

# Buddhist Humanitarian Support During The COVID-19 Pandemic In Ho Chi Minh City: Reflections On The Civic Compassion Of Saigonese Communities

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## Abstract

*The COVID-19 pandemic, as an unprecedented global health and social crisis, profoundly affected economies and societies worldwide. In Vietnam, particularly in Ho Chi Minh City, the epicenter of the fourth wave in 2021, the pandemic presented immense challenges to public health, social welfare, and communal cohesion. Within this context, Buddhism emerged not only as a spiritual force but also as a key socio-religious institution offering practical humanitarian support. This study examines the multifaceted role of the Buddhist community in Ho Chi Minh City during the pandemic, focusing on four primary areas of engagement: (1) distributing food and essential supplies; (2) providing financial aid and gifts to vulnerable populations, including the elderly, pregnant women, and orphans; (3) contributing to the National Vaccine Fund and donating medicines and medical equipment; and (4) offering coffins and managing funeral services for COVID-19 victims. Drawing on a sociological approach to religion, the study argues that these contributions extended beyond immediate material relief, embodying and reinforcing the values of compassion, empathy, and civic responsibility among Saigonese citizens. These efforts reflect a distinct urban cultural response to crisis and underscore the enduring and constructive role of religion in promoting resilient, humane, and adaptive urban development in the face of non-traditional security threats.*

**Keywords:** Buddhism, COVID-19, Ho Chi Minh City, community support, humanitarian values, religion and society.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic stands as an unprecedented medical and social crisis in modern history, with wide-ranging and enduring impacts on human life globally. In Vietnam, and particularly in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), the country's largest metropolis and the epicenter of the fourth wave of the pandemic between May and October 2021, the crisis revealed critical vulnerabilities in public health infrastructure, social welfare systems, mental health care, community solidarity, and institutional crisis response. Within this challenging context, various social resources were mobilized to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, among which religion, especially Buddhism, played a pivotal and socially commendable role.

In Vietnam, Buddhism functions not only as a major religious tradition but also as a deeply rooted social institution that significantly shapes public ethics, everyday behaviors, and the collective spirit of the population. During times of crisis, Buddhism has repeatedly demonstrated its capacity to provide spiritual consolation, strengthen community morale, and promote humanitarian engagement rooted in solidarity and mutual assistance.

Ho Chi Minh City, in particular, is home to a vibrant Buddhist community supported by an extensive network of temples, monks, nuns, and Buddhist charitable organizations. These actors have long been integral to local social and philanthropic efforts. During the height of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Buddhist community's material contributions to residents were especially impactful, offering not only practical support but also embodying the compassionate, generous, and empathetic ethos historically associated with the people of Saigon-HCMC. This ethos is expressed in enduring cultural values such as "the intact leaf covers the torn one" and "love others as you love yourself," which were brought to life in the Buddhist community's pandemic response.

The commitment of Buddhist monks, nuns, and lay followers to community service during the pandemic extended far beyond ritual observance, reflecting a way of life grounded in ethical responsibility and collective care. This engagement reveals how religious values and civic virtues converge in urban Vietnamese society. Examining the Buddhist community's material support during the COVID-19 crisis thus offers critical insight into the cultural character and moral responses of HCMC residents in contemporary times. Furthermore, documenting and analyzing these practices contributes to broader discussions on sustainable urban development and the role of religious ethics in fostering compassionate, resilient communities.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design, drawing on the sociology of religion and content analysis to investigate the social role of Buddhism in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) during the COVID-19 pandemic. It further seeks to elucidate the distinctive cultural and ethical traits of the Saigon-HCMC urban community as revealed through Buddhist charitable practices. The research centers on identifying, documenting, and analyzing the material support activities carried out by Buddhist institutions during the crisis, with the aim of uncovering their broader social and cultural significance.

Data were collected through document-based fieldwork, including official reports from the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha of HCMC and its affiliated organizations. These documents comprised summaries of relief activities, lists of distributed support, and statistics on the scope and scale of implementation. Supplementary data were obtained from mainstream media sources (print, digital, and broadcast), as well as religious publications that recorded the charitable initiatives of prominent temples such as Giac Quang Temple, Giac Ngo Temple, Vinh Nghiem Temple, Thanh Tam Temple, Long Phuoc Temple, and the Tuong Nguyen Charity Association. This triangulated approach ensured a diverse and robust dataset reflective of multiple perspectives.

Content analysis was applied to systematically process and code the collected materials, with data categorized into four thematic domains: (1) distribution of food and essential goods; (2) financial support and gifts to vulnerable groups, including the elderly, pregnant women, and orphans; (3) contributions to the National Vaccine Fund and provision of medicines and medical supplies; and (4) funeral-related support, including coffins and body bags. Each category is explored in detail, accompanied by specific examples to illustrate the organizational mechanisms, scale, and societal value of these initiatives.

To complement this analysis, the case study method was employed to investigate selected Buddhist institutions distinguished by their significant social outreach during the pandemic. In-depth examinations were conducted on exemplary initiatives, including the "rice ATM" system established by Giac Quang Temple, hot meal distributions by the Tuong Nguyen Charity Association, COVID-19 medicine kits distributed by Giac Ngo Temple, and funeral assistance coordinated by Vinh Nghiem Temple. These cases offer insights into the practical modalities, ethical motivations, and adaptive capacities of Buddhist actors in responding to public health emergencies.

The study is further guided by the functionalist perspective in the sociology of religion, which interprets religious practices as mechanisms that reinforce social cohesion and ethical orientation. Accordingly, the Buddhist relief activities are not viewed solely as responses to immediate material needs but as cultural manifestations of enduring values, compassion, altruism, tolerance, and empathy, deeply embedded in the moral fabric of Saigon-HCMC's residents. This analytical lens allows for a nuanced understanding of how religion, as a social institution, contributes to sustaining spiritual resilience and collective identity in the face of urbanization and modern crises.

In sum, the integration of qualitative inquiry, content analysis, and case studies, framed within an interdisciplinary approach combining sociology, religious studies, and urban research, provides a comprehensive and in-depth examination of the Buddhist community's role during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings affirm Buddhism's positive and sustainable contributions to community welfare and the promotion of humanitarian values in contemporary urban Vietnam.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Overview of Ho Chi Minh City and the COVID-19 Situation

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) covers an area of approximately 2,056 square kilometers, accounting for 0.63% of Vietnam's total landmass. Administratively, it comprises Thu Duc City, 16 urban districts, and 5 suburban districts, namely Cu Chi, Hoc Mon, Nha Be, Binh Chanh, and Can Gio. Geographically, the city is bordered by Dong Nai, Binh Duong, Tay Ninh, and Ba Ria-Vung Tau provinces in the Southeast Region, and Long An and Tien Giang provinces in the Southwest Region. The terrain generally slopes from north to south and from east to west, with its southern boundary adjoining the East Sea, facilitating maritime connectivity and trade. Archaeological and ethnographic studies indicate that the region has been inhabited for over two millennia, with the Stieng and Ma ethnic groups considered among the earliest residents (Tran & Tran, 1998, p. 201).

Since the launch of Vietnam's *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) reforms in 1986, HCMC has experienced rapid urbanization and industrialization, attracting migrants from across the country. This demographic shift has made it the most populous city in Vietnam, with an estimated population of around 10 million. As the country's economic powerhouse, HCMC plays a pivotal role in the development of the Southern Key Economic Region. It contributes roughly one-third of Vietnam's GDP and is a central hub for commerce, finance, services, and international trade. The city also houses the nation's largest financial and banking sectors.

Culturally, Saigon-HCMC represents a dynamic intersection of Eastern and Western influences, shaped by its history of migration, openness, and exchange. It serves not only as a symbol of Southern Vietnamese identity but also as a custodian of diverse regional cultural values. Core characteristics of its urban culture include compassion, generosity, and a deep sense of community, traits rooted in the city's historical ethos of openness and mutual support. These values, forged through collective experiences of taming nature and overcoming adversity, have become hallmarks of the city's residents, characterized by tolerance, empathy, and civic solidarity (Huynh & Nguyen, 2022, p. 12).

The outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021 had profound effects on Vietnam's socio-economic landscape. As a global crisis of unprecedented magnitude, the pandemic posed complex and unpredictable challenges, catching even well-prepared nations off guard. In Vietnam, it disrupted progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), reversing gains in economic growth, employment, income equality, and education. The government was forced to reallocate scarce resources toward urgent public health priorities (Vietnam Institute for Sustainable Development, 2020, pp. 14-15).

HCMC emerged as the epicenter of Vietnam's fourth wave of infections, lasting from April 27 to December 31, 2021. Driven by the highly contagious Delta variant, this wave rapidly spread across all 63 provinces and municipalities. HCMC faced the most severe consequences, with rising case numbers, acute symptoms, and high mortality rates. The economic repercussions were substantial: in 2021 alone, industrial production declined, supply chains were disrupted, and labor shortages intensified. Around 415,000 businesses were affected, impacting an estimated 3.2 million workers. Approximately 2,000 businesses suspended operations or were dissolved, resulting in the loss of nearly 63,000 jobs. Total economic losses in 2020 and 2021 were estimated at VND 273,000 billion (approximately USD 11.9 billion), marking the steepest economic decline in the city since the adoption of market reforms (Ho Chi Minh City Command, 2022, p. 49).

On the socio-cultural front, prolonged lockdowns and social distancing measures led to widespread psychological distress, including anxiety, panic, and depression. Online education affected learning outcomes, while healthcare systems were overwhelmed, leading to the resignation of medical personnel. Poverty increased, particularly among vulnerable and marginalized populations. HCMC recorded Vietnam's first confirmed COVID-19 case and bore the highest number of fatalities nationwide, with 19,985 deaths reported by September 30, 2021. The pandemic deeply disrupted not only the city's economic trajectory but also the daily lives and emotional well-being of its residents, especially those directly affected by illness or the loss of loved ones.

### **3.2. Overview of Buddhism in Ho Chi Minh City**

Buddhism has played a pivotal role in the historical formation and socio-cultural development of Saigon-Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), profoundly shaping the spiritual and communal life of its residents. The presence of historic temples such as Giac Lam, Giac Vien, and Phung Son, still active today, attests to the longstanding contributions of Buddhism in enriching the city's cultural and architectural heritage. Prior to 1975, HCMC served as a central hub for various major Buddhist organizations, including the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, the Traditional Vietnamese Buddhist Church, the Vietnamese Mendicant Sangha, the Southern Vietnam Buddhist Association, the Theravāda Buddhist Sangha, and the Tiantai Buddhist Sect. Many of these institutions were headquartered in the city, establishing HCMC as a major center for Vietnamese Buddhism in the 20th century.

Several landmark Buddhist events in Vietnam's modern history took place in HCMC, notably the Buddhist Revival Movement in the early 20th century, the Buddhist protests of 1963, and the post-1975 unification of national Buddhist organizations leading to the establishment of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) in 1981. HCMC's strategic position as an international trade gateway further facilitated contact with diverse Buddhist traditions from Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, China, South Korea, and Japan, fostering both doctrinal exchange and cross-cultural engagement.

With a strong economic foundation and a population known for its compassion and community-mindedness, HCMC's Buddhist community has emerged as a leader in social philanthropy. Buddhist charitable initiatives regularly extend beyond the city's boundaries, reaching remote, impoverished, and disaster-affected areas throughout Vietnam. In 2023, the estimated budget allocated for Buddhist social charity activities in HCMC totaled VND 746 billion (approximately USD 31.4 million), underscoring the scale and impact of Buddhist humanitarian engagement.

Currently, the Buddhist community in HCMC comprises approximately 13,240 monks and nuns, 1,469 temples, and 12 officially designated religious activity centers. The Vietnam Buddhist Sangha's Executive Board in HCMC oversees 22 administrative units, including the Executive Board of Thu Duc City and 21 district- and county-level subcommittees (Executive Board of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, HCMC, 2022, p. 3). The Mahāyāna, Theravāda (both Kinh and Khmer traditions), and Mendicant Buddhist sects are actively involved in the religious, cultural, and social life of the city, collectively contributing to the dynamic and inclusive development of Buddhism in the urban context.

Looking ahead, the Executive Board has articulated a strategic vision aimed at innovating and diversifying its religious, educational, and social activities. These objectives include enhancing the spiritual and moral life of monastics and lay practitioners, fostering national solidarity, promoting ethical and cultural values, and contributing to broader goals of social stability, economic progress, and urban modernization. In alignment with the municipal government and local residents, the Buddhist community seeks to contribute meaningfully to the construction of a smart, modern, compassionate, and culturally enriched HCMC (Executive Board of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, HCMC, 2022, p. 6).

### **3.3. Material Support Provided by Buddhism to the Community During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ho Chi Minh City**

During the prolonged and multifaceted COVID-19 crisis, the material well-being of Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) residents, especially vulnerable populations, was severely compromised. In response, the Buddhist community in HCMC mobilized significant resources to implement a range of humanitarian initiatives that embodied principles of compassion, altruism, and civic responsibility. These efforts concentrated on four major areas: (1) the provision of food and essential supplies; (2) financial support and gift distribution to vulnerable groups; (3) contributions to the national Vaccine Fund and the donation of medical supplies; and (4) assistance with funeral services, including the provision of coffins and body bags.

#### ***Food and Essential Supplies***

When COVID-19 first emerged in early 2020 and began spreading across Vietnam, the government adopted stringent containment measures, such as contact tracing, area-specific lockdowns, and nationwide social

distancing mandates under Directives 15 and 16. In HCMC, the fourth wave, which peaked in mid-2021, necessitated extended lockdowns that lasted until December 2021. While these efforts were effective in limiting transmission, they also led to widespread food insecurity, especially in quarantined and sealed-off areas. Low-income workers and daily wage earners were disproportionately affected due to job loss and restricted mobility.

In this context, Buddhist temples responded promptly by distributing food, particularly rice, a staple in the Vietnamese diet, and other essential goods. The “rice ATM” initiative became a symbol of Buddhist compassion and innovation. Temples such as Giac Quang (Binh Thanh District), Buu Da (District 10), Thien Tri (Binh Chanh District), and Hoang Phap (Hoc Mon District) played pivotal roles. Giac Quang Temple, for example, implemented the rice ATM model between April 2020 and December 2021, distributing 200-500 kilograms of rice per day, with recipients receiving 2 kilograms each in accordance with public health protocols. Beneficiaries included the elderly, disabled, and economically disadvantaged individuals.

Beyond rice, temples also prepared and delivered daily meals to quarantined residents, frontline workers, and medical staff at field hospitals. Nam Thien Nhat Tru Temple (Thu Duc City) distributed approximately 1,000 meals daily to residents and healthcare workers across 47 residential groups in Tan Phu Ward. Thanh Tam Temple (Binh Chanh District) produced 500-700 meals daily for quarantined workers in Le Minh Xuan Commune, coordinating with local authorities to ensure equitable distribution.

Among the most prominent contributors was the Tuong Nguyen Charity Association, led by Venerable Thich Minh Phu. With a long-standing history of community service, the association provided between 22,000 and 23,000 meals daily during the pandemic to hospitals and quarantine centers across the city, including Trung Vuong Hospital, the District 8 Rehabilitation Hospital, and Field Hospitals No. 8 and No. 10. At its peak, the association prepared up to 30,000 meals per day, each meal designed to meet nutritional and safety standards with components such as milk, fruit, and essential supplements.

Temples also distributed fresh produce, fish, eggs, noodles, and condiments. Thanh Tam Temple sourced vegetables from Long An, An Giang, and Lam Dong provinces, distributing roughly 10 tons weekly, equivalent to VND 50 million per shipment, packaged into 1,000 bags for delivery to low-income renters and quarantined households. Long Phuoc Temple (Binh Thanh District) secured produce from Ben Tre, Gia Lai, and Dak Lak, distributing supplies to wards 12, 21, 24, and 25. Items were sorted and packed with durable essentials such as noodles, eggs, and dried fish, and distributed via ward-level networks. Phu Long Temple (Phu Nhuan District) expanded its aid from basic supplies in early 2020 to large-scale distribution between June and October 2021, targeting tenants and students in sealed-off areas.

#### ***Financial Assistance and Gifts for Vulnerable Groups***

In parallel with food distribution efforts, the Buddhist community in HCMC also implemented financial aid programs and gift donations for vulnerable populations. These efforts were particularly critical given the socio-economic disruption caused by the pandemic, which disproportionately affected women, the elderly, children, and disabled individuals. Among the most pressing concerns was the emergence of a new group of orphans: over 1,500 children in HCMC lost one or both parents to COVID-19 by late 2021. These children faced material deprivation and psychological trauma, necessitating both immediate support and long-term care.

In this context, Buddhist institutions prioritized direct assistance. Long Phuoc Temple (Binh Thanh District) provided multiple forms of support for pregnant women returning to their hometowns, children in quarantine zones, and children of impoverished families. For example, 50 pregnant women en route to Gia Lai received VND 2 million each to purchase food and medical supplies. Over 100 children from low-income households received VND 500,000 each, along with thousands of milk cartons distributed across quarantine centers.

Thanh Tam Temple, in coordination with local authorities in Le Minh Xuan Commune, committed to supporting 10 COVID-19 orphans by covering their living expenses and school fees, a program that continues beyond the pandemic. These initiatives highlight how Buddhist organizations quickly adapted to address

emerging vulnerabilities, offering not only emergency relief but also long-term support mechanisms grounded in Buddhist ethics of compassion and interdependence.

#### **Contributions to the Vaccine Fund and Support for Medicines and Medical Equipment**

**Vaccine Fund Contributions:** Recognizing vaccination as the most effective strategy to control COVID-19, reduce mortality, and achieve herd immunity, the Vietnamese government implemented a comprehensive vaccine rollout, which included the establishment of a Vaccine Fund, engagement in vaccine diplomacy, and the orchestration of a nationwide vaccination campaign. In response to the government's call for contributions, social organizations, businesses, and individuals, both domestic and overseas, donated generously to the fund. The Buddhist community in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) played an active role in this collective effort.

The Executive Board of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha in HCMC mobilized monks, nuns, lay Buddhists, and supporters to contribute over VND 1.65 billion to the Vaccine Fund (Executive Board of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, HCMC, 2022, p. 4). In addition, numerous temples and individual monastics made separate contributions. According to the HCMC Committee for Religious Affairs, the total Buddhist contribution to COVID-19-related efforts, including the prevention fund, Vaccine Fund, and medical equipment, amounted to approximately VND 100 billion (Ho Chi Minh City Committee for Religious Affairs, 2021, p. 4). These donations were instrumental in accelerating the government's vaccination strategy, thereby helping reduce mortality and enabling the city to transition to a "new normal" as of October 1, 2021. This transition allowed for the gradual resumption of educational, healthcare, and economic activities, easing the burden on the healthcare system and alleviating public anxiety.

**Medical Aid and Treatment Kits:** During the height of the pandemic in mid-2021, when COVID-19 cases surged and hospitals became overwhelmed, HCMC authorities implemented a home-treatment model for F0 cases (individuals testing positive for COVID-19). The model aimed to reduce pressure on field hospitals and improve recovery outcomes by providing patients with medical kits for self-treatment. Each kit typically included antiviral medication (e.g., Molnupiravir), vitamin supplements, and drugs to manage common symptoms such as fever and cough. Traditional remedies, including herbal steam therapies (e.g., lemongrass, cinnamon, tea tree oil), were also recommended by health authorities to support immune function.

The Buddhist community contributed significantly by distributing more than 20,000 F0 treatment kits, aligned with Ministry of Health guidelines. Each kit included a care handbook, 20 medical masks, 100ml of disinfectant, 500ml of mouthwash, a thermometer, an SpO2 monitor, and medicines categorized into two packages: (1) *Package A* (for asymptomatic or mild cases) contained Paracetamol 500mg (28 tablets) and multivitamins or vitamin C (14 tablets); (2) *Package B* (for cases with early respiratory symptoms) included Methylprednisolone 16mg (14 tablets) and Rivaroxaban 10mg (7 tablets).

The average cost per kit was approximately VND 500,000 (Ho Chi Minh City Buddhist Charity and Social Affairs Committee, 2021, p. 7).

Temples such as Vinh Nghiem distributed 16,000 kits in HCMC and neighboring provinces (Binh Duong and Dong Nai), while Giac Ngo Temple (District 10) distributed 24,500 kits, with 17,000 allocated to HCMC and the rest to surrounding provinces. Phu Long Temple (Phu Nhuan District) contributed over 1,000 kits, which included test kits, common cold medications (e.g., Decogen, Panadol), vitamin C, alcohol-based sanitizers, and masks. These supplies were delivered via local health authorities or directly to households. Additionally, some temples provided traditional herbal remedies, nasal drops, and immune-boosting oils to assist community members in managing symptoms and improving recovery outcomes.

**Support with Medical Equipment:** The surge in COVID-19 cases placed immense pressure on HCMC's healthcare system, which faced shortages of medical personnel, equipment, and protective supplies. Buddhist institutions stepped in to help meet these needs by donating essential medical equipment and supplies. As previously noted, total Buddhist contributions to the COVID-19 response in HCMC amounted to roughly VND 100 billion, including donations of medical devices and ambulances (Ho Chi Minh City Committee for Religious Affairs, 2021, pp. 4-5). The Charity and Social Affairs Committee of the Vietnam Buddhist



Sangha in HCMC, together with affiliated temples and individual donors, supported social welfare and medical relief efforts with over VND 855 billion in total (Executive Board of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, HCMC, 2022, p. 5).

This included the procurement of ventilators, oxygen tanks, oxygen generators, medical-grade masks, protective suits, gloves, and patient transport vehicles. For instance, Phuoc Vien Temple donated an ambulance worth VND 1.5 billion and several ventilators, while Long Phuoc Temple contributed oxygen supplies and protective gear to Gia Dinh People's Hospital and 115 People's Hospital. The Tuong Nguyen Charity Association (District 4), under the leadership of Venerable Thich Minh Phu, provided dozens of ventilators, hundreds of oxygen tanks, tens of thousands of masks and protective suits, and eight IVECO ambulances. These vehicles were allocated to key medical institutions, including Children's Hospital 1, District 8 Rehabilitation Hospital, the Blood Transfusion and Hematology Hospital, Nguyen Tri Phuong Hospital, Hoc Mon General Hospital, and Thu Duc General Hospital, significantly enhancing patient transport and emergency response capacities.

***Support for Funerary Needs: Coffins and Body Bags:*** At the peak of the pandemic in July and August 2021, when vaccination coverage was still limited, particularly among the elderly and those with comorbidities, COVID-19-related mortality in HCMC spiked sharply. Due to health protocols and social distancing regulations, traditional funerary practices were suspended, and bodies of COVID-19 victims had to be processed within 24 hours and cremated to prevent infection risks. Cremation centers, especially Binh Hung Hoa (Binh Tan District), faced immense pressure, leading to shortages of coffins and body bags.

To address this, the HCMC Buddhist Charity and Social Affairs Committee provided industrial wooden coffins and body bags to the municipal Department of Natural Resources and Environment, ensuring the respectful handling of the deceased in accordance with both public health guidelines and cultural expectations. This support not only minimized the risk of transmission but also offered psychological comfort to bereaved families, affirming their loved ones were laid to rest with dignity. For families experiencing financial hardship, Vinh Nghiem Temple offered free coffins upon request. In total, more than 3,000 coffins and body bags were donated by the Buddhist community to support pandemic-related funerary needs (Ho Chi Minh City Buddhist Charity and Social Affairs Committee, 2021, p. 7).

In short, the material support provided by the Buddhist community during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ho Chi Minh City was extensive, timely, and responsive to the urgent needs of the population. These contributions complemented governmental efforts in alleviating hardship among vulnerable groups, especially low-income workers, the sick, and the socially disadvantaged, helping to stabilize public morale and mitigate the broader socio-economic impact of the pandemic. Beyond immediate relief, these actions exemplified the role of Buddhism as a socially engaged institution, reinforcing resilience, compassion, and civic solidarity during one of the city's most critical periods.

### **3.4. Manifestation of the Qualities of Ho Chi Minh City Residents**

The COVID-19 pandemic was not only a global public health emergency but also a profound moral and ethical test for societies worldwide. In Vietnam, particularly in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), the epicenter of the fourth wave in 2021, the tireless efforts of Buddhist and Catholic monks, nuns, and lay followers in quarantine zones, field hospitals, community kitchens, and locked-down neighborhoods reflected a deeply humane and ethically grounded way of life. Their contributions went beyond immediate material support; they alleviated physical suffering and emotional distress while cultivating an ethos of compassion, altruism, and communal responsibility.

This humanitarian engagement exemplified a relational and collective lifestyle that transcends individualism and embraces empathy, solidarity, and the moral imperative to care for others. Religion serves as a vital source of such ethical orientation. As Lim and Putnam (2010) observe, community-based religious practices, such as group rituals, social gatherings, and collective volunteerism, tend to exert a stronger influence on moral development than individualistic religious practices. In HCMC, the image of Buddhist monks, nuns, and followers distributing essentials or volunteering in healthcare settings became a powerful symbol of

compassion in action. These acts resonated deeply with the public and served as ethical exemplars, promoting a shared culture of service and selflessness during an extraordinary crisis.

The Buddhist community's engagement during the pandemic embodied both religious values and the longstanding civic virtues of Saigon-HCMC residents. Acts of charity, inclusion, and sacrifice were not only expressions of Buddhist ethics, centered on *karuṇā* (compassion) and *dāna* (generosity), but also reflective of the city's unique cultural identity. The spirit of mutual aid and self-giving evoked the local ethos of "living for others," a lifestyle nurtured across generations and embedded in vernacular proverbs such as "Lá lành đùm lá rách" ("The intact leaf shelters the torn one").

As a distinct cultural and social institution, religion does more than fulfill spiritual functions; it actively shapes and transmits cultural norms, ethical practices, and civic behaviors. In the case of HCMC, a city defined by rapid modernization and cosmopolitan diversity, religious communities such as the Buddhist Sangha have played a prominent role in reinforcing the values of tolerance, generosity, and compassion. The pandemic became a litmus test for these values, and religious responses illustrated how spiritual institutions could mobilize ethical resources to foster resilience and social cohesion.

One of the most notable aspects of the religious response in HCMC was its inclusivity. The commitment of monks, nuns, and lay volunteers to serve all members of society, regardless of religion, ethnicity, or socio-economic status, demonstrated the city's distinctive culture of openness and solidarity. Migrant workers, informal laborers, the homeless, and F0 patients all received aid from Buddhist institutions. Temples served as hubs for distributing essentials, providing temporary shelter, offering free meals, and even coordinating free funeral services. These acts transcended religious obligation and became social expressions of deep-rooted ethical commitments.

Interfaith collaboration during the pandemic also signaled the maturing of religious tolerance in HCMC. Buddhist temples supplied rice and herbal remedies to Catholic parishes, while churches contributed face masks and sanitizers to Buddhist institutions. Clergy from various faiths volunteered side by side in field hospitals. These forms of cooperation were not simply pragmatic responses to crisis but reflective of an evolving interreligious ethic grounded in mutual respect and shared humanity. The guiding principle, "help those in need, regardless of religious affiliation", was a unifying force that reinforced the pluralistic yet cohesive character of HCMC's civic culture.

Moreover, compassion, arguably the most emblematic value of HCMC's urban residents, was amplified through religious teachings and practices. Buddhist sermons during the pandemic emphasized the moral imperative of sharing, sacrifice, and equanimity in adversity. These teachings resonated not only with monastic and lay practitioners but also with the broader population, many of whom found in them psychological support and moral guidance. Amid the instability and uncertainty of the pandemic, residents continued to exhibit calm, kindness, and collective care, traits reflective of a compassionate urban culture shaped by both religious and civic influences.

Finally, the role of religion in fostering civic responsibility, arguably the highest expression of HCMC's empathetic identity, was clearly evident. The monks and nuns who volunteered in field hospitals did so not out of institutional obligation, but from a deeply internalized sense of moral duty. Their belief that even small acts of help could generate positive change inspired countless others to act similarly. In this way, Buddhism helped cultivate a "culture of compassion" that endured beyond the crisis, strengthening the city's moral resilience.

In sum, the Buddhist response to the COVID-19 crisis in Ho Chi Minh City extended far beyond material assistance. It reaffirmed and invigorated the city's distinct cultural values, tolerance, generosity, and empathy, not merely as ideals, but as lived practices. The pandemic, while devastating, also provided an opportunity for religious institutions to rekindle the noble qualities embedded in the collective character of Saigon-HCMC residents, revealing a community capable of ethical leadership and resilient recovery in the face of adversity.



#### 4. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic, as an unprecedented global health and social crisis, deeply affected all dimensions of life in the 21st century. In Vietnam, particularly in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), the nation's largest economic and cultural center, the impact was especially severe during the fourth wave in 2021. Overburdened healthcare systems, disrupted supply chains, rising unemployment, and widespread social anxiety posed enormous challenges to public resilience and governance. In this context, a broad range of social forces mobilized to support affected populations, with religion, especially Buddhism, emerging as a pivotal actor not only in providing spiritual solace but also in delivering material aid and reinforcing ethical values in public life.

Buddhism in HCMC played a proactive and multifaceted role in responding to the crisis. Its contributions were both extensive and targeted, addressing the urgent needs of vulnerable groups such as the poor, elderly, orphans, informal workers, students, and the homeless. Key interventions included the distribution of rice and food supplies, preparation of millions of daily meals, provision of home-treatment kits for F0 patients, donations to the national Vaccine Fund, and the supply of medical equipment and thousands of coffins and body bags during the pandemic's peak. These actions went beyond short-term charitable relief; they embodied a lived ethical tradition grounded in Buddhist principles of *karuṇā* (compassion) and *dāna* (generosity), while also reflecting the longstanding cultural values of tolerance, altruism, and empathy deeply embedded in Saigon-HCMC's urban identity.

During the height of the crisis, as the city endured strict lockdowns and collective psychological strain, Buddhist temples and clergy served as both material providers and spiritual anchors. The selfless engagement of thousands of monks, nuns, and lay followers, volunteering in hospitals, distributing aid, and supporting patients, played a critical role in alleviating human suffering and fostering social cohesion. Furthermore, interfaith cooperation between Buddhist and Catholic communities, manifested through shared resources and joint volunteering, demonstrated a mature model of religious tolerance and civic solidarity. The guiding principle of "helping those in need, regardless of religion" functioned as a powerful moral compass that reinforced community bonds and enhanced the city's capacity for inclusive, sustainable recovery.

This study affirms that the Buddhist community in HCMC, during the pandemic, functioned not only as a religious institution fulfilling its spiritual mandate but also as a vital social institution contributing to urban resilience. Its active involvement in both humanitarian aid and moral leadership underscored the enduring and constructive role of religion in shaping civic values and supporting social stability in times of crisis. As cities across the globe face growing uncertainty from health, environmental, and social challenges, the case of HCMC highlights the need to formally recognize and integrate the ethical and practical capacities of religious organizations, especially Buddhism, into strategies for sustainable urban development.

Moving forward, policy frameworks should be developed to better leverage the potential of religious communities in public welfare and crisis response. At the same time, scholarly attention should be given to documenting and promoting the ethical values cultivated through religious engagement, particularly during periods of social upheaval. Doing so not only reinforces social trust and civic responsibility but also lays the foundation for a more compassionate, inclusive, and resilient urban future in the post-pandemic era.

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