

Leveraging the Religious Value Systems of Catholicism and Protestantism as Resources for Sustainable Development of Local Ethnic Minorities: The Case in Lam Dong Province

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the religious value systems of Catholicism and Protestantism among local ethnic minority communities in Lam Dong province, Vietnam, and their contributions to sustainable development. Drawing on the qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews and participant observation among the Co Ho, Chu Ru, and M'Nong groups, the study examines how religious ethics are manifested in everyday practices across spiritual, economic, cultural, social, and environmental domains. The findings reveal that: (1) religious teachings cultivate values such as diligence, honesty, and environmental stewardship; (2) traditional cultural elements are preserved through their integration with religious rituals; (3) religious norms enhance ecological awareness by discouraging the use of harmful chemicals; and (4) religious leaders play a pivotal role in community mobilization and value transmission. This research highlights how religious institutions and ethical frameworks serve as localized mechanisms for promoting sustainable development in Vietnam's multi-ethnic and transitional context.

Key words: Religious value system, dedication, fairness, local ethnic minorities, Lam Dong province

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary development discourse, religion is increasingly recognized not merely as a spiritual or cultural phenomenon but as a vital resource shaping social ethics, community resilience, and sustainable practices.¹ Religious value systems, comprising moral codes, worldviews, and collective behaviors, form the normative core of religious life and influence adherents' everyday choices in economic, social, and environmental domains.²

This recognition takes on particular importance in the context of Vietnam, a country characterized by deep ethnic diversity and a complex religious landscape. Among local ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, specifically in Lam Dong province, Catholicism and Protestantism have not only provided spiritual guidance but have also contributed significantly to the structuring of social organization, labor ethics, inter-community relations, and approaches to resource stewardship.³⁻⁵ These religious systems often coexist with, complement, or sometimes challenge both indigenous belief systems and state-led development frameworks.⁵

Although global research has extensively highlighted the positive contributions of Christian ethics to social and economic development,^{3,6-9} such insights

have rarely been applied to the Vietnamese context. There remains a gap in the literature regarding how Christian religious values concretely interact with the livelihoods, practices, and aspirations of ethnic minority communities in Vietnam. Addressing this lacuna, the present study seeks to provide an empirically grounded analysis of these dynamics.

To that end, this article examines how the value systems of Catholicism and Protestantism are interpreted, embodied, and enacted among local ethnic minorities in Lam Dong province. It investigates the extent to which these systems contribute, both directly and indirectly, to processes of sustainable development. Especially, the research focuses on four key dimensions: economic behaviors, environmental consciousness, cultural preservation, and social cohesion. By doing so, the study illustrates how religious ethics serve not only as moral compasses but also as mechanisms that facilitate development outcomes. Before detailing our research methodology and findings, however, it is important to situate this inquiry within the broader scholarly landscape. The following section offers a literature review that outlines the current state of research on the intersection of religion, ethnicity, and development, thereby framing the analytical lens through which our study proceeds.

LITERATURE REVIEW

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Religious value systems play a central role in shaping the spiritual worldview, moral reasoning, and social behavior of religious communities. These values are not only derived from theological doctrines but are also continuously reinterpreted through lived experiences and collective practices. According to Ngo Thi Phuong Lan (2024), religious values extend beyond the spiritual sphere, exerting influence over economic, cultural, and social domains, thereby contributing to ideals of truth, goodness, and beauty, as well as promoting national sustainability and social cohesion.²

Building upon this foundational view, numerous studies have shown that religious values are not fixed or static entities. Instead, they function as dynamic social systems capable of adapting to structural and cultural changes in specific contexts. Han (2022) conceptualizes religious organizations as “adaptive social technologies” that not only reflect but also actively reshape modern societal conditions.⁶ He emphasizes the heterogeneous nature of religious systems, which are shaped by diverse theological interpretations, historical legacies, and ongoing negotiations with contemporary social forces. This flexibility allows religious institutions to remain morally authoritative while being socially responsive.

In a related vein, Deneulin (2022) investigates the dual function of religion in development contexts. She notes that religious institutions often serve to legitimize political authority and maintain social order, while also possessing the potential to critique and transform entrenched inequalities through theological discourse and ritual action.³ Similarly, Afiyo (2024) explores how religious communities respond to modernization, highlighting their role in selectively reinterpreting tradition to reinforce localized agency and navigate power dynamics. Her research frames religious value systems as “strategic tools” for negotiating identity, political positioning, and socioeconomic change.⁷

The ethical dimension of religion has also been a focus in scholarship that connects religious morality with broader development processes. Akhir et al. (2020), focusing on Islamic ethical traditions, conceptualize *akhlaq* (Islamic moral character) as a holistic framework for human development, integrating personal ethics with collective wellbeing [8]. In this sense, religious ethics are not confined to individual morality but serve as collective regulatory mechanisms for social advancement. Complementing this, Asim et al. (2023) introduce the concept of “ethical ecologies” across Islamic and Christian traditions, which

represent normative environments structured by religious teachings. These ethical ecologies foster social resilience, intergenerational solidarity, and ethical innovation, empowering communities to address systemic issues such as poverty, health crises, and environmental degradation in culturally embedded ways.⁹

Taken together, these studies conceptualize religious value systems as complex, embedded, and multifunctional. They operate at multiple levels, personal, communal, institutional, and across various domains, economic, environmental, and sociocultural. As normative frameworks, they guide behavior, shape collective identities, and mediate both continuity and transformation in social structures. The social capital inherent in religious communities, grounded in shared beliefs, mutual trust, and collective action, is increasingly recognized as a vital driver of inclusive and sustainable development.¹⁰

While this body of studies offers rich theoretical insights and broad comparative perspectives, it often remains at an abstract or global level. There is a noticeable lack of empirically grounded studies that explore how religious value systems function within specific cultural, ethnic, and political settings, particularly in Southeast Asia. In the Vietnamese context, and especially in the Central Highlands region, where religious transformation, ethnic identity, and state development policies intersect in historically and socially embedded ways, empirical evidence remains limited. Lam Dong province, in particular, presents a compelling case of cultural and religious diversity, where religion interacts dynamically with local development trajectories.

Recently, several studies have begun to explore these interactions. For instance, Chu Van Tuan (2023) characterizes religion in Lam Dong as a “dynamic ecosystem” that continuously shapes and is shaped by the development processes of local ethnic minority communities.³ His ethnographic research illustrates that religious beliefs are not isolated spiritual domains but are deeply integrated into broader cultural structures. These structures influence livelihood strategies, facilitate intergenerational knowledge transmission, and enhance community resilience. Likewise, the work of Ngo Van Le and Huynh Ngoc Thu (2017) highlights the role of religious value systems in preserving indigenous cultural heritage. They argue that religion serves as a form of “living cultural memory,” helping to maintain and regenerate essential local knowledge. Their study in Dak Nong province shows that religious rituals and beliefs are integral to local socio-ecological

knowledge, specifically in agriculture, forest management, and community organization.¹¹ By embedding moral teachings within daily rituals and customary norms, religious values reinforce survival knowledge and strengthen ethnic identity.

Further extending in this line of inquiry, Huynh Ngoc Thu (2024) examines the phenomenon of religious conversion among ethnic minorities in the region. He argues that conversion to Christianity, whether Catholicism or Protestantism, does not necessarily lead to cultural erosion. Rather, traditional cultural elements are selectively transformed to align with new religious frameworks.⁴ In many cases, conversion is accompanied by improved access to economic opportunities, education, and healthcare through the support of religious organizations and state programs. In addition, traditional local leaders often enhance their legitimacy by aligning themselves with religious institutions, thereby strengthening their leadership roles within the community.⁵

Despite these valuable contributions, most of the existing studies remain either general in scope or comparative in nature. Very few engage directly with the lived, everyday interactions between religious values and community practices. For this reason, our research aims to fill that gap by offering an in-depth empirical and ethnographic analysis of how Catholic and Protestant value systems are interpreted, negotiated, and practiced within the daily lives of ethnic minority communities in Lam Dong. The study does not treat religion merely as an abstract moral code, but instead focuses on how religious ethics are concretely enacted in livelihood strategies, environmental adaptations, and communal governance.

By situating religious value systems within the socio-cultural and political specificities of Lam Dong, this research contributes locally grounded insights to global academic discussions. It demonstrates that religious ethics are not only normative ideals but also active forces that operate within real-world practices of transformation, resilience, and sustainable development. In contexts like the Central Highlands, where religion intersects deeply with ethnicity, cultural identity, and socio-economic change, understanding how religious values shape and are shaped by development is crucial to both academic inquiry and practical policymaking.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

Research Context

Lam Dong province, located in Vietnam's Central Highlands, is a region of notable geographical, ecological, and cultural diversity. With its mountainous terrain, temperate climate, and forested landscapes, Lam Dong serves as both an economic hub for agriculture and tourism as well as a socio-cultural cross-roads where multiple ethnicities and belief systems intersect. The province is home to various local ethnic minority groups, the most prominent of which are the Co Ho, Chu Ru, and M'ngong. These communities are considered autochthonous to the region, possessing deep-rooted historical ties to the land and a wealth of ecological and cultural knowledge shaped by generations of interaction with the highland environment.¹¹ According to the 2019 Population and Housing Census, Lam Dong had a total population of 1,296,906. Among this, the Co Ho accounted for 175,531 people (13.53%), the Chu Ru for 22,473 (1.73%), and the M'ngong for 10,517 (0.81%).¹² These ethnic groups are characterized by distinct linguistic systems, kinship structures, customary laws (tục lệ), and religious worldviews. Traditionally, their spiritual lives were oriented around animism, ancestor worship, and a deep reverence for nature spirits (yang), all of which were intricately tied to their subsistence economies and community rituals.

However, beginning in the late 19th century and intensifying throughout the 20th century, Lam Dong became a focal point for Christian missionary activity, first through Catholicism and later through Protestantism. Catholicism entered the Central Highlands after being suppressed in the lowlands, especially under banned during the reign of King Minh Mang (1820-1841), prompting missionaries to redirect their efforts toward ethnic minority communities in more remote areas. Missionary figures such as Bishop Stephano Quénot Thê and Father Jean Pierre Combes were instrumental in establishing Catholic parishes in Lam Dong during the mid-1800s.^{3,13} By the early 20th century, missionary networks had firmly established Catholicism in many ethnic communities.

Soon after, Protestantism followed in the early 1900s, with a strong surge in conversions occurring during the 1940s. Urban centers such as Da Lat and Buon Ma Thuot became headquarters for evangelical missions that focused heavily on ethnic minorities.^{1,4} Protestant outreach often emphasized literacy, the vernacular translation of the Bible into indigenous languages, and the establishment of local church-based governance. Today, Lam Dong is home to a large population of ethnic minority Christians, including over 350,000 Protestants and approximately

250,000 Catholics across the Central Highlands, with a significant concentration in Lam Dong itself.^{3,4}

The rapid expansion of Christianity has brought profound changes to the social, cultural, and economic fabric of indigenous communities in Lam Dong. In many cases, religious conversion has restructured traditional authority structures, community rituals, and social norms. Churches have come to function not only as religious institutions but also as centers of community organization, education, and development support. Especially in rural and upland areas, Christian institutions often provide crucial services in health, schooling, poverty alleviation, and legal counseling, thereby influencing everyday life far beyond the realm of spiritual practice.⁷

Despite the substantial documentation on the historical spread and social impacts of Christianity in Lam Dong, less attention has been paid to the internal value systems of Catholicism and Protestantism, and how these systems, rooted in ethics, social teachings, and communal responsibility, are actively shaping development practices at the grassroots level. Questions remain about how these religious value systems are being localized, how they intersect with traditional cultural values, and in what ways they are mobilized by ethnic communities to pursue more sustainable and autonomous futures.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the value systems of Catholicism and Protestantism as embedded in ethnic minority communities in Lam Dong, with particular attention to their roles in promoting sustainable development. Rather than viewing religion as an external influence or solely a spiritual phenomenon, this research approaches it as a socio-cultural resource, one that shapes behavior, institutions, and aspirations. By focusing on the lived experiences of Co Ho, Chu Ru, and M'ngong communities, the study seeks to understand how religious ethics are interpreted, adapted, and translated into developmental strategies. This approach not only addresses a critical gap in the literature but also responds to broader questions of how indigenous communities navigate modernity through localized forms of faith-based resilience.

Research Methodology

During 2022-2023, the research team conducted fieldwork in three local ethnic minority communities in Lam Dong Province: the Co Ho, Chu Ru, and M'ngong. Data collection was carried out using three primary methods: participant observation, key informant interviews, and community informant interviews.

Participant observation: The research team lived and worked directly within the communities. We stayed in the homes of influential individuals such as village elders and pastors to gain a deeper understanding of social dynamics. Observations focused on community management, including conflict resolution, religious activities, and security concerns such as theft. Additionally, the team observed economic and cultural activities, including agricultural work, cultural festivals, and religious ceremonies. Detailed observations were systematically documented in a field diary for subsequent analysis.

Key informant interviews: The research team conducted in-depth interviews with 10 selected key informants from each community, totaling 30 key individuals across the three communities. These included a religious dignitary (e.g., a pastor or deacon), a village elder, and a local official, all male, with an average age of 55 (ranging from 45 to 65). These interviews explored perspectives on social management, religious practices, cultural preservation, economic activities, and environmental concerns under the influence of religious values. Each interview, lasting 60 to 90 minutes, was conducted in Vietnamese with interpretation for ethnic languages provided as needed. Where supplementary data was required, follow-up interviews were conducted with the original participants. In total, 55 in-depth interviews were completed. All interviews took place in the informants' homes and were recorded on smartphones with prior consent. The recordings were subsequently transcribed for analysis. It is important to note that this research did not include cadres from the local religious management departments. This limitation was intentional, as the study focused on grassroots perceptions and practices within ethnic communities rather than administrative or institutional perspectives.

Community informant interviews: In addition to the key informant interviews, the team engaged in informal conversations with over 120 community members. These interviewees included both men and women, aged 40 to 55, typically household heads or their spouses. Conversations occurred in diverse settings such as homes, agricultural fields, churches (before or after religious ceremonies), and local coffee shops. Each interaction lasted between 15 and 30 minutes, depending on the participants' availability. Topics included personal life histories, family economic and cultural activities, religious practices, life experiences, and conflicts requiring community leadership intervention. These conversations were conducted in Vietnamese, and notes were directly

recorded in a field notebook rather than through audio recordings.

Data analysis: Following data collection, the team synthesized and analyzed information from field diaries, interview notes, and transcribed audio recordings. The analysis aimed to contextualize community life and evaluate the impact of religious value systems on economic, cultural, and social activities within the framework of sustainable development for ethnic minority communities.

This multi-method approach allowed the research team to gain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of community life. By combining direct engagement and detailed observation, the study presents a multidimensional perspective on the socio-cultural realities of ethnic minority communities in Lam Dong Province.

FINDINGS

Identifying the Religious Value Systems in Local Ethnic Minority Communities

The religious value systems of Catholicism and Protestantism, as embraced by local ethnic minority communities in Lam Dong province, are grounded in doctrinal teachings that promote ethical behavior, social responsibility, and legal compliance. These foundational values constitute an essential framework for understanding how religion can serve as a cultural and moral resource for sustainable development.

Doctrinal Foundations

Although Catholicism and Protestantism differ in theological doctrines and institutional structures, both traditions share a commitment to fundamental moral values such as truth, justice, compassion, humility, and self-discipline.^{2,4} These are not merely abstract spiritual ideals but function as normative guidelines that govern human conduct in both religious and secular contexts.

A central tenet in both traditions is the eschatological vision of salvation, a future state of perfection and peace, conceptualized as the Kingdom of God in both Catholic and Protestant thought, and as Heaven in Catholic eschatology.^{14 15} This vision provides a teleological orientation that encourages believers to live ethically in the present as a pathway toward spiritual fulfillment. Religious teachings emphasize honesty, integrity, and moral accountability, urging adherents to refrain from actions that harm individuals, communities, or the natural environment.⁴

These teachings are not limited to private belief but operate as regulatory mechanisms in daily life.

Among ethnic minority communities in Lam Dong, where kinship ties and communal structures remain strong, such values are often embedded in family practices, customary village norms, and inter-generational education. Through sermons, catechism classes, and youth activities organized by local churches, moral principles are continually reinforced, cultivating a collective consciousness that links individual behavior to both divine reward and communal well-being.²

A second foundational aspect is the doctrinal emphasis on ethics as the foundation of human dignity and social responsibility. Catholic social teaching regards work not only as an economic necessity but as a sacred vocation, a form of co-creation through which human beings participate in the divine mission. This perspective encourages diligence, solidarity, and respect for labor, while discouraging selfishness, exploitation, and material greed. Protestant ethics, particularly in evangelical and Reformed traditions, similarly promote the concept of "calling" (*Berufung*), where each individual's occupation is seen as a moral and spiritual obligation contributing to the common good.¹³

As noted by Ngo Thi Phuong Lan (2023), Christian economic and civic engagement is often guided by the scriptural maxim: "render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and unto God what belongs to God." This principle underscores a dual responsibility, to the state and to divine authority, which promotes a harmonious integration of faith and law, reinforcing values such as fiscal honesty, law-abiding citizenship, and community trust [²:125-144].

Furthermore, both traditions firmly oppose corruption, injustice, and unethical conduct, particularly when such actions are motivated by personal gain at the expense of others. These prohibitions are especially relevant in the context of ethnic minority communities in Lam Dong, who are increasingly exposed to the pressures of market liberalization, land commodification, and cultural erosion. Religious teachings offer a counterbalance to these pressures, providing communities with shared moral frameworks that prioritize fairness, social cohesion, and environmental stewardship.

Doctrinal Values and the Sustainable Development Framework

From the perspective of sustainable development, the doctrinal value systems of Catholicism and Protestantism are closely aligned with several core pillars of the global development agenda. These include: (1)

Environmental stewardship: Both traditions emphasize the sanctity of creation and the ethical obligation to protect the natural environment. This reinforces community practices that prioritize sustainable use of land, water, and forests, particularly critical in upland agricultural settings, (2) *Social equity and inclusion*: Doctrines that advocate for compassion, service, and human dignity foster inclusive development, strengthen intergroup solidarity, and reduce marginalization, specifically in ethnically diverse and socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts, (3) *Economic ethics*: Teachings that uphold the dignity of labor and condemn unjust enrichment promote ethical livelihoods, discourage exploitative practices, and encourage equitable resource distribution, and (4) *Legal and civic responsibility*: Religious imperatives to obey just laws and respect institutional authority complement local governance structures, facilitate conflict resolution, and reinforce the rule of law, especially where state presence is limited.^{2,4}

Viewed holistically, the religious value systems function not merely as internalized beliefs but as cultural infrastructures, frameworks through which individuals understand their roles, organize their social lives, and envision collective futures. These values serve as moral anchors in contexts of socio-economic transition, while simultaneously offering practical resources for building resilient, ethical, and sustainable communities. This is further illustrated through the empirical analysis of how religious value systems influence the economic, cultural, environmental, and social dimensions of community life among local ethnic minorities in Lam Dong province today.

Practical Impacts on Community Life

Survey findings from local ethnic minority communities in Lam Dong province reveal that religious doctrines, norms, and belief systems play a significant role in linking community life, such as economic, cultural, environmental, and social practices.

Economic Impact

Religious moral values serve as guiding principles in the economic behavior of believers. Both Catholic and Protestant doctrines emphasize honesty, integrity, and moral responsibility, urging followers to manage resources, including health, knowledge, labor, and finances, ethically and judiciously. These teachings discourage economic activities that inflict harm on others or the environment for personal gain and instead promote the notion that true prosperity is a reflection of one's faith and obedience to God.

Nowadays, agriculture remains the primary livelihood among ethnic minority households, with key crops including coffee, pepper, avocado, durian, and banana. Coffee and durian, in particular, are prioritized due to their higher market value. As one resident observed: "Growing coffee helps them earn money to build houses and buy cars" (Interview with Mr. K.D., 49 years old, Protestant, 2023). Farming practices are typically shaped by limited financial resources, with families exercising careful consideration in the use of fertilizers, pesticides, and stimulants to reduce negative impacts on health and the environment. This cautious approach is strongly influenced by religious guidance and the counsel of church leaders. As one Protestant pastor explained: "We should not use too many chemicals on crops so as not to affect the health of others and pollute the environment" (Interview with Mr. D.L., Protestant, 2023).

To diversify income, many households also raise livestock, including F1 hybrid wild boars, chickens, cows, and buffalo. Rather than relying on industrial feed and chemical stimulants, most farmers prefer locally sourced, homemade feed. Their approach to animal husbandry prioritizes the production of clean, safe food, protects consumer health, and minimizes ecological harm. One Catholic farmer expressed this view succinctly: "Using industrial feed or growth stimulants can reduce the value of products and harm health" (Interview with Mr. D.T.D., Catholic, 2023).

Overall, work is considered a religious and moral obligation within both Catholic and Protestant communities. Hard work is not only regarded as a path to improving family well-being and contributing to community development but also as a means of fulfilling divine expectations. As one respondent shared:

"The parish priest often teaches that we need to work hard to prove that we are useful to our family and society, and if we are lazy, we will commit a sin" (Interview with Ms. H'D.J.Ê., Catholic, 2023).

In summary, the economic activities of ethnic minority communities in Lam Dong are profoundly influenced by religious values. These communities emphasize not only financial gain but also ethical principles such as honesty, environmental responsibility, and social harmony. Their commitment to diligence, initiative, and moral integrity reflects a meaningful integration of religious ethics and practical livelihood strategies, contributing to a model of sustainable economic development aligned with global development goals.

Cultural Impact

Findings from the survey of local ethnic minority communities in Lam Dong province reveal that religious beliefs, particularly Catholicism and Protestantism, have significantly influenced cultural life, especially in the preservation and transformation of traditional elements. While many cultural expressions, including traditional costumes, musical instruments, and agricultural rituals, remain in practice, they have been adapted to align with the moral and liturgical frameworks of these religions.

- *Traditional Attire and Religious Practice:* The traditional costumes of local ethnic minority groups are typically made from hand-woven brocade with distinctive patterns and symbolic colors. Despite religious conversion, followers of both Catholicism and Protestantism continue to wear these garments, with no imposed restrictions on clothing from religious authorities. As one Catholic respondent noted:

"There is no mandatory regulation to change the dress code for Catholics, so the parish priest does not require a change, and people continue to wear their traditional costumes" (Interview with M.T., Catholic, 2023).

In the same way, a Protestant interviewee stated: "Pastors do not require changes in attire, and the community still maintains its traditional style" (Interview with R'Ô.K.R., Protestant, 2023).

Nevertheless, under the influence of modernization and cultural exchange, especially with the majority Kinh population, traditional clothing is changing. In everyday life, men often wear modern items such as shirts, trousers, watches, and shoes for formal events, while using practical, market-bought clothing for labor. Women continue to don traditional outfits such as skirts and blouses during festivals and rituals, though many now use commercially available fabrics rather than handwoven textiles.¹⁶

Interestingly, there is an emerging trend of revitalizing traditional dress during religious events. In Catholic communities, women often wear brocade clothing during church festivals, thereby reinforcing cultural identity through religious participation. Among Protestants, traditional garments are sometimes combined with formal attire, including white shirts and black trousers, as a symbol of respect and decorum in church settings. A Protestant follower explained:

"The pastor advises everyone to dress politely, such as white shirts and black trousers, when attending ceremonies. He also encourages wearing traditional short-sleeved shirts to keep warm" (Interview with Mr. K'N., Protestant, 2023).

Likewise, in Catholic parishes, priests actively encourage the wearing of traditional garments, resulting in widespread use of brocade during mass and special liturgical occasions (Interview with Mr. K.T., Catholic, 2023).

- *Traditional Musical Instruments and Religious Adaptation:* Attitudes toward traditional musical instruments differ significantly between Catholic and Protestant communities. Among Catholics, traditional instruments are actively preserved and even integrated into worship. They are commonly played during weekly services, as well as during major liturgical events like Easter and Christmas, reflecting a respectful fusion of religious expression and cultural heritage. Several communities have also formed traditional music clubs, particularly in areas like the Langbiang Biosphere Reserve, with the dual aim of cultural preservation and promoting tourism.

In contrast, Protestant communities have largely discontinued the use of traditional instruments in church rituals. One Protestant pastor explained:

"We do not want people to associate with the past rituals of idol worship, as these instruments were traditionally used during such rites. Now, believers only pray to God, so we do not use the sounds produced by traditional musical instruments" (Pastor's opinion, 2023).

While these instruments are not employed in religious contexts, they remain in limited use within the broader cultural life of Protestant communities and thus retain some spiritual relevance.

- *Agricultural Rituals and Religious Reinterpretation:* Agricultural rituals continue to play a role in the spiritual and cultural life of ethnic minority groups. These include prayers for bountiful harvests, protection from natural threats, and thanksgiving ceremonies. However, the theological orientation of these rituals has shifted. Traditional deities are no longer invoked; instead, prayers are directed to God. A notable example is the "Sanctifying Work" ritual on the third day of the Lunar New Year, particularly observed by Catholic communities.¹⁷ Although ethnic minorities do not traditionally celebrate Tet in the same way as the Kinh, Catholics now attend church services to pray for success in their work for the coming year, demonstrating a creative integration of religious belief and traditional agricultural custom.

In short, while religious conversion has undeniably reshaped aspects of cultural life among ethnic minority communities in Lam Dong, many traditional values and practices remain intact or have been recontextualized within new religious frameworks. The interaction between indigenous culture and global re-

ligious systems has produced diverse local expressions of identity. Notably, even within the same ethnic group, Catholic and Protestant adherents often adopt different approaches to cultural preservation. Nevertheless, both religious traditions promote universal moral values (truth, compassion, and beauty) that contribute to building morally grounded, resilient communities while sustaining cultural continuity amid ongoing social change.

Environmental Impact

The ethnic minority communities in Lam Dong province rely primarily on agriculture, centered on crop cultivation and livestock farming, as their main source of livelihood. Within these economic activities, religious ethics serve as an important guiding framework, particularly in regulating the use of agricultural inputs. Both Catholic and Protestant believers are strongly encouraged to avoid excessive use of pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and synthetic growth stimulants due to their adverse effects on human health and the natural environment. This environmental consciousness is shaped not only by agricultural extension efforts but also, and perhaps more significantly, by religious teachings. Given the high moral authority of religious leaders in these communities, their guidance is often interpreted as divinely inspired and is followed with sincerity and trust.^{4,5}

As one Catholic farmer shared:

“The words of the parish priest are also considered the words of God. He always advises us to do good things and not to abuse chemicals that harm others” (Interview with Mr. D.T.D., Catholic, 2023).

A Protestant respondent echoed this sentiment: “The pastor always reminds us not to use chemicals harmful to the environment and health, as it goes against God’s rules” (Interview with Mr. K.D., Protestant, 2023).

In conversations with pastors and deacons in Co Ho communities, several noted that the use of chemicals was uncommon in the past. However, the introduction of intensive agricultural practices by outside actors led to the adoption of chemical-based farming methods. Recognizing the dangers of such practices, religious leaders now frequently counsel their congregations on the risks of chemical overuse and encourage the community to uphold religious values in agricultural decision-making. One pastor emphasized the importance of avoiding both ecological harm and financial debt arising from chemical dependency (Interview with Pastor K.D., 2023).

While no systematic environmental impact assessment has yet been conducted in these communities, qualitative interviews and participant observation suggest that religion plays a significant role in promoting environmentally sustainable farming practices. Religious teachings help to curb harmful agricultural behavior, thereby contributing to the protection of local ecosystems and public health.

In addition to influencing farming practices, improvements in the built environment further illustrate the positive synergy between religion, local governance, and community participation. Field observations revealed that residential areas are generally clean, with paved village roads and houses constructed using more durable materials such as bricks and corrugated iron-replacing older, less stable wooden structures. These houses typically feature designated living spaces, including separate areas for sleeping, cooking, and sanitation. In livestock farming, free-range systems have been largely replaced by enclosed barns or designated pens, thus strengthening hygienic control and curbing environmental degradation. These developments have been supported by the National Target Program for New Rural Development, with active community involvement.

Although such infrastructural improvements are not directly driven by religion, religious leaders play an indirect yet strategic role in facilitating these transformations. Local government authorities often partner with parish priests and Protestant pastors to mobilize community participation in development initiatives, including road construction, land allocation, and school building. The moral authority of religious leaders enhances community trust and cooperation, making these development programs more effective and inclusive.

Furthermore, community hygiene, waste management, and animal waste control have become key areas of focus in creating a clean and sustainable living environment. Self-management groups in villages frequently encourage households to maintain sanitation, and religious figures are instrumental in reinforcing these practices. Catholic priests regularly remind congregants of the health benefits of cleanliness and stress the need to eliminate mosquito breeding grounds to prevent diseases such as dengue fever (Interview with Mr. K’S., Catholic, 2023). Protestant deacons also collaborate closely with village leaders to raise awareness of sanitation and disease prevention (Interview with Mr. K.H., Protestant deacon, 2023).

In conclusion, religious leaders have played a vital role in promoting environmentally responsible behavior, ranging from sustainable agricultural prac-

tices to household hygiene and sanitation. By aligning religious ethics with local development goals, religion has become a valuable social force for ecological sustainability. The collaboration between religious institutions and local authorities has not only improved community health but also enhanced environmental resilience and long-term sustainability in Lam Dong's ethnic minority regions.

Social Impact

This section examines the social dimensions of development in Lam Dong's ethnic minority communities, focusing on three key areas: healthcare, education, and local governance. These aspects align closely with Vietnam's sustainable development priorities as articulated in Resolution 136/NQ-CP, dated September 25, 2020, which outlines national objectives to: (1) ensure healthy lives, (2) provide quality education, and (3) promote social equity and cohesion.

- *Healthcare*: Field research indicates that access to basic healthcare has significantly improved in ethnic minority areas of Lam Dong, thanks to concerted efforts by local authorities. Most communes are now equipped with health stations staffed by 3-5 medical personnel, offering essential equipment and medication to meet routine healthcare needs. As one resident noted:

"Here, whenever people have a cold, fever, or stomachache, they go to the commune health station for examination and medicine, at no cost thanks to health insurance. If the illness is serious, we go to the provincial or city hospital" (Interview with Mr. C.P., Catholic, 2023).

In addition to these facilities, local pharmacies are readily available, and over 90% of surveyed ethnic minority residents reported having health insurance, which they frequently use for consultations and prescription medicine.

Religious organizations, particularly Catholic and Protestant churches, also play an important complementary role in community health. These groups often organize free medical outreach events, including eye surgeries, health screenings, and vaccination drives for underserved populations. As one parishioner recalled: "The church often organizes free eye surgeries and medical check-ups. People come in large numbers and do not have to pay any fees" (Interview with Ms. H'W.N., Catholic, 2023). Moreover, religious leaders actively work to eliminate harmful superstitious practices, such as animal sacrifices for healing, thereby supporting more scientifically grounded approaches to healthcare.

- *Education*: Lam Dong province has made considerable strides in improving educational access for ethnic minority communities. Most communes are equipped with primary schools, while secondary and high schools are typically located in district centers and towns. Tertiary education is available through institutions such as Da Lat University. Ethnic minority students frequently benefit from tuition waivers, significantly lowering barriers to education. Local government officials report low dropout rates and increasing numbers of students advancing to university or postgraduate levels, a testament to both state investment and community engagement.

Religious institutions contribute meaningfully to educational development. During religious holidays, churches often award scholarships to high-performing students, while sermons regularly emphasize the transformative value of education. This dual reinforcement from both state and religious institutions has fostered a strong culture of learning among ethnic minority youth.

In summary, the combined efforts of the state and religious organizations in the domains of healthcare and education have tangibly improved the quality of life in Lam Dong's ethnic minority communities. These sectors illustrate how religion, when integrated with state policy, becomes an effective partner in achieving inclusive and sustainable development outcomes.

- *Community Governance*: The traditional bon/buon (village) governance structure of ethnic minority groups in Lam Dong has historically been organized around a closed, hierarchical system. Within families, matriarchal norms prevail, while at the community level, respected elders and shamans have traditionally exercised moral and social authority.⁵ However, contemporary village governance now reflects a more complex hybrid system that incorporates state officials, religious dignitaries, and elder councils.

Religious leaders, in particular, have emerged as highly respected figures, often regarded as moral and spiritual authorities within the community. As one Protestant resident described:

"The pastor here is very concerned about our lives. He often advises us to work hard, avoid alcohol and tobacco, and financially support children's education. He also helps organize ceremonies for important events such as housewarmings, weddings, and funerals. Therefore, we respect him greatly" (Interview with Mr. H.N., Protestant, 2023)

Similarly, a Catholic parish priest in Dung K'nòh was praised for his long-standing service and cultural fluency:

“The parish priest here has served for more than 15 years, becoming an essential part of the community. He is fluent in the ethnic language, performs ceremonies, and even raises funds to assist families in need” (Interview with Mr. D.T.D., Catholic, 2023).

While state officials continue to play a critical role in public administration, law enforcement, and development implementation, they are generally approached for issues involving formal procedures or policies. In contrast, religious leaders are more intimately involved in everyday community life. The village elder councils retain consultative roles, especially in mediating minor disputes and offering cultural advice, but their influence has diminished in comparison to that of religious leaders and state representatives.⁵

One Protestant respondent explained the difference in authority by highlighting the cultural and linguistic closeness of pastors and deacons to the community. Because many religious leaders share the same ethnic background and speak the local language, they are seen as approachable, trustworthy, and empathetic, thereby enhancing their social legitimacy.

In conclusion, community governance in Lam Dong’s ethnic minority villages is now characterized by a tripartite structure: legal-administrative authority from the state, cultural-spiritual leadership from religious figures, and traditional guidance from elder councils. Among these, religious leaders stand out as particularly influential, serving not only as spiritual guides but also as de facto social workers, mediators, and development advocates. This model of governance, where religion and state work in tandem, has fostered social stability and strengthened the capacity for locally grounded development.

Thus, based on the analysis presented above, this article has elucidated the similarities and differences between the religious value systems of Catholicism and Protestantism as manifested in the economic, cultural, environmental, and social lives of ethnic minority communities in Lam Dong province, Vietnam. These findings are detailed as follows:

- *Economic Dimension:* Both Catholicism and Protestantism promote diligence, honesty, and thrift in labor and production. However, the manner in which these values are expressed differs. Catholic teachings often portray labor as a form of “collaboration with God,” with priests encouraging responsible farming practices, including the use of organic fertilizers, the avoidance of harmful chemicals, and the development of clean livestock systems. In contrast, Protestantism, specifically in the Reformed tradition, frames labor as a “divine calling” (Beruf), in which individuals are morally obligated to work hard both to honor

God and to contribute to the welfare of the community. While both traditions view laziness as a moral failing, Protestantism emphasizes personal autonomy and self-discipline, whereas Catholicism stresses collective responsibility and community cohesion.

- *Cultural Dimension:* Both religious traditions exhibit a degree of tolerance toward indigenous cultural elements, though to varying extents. Catholic communities in Lam Dong often incorporate traditional attire into liturgical celebrations, particularly during major holidays such as Easter and Christmas. Traditional musical instruments, including gongs, are also used in church services as symbols of cultural integration. Protestant communities, however, tend to adopt a more conservative stance regarding traditional rituals. Certain instruments associated with ancestral worship or polytheistic practices are avoided in worship, as they are considered incompatible with Protestant doctrinal purity.

- *Environmental Dimension:* Both Catholicism and Protestantism emphasize environmental stewardship as a moral imperative. Catholic doctrine interprets the rational use of natural resources as a form of gratitude for God’s creation. Priests frequently encourage parishioners to avoid excessive use of chemical inputs to prevent ecological degradation. Likewise, Protestant pastors advocate for harmonious living with nature as a divine mandate. Notably, in many ethnic communities, these teachings have extended beyond sermons to become embedded norms guiding agricultural and livestock practices.

- *Social Dimension:* Religious leaders play a pivotal role in fostering community solidarity and supporting local governance. Catholic priests are widely respected as moral and spiritual authorities, often involved in conflict resolution, social mobilization, and development initiatives. Protestant pastors, especially those of indigenous origin, possess linguistic and cultural proximity that allows them to function as effective community representatives in interactions with governmental institutions. While Catholicism tends to emphasize parish-based communal structures, Protestantism prioritizes the model of the “moral family,” focusing on individual transformation as the basis for broader social change.

In conclusion, the religious value systems of Catholicism and Protestantism among ethnic minority communities in Lam Dong share a common ethical foundation yet differ significantly in their modes of expression and practical application. These distinctions contribute to diverse models of community development that illustrate the dynamic interplay between global

religious traditions and local cultural contexts. Ultimately, this analysis underscores that religion functions not only as a domain of spiritual life but also as a vital social resource for fostering justice, harmony, and sustainable development.

DISCUSSION

Exploiting Religious Value Systems for the Sustainable Development of Local Ethnic Minorities

Religious value systems are not merely spiritual or theological doctrines; they constitute comprehensive ethical and cultural frameworks that regulate social behaviors, reinforce community cohesion, and shape development trajectories. In the context of Vietnam's Central Highlands, particularly Lam Dong province, Catholicism and Protestantism have become not only sources of spiritual guidance but also catalysts for transformation in livelihood strategies, environmental ethics, and local governance.^{2,4}

Both Catholic and Protestant traditions emphasize environmental stewardship as a theological imperative. Nature is considered a divine creation entrusted to humankind, necessitating its careful and sustainable management. This principle translates into community norms that discourage harmful farming practices, excessive chemical use, and exploitation of natural resources, thereby aligning closely with global sustainability goals.⁹ In Lam Dong, religious leaders reinforce these principles through sermons and daily counsel, cultivating environmentally responsible behaviors among adherents. For example, pastors and parish priests frequently warn against the overuse of chemical fertilizers and promote organic farming practices, often linking these behaviors to biblical teachings on stewardship (Field Interview, 2023).

Equally significant are the ethical tenets of justice, compassion, and solidarity embedded within both religious traditions. These values promote inclusivity, reduce social alienation, and support mutual aid mechanisms, especially vital in ethnically diverse and economically vulnerable contexts. For instance, churches in Lam Dong are known to organize charitable activities, support families in crisis, and provide scholarships for underprivileged students.³ In the village of Próh, for example, a local Catholic parish coordinated relief distribution to families affected by crop failures due to drought, showcasing the active role of faith communities in social safety nets.

The organizational reach of Catholic and Protestant institutions plays a critical role in service delivery.

In many ethnic minority communities, these institutions operate as de facto social infrastructure, facilitating access to healthcare, education, and legal support. Their presence supplements state services and fills critical development gaps.¹¹ In one case, a Protestant church in Di Linh organized free health check-ups in collaboration with a provincial hospital, providing essential medical access to over 200 villagers who otherwise faced logistical and financial barriers to healthcare.

Religious institutions also advocate for education as a moral duty and societal contribution. This connection between faith and knowledge encourages youth to pursue formal education and lifelong learning, reinforcing civic responsibility and social mobility. In a church-based youth group in Lạc Dương, pastors regularly integrate messages about educational perseverance into weekly Bible study sessions, leading to increased school retention rates among local adolescents.⁸

In times of adversity, ranging from climate events to economic hardship, religion offers psychological resilience and mobilizes collective action. Faith-based networks have provided emotional support and logistical assistance during crises, strengthening community adaptability and perseverance.¹⁰ During the COVID-19 pandemic, local parishes played a critical role in disseminating health information, distributing masks, and supporting quarantined families, thus reinforcing both public health and communal solidarity.

Based on empirical observations and fieldwork findings, two overarching ethical imperatives, *dedication* and *fairness*, emerge as particularly resonant within the religious narratives of Catholicism and Protestantism in Lam Dong:

- **Dedication** denotes a religiously inspired commitment to labor, community development, personal improvement, and cultural preservation. It is observed in the hard-working ethos of minority households, their respect for ancestral heritage, and their willingness to contribute to community advancement [4]. A Protestant farmer in Dam Rong explained that tending his land diligently was not just a means of livelihood but a "way of serving God and the community" (Field Interview, 2023).

- **Fairness** refers to the pursuit of equity, justice, and mutual respect in both individual and collective actions. It manifests in opposition to corruption, discrimination, and exploitation, and in the promotion of equal access to education, healthcare, and natural resources.⁹ This is illustrated in how Protestant

deacons work with village leaders to mediate disputes, promoting reconciliation based on mutual respect and biblical ethics.

These values are not abstract. They are lived experiences, reinforced through daily practices, intergenerational education, and religious rituals. Their compatibility with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and national priorities of Vietnam makes them highly valuable for policy frameworks and local initiatives.

Strategic Recommendations for Leveraging Religious Values

To harness these religious value systems more effectively in development programming, several strategic directions are proposed:

- **Economic and Environmental Resilience:** Promote ethical economic models grounded in religious teachings about honest labor, resource conservation, and environmental balance. Religious leaders can play central roles in advancing green livelihoods and sustainable agriculture.² For instance, the introduction of livestock husbandry training by Catholic charities in Da Sar commune has not only improved income but also promoted non-invasive land use.

- **Cultural Continuity and Revitalization:** Collaborate with religious networks to preserve and reinterpret traditional cultural elements, including language, dress, and music, within new ethical and liturgical frameworks. This approach helps ethnic communities maintain cultural identity while navigating modernity.³ In Catholic parishes, traditional brocade costumes are worn during major liturgical celebrations, turning the church space into a venue for cultural affirmation.

- **Social Governance and Civic Engagement :** Involve religious dignitaries in local governance structures. Their moral authority enhances public trust, facilitates legal education, and strengthens local conflict mediation and development planning.⁴ A notable case in Lâm Hà district showed how a parish priest mediated between the community and local authorities regarding land boundary disputes, ensuring transparency and avoiding escalation.

In conclusion, religious value systems represent a vital yet underutilized resource by development policymakers and local governance structures, despite their presence and influence within religious communities themselves, for achieving sustainable, inclusive, and culturally grounded development. In Lam Dong, where religious affiliation and ethnic diversity converge, the ethical imperatives of dedication and

fairness can serve as foundational pillars for community empowerment and institutional collaboration. As demonstrated through both doctrinal analysis and practical outcomes, religious ethics hold transformative potential for sustainable development not only at the local level but also across broader national and global contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the religious value systems of Catholicism and Protestantism, when localized and integrated into the daily lives of ethnic minority communities, serve not merely as spiritual doctrines but as dynamic ethical frameworks for sustainable development. Drawing on ethnographic evidence from the Co Ho, Chu Ru, and M'Nong communities in Lam Dong province, the research reveals that these religious systems foster a culture of dedication and fairness that informs economic practices, reinforces cultural identity, promotes environmental stewardship, and strengthens social cohesion.

Catholic and Protestant teachings alike emphasize moral imperatives such as diligence, honesty, compassion, and environmental responsibility. While they share foundational ethical values, their expressions vary: Catholicism often emphasizes community solidarity and institutional mediation, while Protestantism places greater stress on individual responsibility and internalized moral discipline. These differences produce complementary models of development that reflect the flexible, adaptive potential of religion in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

The empirical findings further illustrate how religious leaders serve as influential agents of change. Their roles transcend spiritual guidance, encompassing community leadership, dispute resolution, educational support, and collaboration with state authorities. Religious institutions function as parallel infrastructures, bridging gaps in public service delivery and enhancing participatory governance in rural areas.

Ultimately, this research affirms that religion, when aligned with local needs and sustainable development goals, can function as a vital social resource. The value systems of Catholicism and Protestantism contribute to the construction of resilient, ethical, and inclusive communities. In the multi-ethnic and transitional setting of Vietnam's Central Highlands, these systems offer not only a source of spiritual meaning but also a foundation for equitable development and cultural sustainability. Future policies and development programs should recognize and strategically engage with these religious frameworks to advance more grounded, context-sensitive, and community-empowered pathways to sustainability.

DISCLAIMER

The research reflected in this article was all carried out by our university's code of research ethics at the time.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

This manuscript has no conflicts of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

All authors contributed to the conception and design of the study, as well as to material preparation, data collection, and analysis. Huynh Ngoc Thu drafted the initial manuscript, and all authors provided feedback on previous versions and approved the final manuscript.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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Khai thác hệ giá trị tôn giáo của Công giáo và Tin Lành như nguồn lực cho phát triển bền vững các dân tộc thiểu số địa phương ở tỉnh Lâm Đồng, Việt Nam

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TÓM TẮT

Bài viết khảo sát hệ giá trị tôn giáo của Công giáo và Tin Lành trong cộng đồng các dân tộc thiểu số ở tỉnh Lâm Đồng, Việt Nam, và vai trò của các hệ giá trị ấy trong phát triển bền vững. Dựa trên dữ liệu từ phỏng vấn sâu và quan sát tham dự tại các cộng đồng như Cơ Ho, Chu Ru và M'nông, nghiên cứu làm nổi bật cách các hệ giá trị này tác động đến đời sống tinh thần, kinh tế, văn hóa, xã hội và môi trường của đồng bào dân tộc. Kết quả chính gồm: (1) Đạo đức tôn giáo thúc đẩy sự cần cù, trung thực và thực hành thân thiện với môi trường; (2) Các yếu tố truyền thống như trang phục và âm nhạc được bảo tồn nhờ sự gắn kết với đức tin tôn giáo; (3) Tôn giáo nâng cao nhận thức môi trường, hạn chế hóa chất độc hại và khuyến khích bảo vệ tài nguyên; (4) Các chức sắc tôn giáo đóng góp vào chăm sóc sức khỏe, giáo dục và quản lý cộng đồng, góp phần củng cố ổn định xã hội và phát triển. Bài viết kết luận rằng các giá trị "hiền dân" và "công bằng" được lồng ghép trong những hệ giá trị này tạo nền tảng cho sự phát triển bền vững của các dân tộc thiểu số, thúc đẩy sự thịnh vượng và hài hòa ở tỉnh Lâm Đồng cũng như có khả năng lan tỏa rộng hơn.

Từ khóa: Hệ giá trị tôn giáo, sự cống hiến, công bằng, tộc người thiểu số tại chỗ, tỉnh Lâm Đồng

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