other religious organizations to cooperate in environmental activism, Nguyễn Tất Đạt, the head of the Central Management Committee of Hòa Hảo Buddhism Saṃgha, delivered a speech at a convention of delegates who gathered with the intention of mobilizing religious organizations toward environmental action in response to climate change. On that occasion, he said, "the religious way of life for practitioners of Hòa Hảo Buddhism is inseparable from everyday life, and it is our essential duty (*bổn phận*) to ensure a beautiful, safe, and sustainable environment for the sake of that life."[51] On another occasion, he explicitly conjured the teachings of Hòa Hảo's prophets, including Master Buddha:

> Having inherited Master Buddha of Western Peace Đoàn Minh Huyên's Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương tradition, Hòa Hảo Buddhism develops the tenets "learn from Buddha to cultivate humaneness" and "lay practice in the home".... Against the circumstances of the times, Master of the Saṃgha Venerable Huỳnh witnessed the phenomenon of unusual changes in the weather that did not

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48 Bourdeaux, "Being Engaged in the World," 885.

49 Bourdeaux, "Being Engaged in the World," 1–22.

50 With two successive five-year plans from 2015 to 2020 and again from 2021 to 2026, these agencies, especially the Vietnam Fatherland Front, called for coordination with religious organizations in order to address environmental issues and climate change. Ngô Sách Thực, "Mặt trận tổ quốc Việt Nam," 104–12.

51 Nguyễn Tất Đạt, "PGHH: Bảo vệ môi trường là bổn phận."

> follow natural laws. Ever since, He taught his followers to save in their daily activities and live cleanly. That was the Venerable Master of the Saṃgha's exhortation to all of his followers to participate in protecting the environment.[52]

Thus inspired by the prophets and foregrounded in their prophecies, Nguyễn Tất Đạt estimated that, in one year, the Central Management Committee of Hòa Hảo Buddhism Saṃgha succeeded in mobilizing 1586 Hòa Hảo practitioners toward environmental action.[53] In successive years, such Hòa Hảo activities in the Mekong Delta included the provision of drinking water and relocation assistance in response to saltwater intrusion by hundreds of religionists in Bến Tre Province, coordinated environmental efforts among eight Buddhist pagodas and fifty-five local Hòa Hảo chapters in Cần Thơ City, and meetings of local "Hòa Hảo Clubs" in Kiên Giang Province that gathered upwards of forty households to work collectively on saving the environment in response to climate change.[54]

How do such efforts by millenarian Buddhists in Vietnam compare with Eco-Buddhists abroad? "Deep ecology" is, if nothing else, a desire to find spiritual meaning through environmental work and humankind's relationship with nature. This is entirely in keeping with Swenson's lay-Buddhist informants and philanthropists who sang of living more fully or "living deeply" (Vn. *sống sâu*) by virtue of their charitable deeds.[55] The inner Buddhist virtue of the heart-mind (Vn. *tâm* 心) must be given tangible expression—that is, made visible—to be fully realized.[56] Building projects, medical care, donating provisions, and advocating for environmental protection are all manifest actions that "bring Buddhism to life" vis-à-vis climate change. But what sets Hòa Hảo and similar traditions associated with Master Buddha's teachings apart from myopic, conceptual attempts to undergird Eco-Buddhism with reductionist philosophy is that they come to us with a real history, a "pioneer spirit,"[57] and a

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52 Nguyễn Tất Đạt, "PGHH với sứ mệnh."

53 Nguyễn Tất Đạt, "PGHH với sứ mệnh."

54 Anh Khôi, "Phát giáo Hòa Hảo tỉnh Bến Tre"; Hà Giang, "Phát động các cơ sở"; Nhật Trường, "Xã Tân Hội ra mắt."

55 Swenson, "The Political Spirituality of Buddhist Volunteerism," 2.

56 Meeker, "Being Witnessed Saving Others," 309–28.

57 Bourdeaux, "Being Engaged in the World," 13.

tradition of adapting a Buddhist way of life to the changeable waterscape of the Mekong Delta and building communities amidst environmental challenges not unlike those posed by a changing climate.

Swenson observed that for lay Buddhists in Vietnam today, "devotional charity" is transformative.[58] Patriotic calls to social action can be channeled toward pious charity, and global cries to preserve the Earth can be yoked to the bodhisattva path, and these in turn can lead to personal transformation. There is a restorative, self-reinforcing power to the bodhisattva's work. The more one gives, the more meritorious one's deeds, and the more one feels edified and empowered. This positive feedback loop, like the namesake of Amitābha Buddha, becomes the "immeasurable store of life" (Vn. *vô lượng thọ*, Ch. *wuliang shou* 無量壽).[59] This self-reinforcing transformative work is the promise of Buddhist inspired charity and, by extension, environmental action.

What does this mean, then, for millenarian Buddhists in the Mekong Delta? As Buddhism teaches, nothing is certain. Traditions like Hòa Hảo have demonstrated a willingness and an ability to perform and flourish within the normative bounds of state authority. Since the maturation of its state-sanctioned management committee in 2005, the Hòa Hảo have been particularly successful in cooperating with the state on charity and environmental projects.[60] This is the most likely trajectory going forward for these millenarian traditions as they navigate today's climate crisis in the Mekong Delta. However, with their rich history of facing adversity amidst the challenges of their watery terrain, politics, and the arena of war, they have not entirely shed the independent streak of millenarian fervor once cultivated by Đoàn Minh Huyên's generation of spiritual guides and community leaders. These Buddhists retain a certain knack for challenging the status quo.[61] As lay Buddhists with only tenuous ties to monastic and secular powers, the transformative power of giving could allow them to "actively reject monastic authority and completely sidestep institutional hierarchies, while laying claim to means of generating merit on their own terms."[62]

Historical precedents of rupture with the state may serve to gauge the un-

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58 Swenson, "The Political Spirituality of Buddhist Volunteerism," 4–6.

59 *Fo shuo Guan wuliang shou fo jing*, T 365.12.340.

60 Bourdeaux, "Being Engaged in the World," 886–87.

61 Bourdeaux, "Phật Giáo Hòa Hảo," 597–98; Taylor, "Apocalypse Now?," 351.

62 Swenson, "Compassion Without Pity," 8.

predictable nature of millenarian Buddhism in the future. Since the mid-nineteenth century, key to millenarian traditions' resilience and enduring ability to adapt to dramatically changing historical circumstances in the Mekong Delta has been their rootedness in their prophets (and thus in their prophecies) and local geography.[63] But these sources of stability and cohesion can also serve as catalysts of radical transformation and action. For example, when Venerable Huỳnh vanished in April 1947, messianic fervor violently reignited among his followers despite the prophet's concerted efforts in the preceding years to convert his flock's millenarian energy into a modernist social institution and even into a political entity.[64] Venerable Huỳnh's sudden disappearance was followed by the spread of renewed prophecies, including the well-known cryptic *Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương* poem attributed to Master Buddha, rumors of the impending reincarnation as Buddha-King of Venerable Huỳnh (himself a reincarnation of Master Buddha), and rapturous violence reminiscent of the Boxer Rebellion in China at the turn of the twentieth century, in which Hòa Hảo adepts in the Seven Mountains region armed themselves with primitive weapons and waged war, sometimes successfully, against the superior weaponry and professionally trained communist forces of the Việt Minh.[65] These responses were not without precedent; such eruptions of religious zeal have flared up sporadically and repeatedly since the time of Master Buddha.[66] This is because prophecy is open-ended and ever expanding, while belief in reincarnation and/or the descent of messianic beings makes its embodiment in new prophets a perpetual possibility—indeed, for the adept, an eventuality.[67] It is perhaps for this reason

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63 Bourdeaux, "Being Engaged in the World," 884.

64 Bourdeaux, "Being Engaged in the World," 880–81; Bourdeaux, *Bouddhisme Hoa Hao*, 133–210; Bourdeaux, "Réflexions sur l'institutionnalisation," 375.

65 Việt Minh is the abbreviated name of the Vietnamese Independence League (Việt Nam Độc lập Đồng minh). McHale, *The First Vietnam War*, 86, 109, 143–44. For the use of invincibility practices by adepts associated with Master Buddha's prophecy, see Ho-Tai, *Millenarianism*, 36, 47–48, 50; Quảng Huyền, *Dharma Mountain Buddhism*, 112–21. The Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương poem speaks of the rebirth of Emperor Minh Mạng (1791–1841) as the King of Enlightenment, the military leadership of (a reincarnated?) Trạng Trình (Nguyễn Binh Khiêm 1491–1586), and the restoration of 'Việt Nam.' For a translation and discussion of the poem, see McHale, 144.

66 Ho-Tai, *Millenarianism*, 40–43.

67 Ho-Tai, *Millenarianism*, 40–41, 161.

that Vietnamese government authorities have recently displayed exceptional vigor in forbidding more fundamentalist millenarian factions, especially self-styled Pure Hòa Hảo Buddhists (*Phật giáo Hòa Hảo thuần túy*), from celebrating Venerable Huỳnh's birth (that is his descent as a living Buddha) and from spreading unexpurgated versions of his prophecies.[68]

Climactic transformation of the Mekong Delta landscape (or waterscape), too, can awaken millenarian passions that lead to social fissure. One notable instance took place in 2000, when the delta was overtaken by the most damaging flood in decades. At that time, the fledgling precursor to the Hòa Hảo Central Management Committee responded to the crisis with a dramatic outpouring of devotional charity by domestic and transnational Hòa Hảo adepts that government authorities found impossible to restrain. The overseas element was especially significant, for these adepts included large numbers of Hòa Hảo traditionalists as well as polemicists who did not necessarily sympathize with Vietnam's communist government nor with the Hòa Hảo Management Committee that conceded to the state through compromise. As a result, just one year after attaining state recognition as a religious organization, Hòa Hảo Buddhists, including disaffected overseas Vietnamese and fundamentalist practitioners, overwhelmed state authorities while, within Hòa Hảo communities, fissures emerged between statists and traditionists. Vis-à-vis a climate catastrophe like the 2000 flood, even goodwilled passions could ignite difficult-to-tame polemical and political conflagrations for both religionists and the state.

The past year has seen exceptional instances of widespread drought, forest fires, saltwater intrusion, flash flooding, hailstorms, and other forms of severe weather in the Mekong Delta.[69] The impacts of these weather events are further compounded by geological engineering projects, such as sand harvesting and the construction of the Funan Techo Canal upstream in Cambodia.[70] What do these environmental exigencies spurred on by climate change mean for Buddhist traditions rooted in apocalyptic thought?

Giving is a double-edged sword. When outcomes of charity are good, then the merit building cycle of giving gains momentum, and merit accumulates.

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68 "An Giang."

69 Minh Phúc and Kim Anh, "The 2024 Mekong"; Việt An, "Saltwater Intrusion"; Việt Nam News, "Mekong Delta".

70 Dung Duc Tran et al., "Uncovering," 1–3; Brian Eyler et al., "Impacts."

But when things go awry, then this feedback loop can redouble in reverse, leading to exasperation, desperation, and harmful tendencies. This is because the transformative power of "devotional charity" creates rupture, defies boundaries, and generates new points of departure from which to venture beyond "without *telos*."[71] In the indelible language of the *Heart Sūtra*, the open-ended bodhisattva "goes beyond, beyond, and ever beyond."[72]

What if *dāna*—the one word, as Master Buddha stated, "that should come first"[73]—fails? Regarding climate responses in Vietnam, past precedents suggest that when institutional actors fall short, although grassroots activists remain determined to step in, once the latter's resilience, too, is exhausted, social unrest and even violence ensues.[74] History has also shown that traditions like Hòa Hảo can abruptly and radically take a violent turn when their followers' aspirations are thwarted, while extremists, militants, and opportunists have been quick to seize upon religious fervor at moments of acute crisis. Modernist discourses are unlikely to quelch millenarian zealotry once it bursts free from the dikes of convention, for belief and investment in supernatural powers and magical thinking associated with Buddhist millenarianism remains stubbornly fervid in southern Vietnam, even in its most urban centers.[75] Therefore, for Buddhists of the delta whose worldviews align with Master Buddha's teachings, the climate crisis and fantastical visions of impending apocalypse converge. Both are manifest and real.

The Vietnamese state, too, may play a role in edging millenarian Buddhists to extremes. Recently, the state has displayed marked contradiction in its sensitivity toward climate and environmental issues on the one hand and its curious suspicion and heavy-handed suppression of grassroots environmental activists on the other. As one commentator puts it, "the two biggest existential crises facing the VCP [Vietnamese Communist Party] are environmental change *and* environmental activism."[76] That is in part perhaps why, in 2014, Vietnam's

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71 Swenson, "The Political Spirituality of Buddhist Volunteerism," 5.

72 *Bore boluomiduo xinjing*, T 251.08.0848c04–23.

73 Huyền, "Esoteric Tradition," 220.

74 Biggs et al., "The Delta Machine," 217–21.

75 Swenson, "Three Trees Make a Mountain", 6, 11–12.

76 Hunt, "Vietnam's Ecological Leninism"; "Will the Environment be the Vietnam Government's Downfall?"

prime minister declared climate change "a matter of life and death."[77] What then would such strident pronouncements portend for potentially disillusioned and besieged lay millenarian activists in an era of ongoing disinformation, conspiracy, and so-called "conspirituality"?[78]

Apocalypse now? What is clear from our present discussion is that, if Master Buddha's vision of the Dharma-ending Age is indeed accompanied by climate change catastrophe, then the responses among Buddhists who are receptive to his message in the Mekong Delta will be guided less by the rationalistic and universalist appeals of Eco-Buddhist ideologues than by the endemic contingencies of local populations and the peculiarities of their religious orientations and beliefs, including merit-making, "magical thinking," and millenarian dreams. If Master Buddha was right, then it will be up to *their* hearts and minds, their *tâm*, to decide.

Conclusion

Advocates of Eco-Buddhism and the Deep Ecology with which is it aligned largely ground environmental action in Buddhist philosophy and ethics. As a result, these movements tend toward modernist and rational attitudes that apply a sort of armchair philosophizing that appeals to reason. Their rhetoric is persuasion; they assume that environmental activists need to be convinced intellectually before exercising will to action. This perspective is not limited to Western postcolonial urban societies, but is also iterated by non-Western Buddhist leaders with ecumenical, global, and reformist agendas, like the Dalai Lama and the late Thích Nhất Hạnh.

Excluded from Eco-Buddhism's environmental discourse are Buddhist traditions and communities that rely less on rationalization and find purpose in other sources of religious expression. However, Buddhists who, like millenarian Buddhists, are motivated as much by magic, miracles, and the otherworldly effects of past lifetimes, merit-making, Dharma and its teachers have just as much to contribute to humanity's response to climate change. This is especially

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77 "Việt Nam coi ứng phó với biến đổi khí hậu là vấn đề có ý nghĩa sống còn". Quoted in Lê Thanh Triệu et al., "Climate Change Reporting," 234.

78 Ward and Voas, "The Emergence of Conspirituality," 103–21.

true for Vietnamese millenarian traditions in the Mekong Delta for whom dealing with environmental and meteorological catastrophes is a choice imbedded in culture, teachings, history, and lore, rather than informed by rational arguments from above or without. Millenarian traditions that emerged from the activities and apocalyptic teachings of Master Buddha Đoàn Minh Huyên, including Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, and Hòa Hảo, have over a century-and-half of history creating agricultural settlements in the Mekong Delta and coping with the challenges that such large-scale transformation of the landscape (and waterscape) entails. Moreover, the written and oracular scriptures of these traditions speak at length about the destructive potentialities that come to pass when human society is morally debased and out of balance with the environment. The result would be, in a word, apocalypse—deluge, drought, famine, and death. These prophecies are not just fantastical eschatological metaphors; they reference actual landmarks and geological features. Meanwhile, the recent and projected effects of climate change in the delta parallel descriptions of geological transformation in the apocalyptic scriptures, especially the prospect that inundation of delta lowlands would leave only the high ground of the sacred Seven Mountains as a refuge. For millenarian adepts in the Mekong Delta, both Dharma and its end-time are inscribed in the environment around them.

At the same time, traditions rooted in Master Buddha's teachings have a long tradition of coordinating with secular authorities, especially since the 1940s when Venerable Huỳnh gave Hòa Hảo Buddhism an institutional edifice, a curriculum of practice, and conversance in politics. This historical trajectory culminated at the turn of the twenty-first century when Hòa Hảo Buddhism received state approval for its activities and the Central Management Committee of Hòa Hảo Buddhism's Saṃgha was formed to negotiate between religionists and the state.

Nonetheless, this negotiation is a delicate, tenuous dance. The massive floods of 2000 inspired an outpouring of religious energy, much of it from traditionalist overseas adepts, that startled the state, while the compromises made with the government to form the Central Management Committee created rifts between state-oriented religionists and those with purist convictions. The latter, marginalized adepts constitute a latent millenarian force that is at odds with official Buddhist institutions and under suspicion from the state. Whether the government and its sanctioned religious organs can successfully curb or redirect the puissance of the prophets' apocalyptic visions among ardent tra-

ditionalists remains to be seen, but historical precedent forewarns that should the state appear to lose control of the climate situation, then outbursts of millenarian fervor may again find expression in the delta. In this respect, feverish millenarian sectarians and the more zealous acolytes of Deep Ecology may find common ground in the realms of radical environmentalism and ecotage.[79]

In conclusion, scholars and activists alike stand to benefit from including millenarian traditions in discussions about Buddhist environmentalism. Traditions like those that stem from the teachings of Master Buddha complement the aloof ideologies of Eco-Buddhism by providing examples of religious practice and belief that are intrinsically tied to local geography and prescribe a socially-committed response to the climate crisis through moral cultivation, charitable action, and cooperation with secular authorities. In this sense, the apocalyptic but open and un-sealable prophetic language of Master Buddha, as perpetuated in traditions like Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, and Hòa Hảo, present something akin to what eco-linguists identify as a decolonizing idiom that helps us imagine alternative ways of coding and channeling local forms of "environmental knowledge."[80] Although the future remains to be written, it stands to reason that the trajectory of Vietnamese millenarian Buddhists will depend largely on how they manage their relationship with the state and on the degree of severity of climate crises in the Mekong Delta. As long as cooperation between religionists and the state keeps the worst effects of climate change at bay, they are likely to continue to work together and millenarian Buddhists will continue to have a sanctioned role in environmental activism. However, if such attempts fall short and climate disaster appears imminent and inescapable, then fissures between religionists and the government, as well as within the millenarian sects themselves, may give rise to more extreme virulent voices. Therefore, religionists and state actors will both share agency in determining whether climate catastrophe can be forefended or whether it is an apocalypse now.

Finally, the above discussion suggests several avenues for future study. Ethnographic research might reveal how religionists negotiate their priorities with

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[79] For the relationship between Deep Ecology and radical environmentalism, see Devall, "Deep Ecology"; for a discussion about the potential role of violence and ecoterrorism in the future, see Gottlieb, "Spiritual Deep Ecology," 30–31.

[80] Harrison, "Environmental Linguistics," 113.

those of the state, and how they situate themselves vis-à-vis environmental crises that are simultaneously national and transnational in nature. As millenarian traditions like Hòa Hảo continue to expand their geographic reach in Vietnam and abroad, can the body of prophetic teachings endemic to a small portion of the Mekong Delta find purchase in regions far from their riverine source? In what ways are these teachings reiterated, reshaped, hidden, or ignored in accord with ongoing developments? Can balance be achieved between apocalyptic urgency and its pressing call to action on the one hand and enduring sustainability on the other?

Abbreviations

T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經 [Buddhist Canon Compiled under the Taisho Era (1912–1926)]. Edited by Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭. 100 volumes. Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai 大正一切經刊行會, 1924–1932.

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