

Tran Nhan Tong as a Model of Post-Secular Spiritual Leadership: Truc Lam Buddhism's Global Contribution to Leadership Theory and Contemporary Buddhist Thought

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Abstract

In a context where the world is facing a leadership crisis, declining social trust, and the strong resurgence of religion in public life, there is an urgent need to find leadership models that combine ethics, spirituality, and political power. In recent decades, post-secular theory has challenged the classical secularization thesis by acknowledging the reemergence of religion in the public sphere. However, studies of post-secular leadership have primarily focused on Western or South Asian Christian contexts, while the East Asian Buddhist experiences have yet to be fully theorized. This article addresses the gap by interpreting Tran Nhan Tong (1258 - 1308), the founder of Truc Lam Buddhism, as a representative model of post-secular spiritual leadership. Instead of viewing him merely as a historical monarch or a national religious figure, the study argues that he represents a distinctive model of leadership in which political power, Buddhist enlightenment, and social ethics are organically integrated. Based on post-secular theory, studies of spiritual leadership, and Buddhist political philosophy, this article demonstrates that he transcended the dichotomy between secular power and religious withdrawal. The philosophy of "*Living in the world while enjoying the Dharma*" establishes a non dualistic framework in which governance is practiced without attachment to power, while enlightenment is realized through social responsibility. Therefore, the Truc Lam model makes a significant contribution to contemporary discussions on ethical leadership, post-secular governance, and engaged Buddhism.

Keywords: Tran Nhan Tong, Truc Lam Buddhism, post-secular spiritual leadership, Engaged Enlightenment, contemporary Buddhist studies, leadership theory

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the resurgence of religion in the public sphere has posed a fundamental challenge to the classical secularization thesis, which posits that modernization inevitably leads to the decline of religion (Habermas, 2008; Taylor, 2007; Casanova, 1994; Berger, 1999). In practice, however, religion has not disappeared, but rather, it has transformed its role, becoming a vital moral, cultural, and political force in contemporary life. This phenomenon has been conceptualized by many scholars as a "*post-secular turn*," emphasizing the reconfiguration of the relationship between secular reason and religious belief.

In this context, the issue of leadership, particularly moral, spiritual, and political leadership, has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Contemporary research seeks to explain how religious values can contribute to social governance without leading to theocracy or authoritarianism. However, much of this discussion remains focused on the Western Christian context, or in some cases, on Hindu or South Asian Buddhist traditions. The experience of East Asian and Southeast Asian Buddhism, especially those directly linked to supreme political power, has been largely overlooked in theory.

This paper aims to fill that gap by systematically theorizing the leadership model of Emperor Tran Nhan Tong, the founder of Truc Lam Buddhism, as a complete example of post-secular spiritual leadership. In existing studies, Tran Nhan Tong is often approached as a wise ruler, a national hero, or an outstanding Zen master of Vietnamese Buddhism. While historically and culturally valuable, these approaches largely remain descriptive and fail to develop the universal theoretical significance of his life and thought.

The central thesis of this article argues that Tran Nhan Tong should be viewed not only as a historical or religious figure, but as a subject of theoretical significance. His life and thought exemplify a leadership model in which political power, Buddhist enlightenment, and social morality are not opposed but mutually reinforcing. As both a reigning emperor and a realized spiritual practitioner, Tran Nhan Tong realized a form of leadership that transcends the duality of “*secularism - religion*,” which still largely dominates modern thinking about politics and faith.

Accordingly, the article addresses three research questions, namely: (1) How can Tran Nhan Tong’s leadership model be conceptualized within a post-secular theoretical framework? (2) How does the Truc Lam leadership model differ from other spiritual leadership ones proposed in contemporary scholarship? And (3) What contributions does this model make to contemporary Buddhism, leadership studies, and political philosophy?

2. Research Methods

In terms of methodology, this study combines textual analysis of Tran Nhan Tong’s writings, research into the historical context of the Tran Dynasty, and synthesis of theories from post-secular studies and spiritual leadership. History here is not only seen as documentation, but as a space for the emergence of concepts, where practical experience becomes the foundation for theoretical creation. By repositioning Tran Nhan Tong as a theoretically plausible post-secular spiritual leadership model, the article aims to address two main objectives: (1) To affirm the position and value of Vietnamese Buddhism within global academic discourse, rather than allowing it to be treated as a marginal or secondary case; and (2) To contribute a non-Western Buddhist leadership model to contemporary debates on ethical governance in the context of value crises, political polarization, and existential crises of meaning.

3. Research Content

3.1 Theoretical Basis

3.1.1 The Concept of Post-Secularism

The concept of “*post-secularism*” emerged as a counter-argument to the secularization thesis, which predicted that religion would gradually lose its influence in modern society. Habermas (2008) argues that “*contemporary societies are compelled to acknowledge the enduring vitality of religion and consider religious traditions as legitimate partners in public dialogue*” (p. 58). He further maintains that, “*a post-secular society is not one in which religion dominates politics, but one in which secular and religious reason coexist and interact in the public space*” (p. 59).

Taylor further expanded this perspective through the concept of “*multiple modernities*,” emphasizing that “*modernity does not follow a single path. Each society constructs its own form of modernity, shaped by its particular cultural and religious history*” (2007, p. 102). Casanova, meanwhile, discusses the phenomenon of “*deprivation of religion*,” arguing that “*religious subjects return to the public space not as coercive powers, but as moral agents*” (1994, p. 162).

However, despite these contributions, much post-secular theory continues to bear the imprint of Euro-centrism. The implicit religious model in many studies remains rooted in the Christian experience, particularly linked to the historical separation of Church and State. Buddhist traditions, especially those that have integrated spiritual practice with political power, call for an expansion and adjustment of this theoretical framework. Recent studies have expanded the discussion of post-secularism beyond the Western context, emphasizing the role of religious and spiritual traditions in reshaping contemporary ethical frameworks and leadership models (Habermas, 2008; Nader & Maheshwari, 2023).

3.1.2 The Theory of Spiritual Leadership

The theory of spiritual leadership emerged as a response to purely technocratic or instrumental models of leadership. According to this approach, leadership should not only focus on performance but also cultivate meaning, values, and ethical purpose. Qualities such as compassion, integrity, altruism, and service to the community are often considered as central to spiritual leadership. However, existing theories reveal two major limitations. First, they are often detached from the exercise of actual political power, and are primarily applicable to business or civil society contexts. Second, many models rely on abstract universal principles without clearly articulated philosophical or religious foundations, making “*spirit*” a vague ethical notion.

Recent studies on Buddhism's contribution to leadership often focus on mindfulness, compassion, or selflessness as psychological resources. While valuable, this approach tends to dehistoricize and depoliticize Buddhism by isolating its Buddhist concepts from the broader social and institutional context in which they are embedded and enacted.

3.1.3 The Post-Secular Buddhist Leadership Model

Tran Nhan Tong's leadership model offers an important theoretical counterpoint to the limitations mentioned above. His life exemplifies a form of leadership that is both deeply spiritual and closely intertwined with political and social responsibility. Unlike many modern spiritual leaders who operate outside of state power, Tran Nhan Tong exercised the supreme power while embodying the core values of Buddhism such as selflessness, compassion, and wisdom.

From a post-secular perspective, Tran Nhan Tong cannot be confined to the categories of "secular" or "religious". His governance was neither secular in the modern sense nor theocratic. Rather, it was based on an ethical vision shaped by Buddhist empirical insight, expressed in the philosophy of "Living in the world while remaining at peace with the Dharma". This article proposes the concept of "post-secular Buddhist leadership" to describe this synthesis. This model is characterized by three key elements: (1) Spiritual enlightenment as the ethical foundation of power; (2) Non-attachment to power as a principle of governance; and (3) Social responsibility as an expression of compassion.

These characteristics distinguish the Truc Lam model from both secular technocracy and religious extremism. Situating Tran Nhan Tong at the intersection of post-secular theory and spiritual leadership studies enables a reassessment of Vietnamese Buddhism as a globally valuable source of theoretical innovation. The following sections clarify how this model was realized historically and why it remains relevant to contemporary debates on ethical leadership and governance.

3.2 Practical Basis

3.2.1 Tran Nhan Tong in the Historical and Intellectual Context of Dai Viet in the 13th Century

- Tran Nhan Tong as King: Leadership in a Time of National Crisis:

Tran Nhan Tong ascended the throne during one of the most turbulent periods in the history of Dai Viet, when the Yuan dynasty one of the most formidable military powers of the medieval world launched repeated large-scale invasions. In this context, the king was not merely a symbol of authority but the focal point of national survival. Notably, despite holding supreme political power, Tran Nhan Tong did not absolutize it. On the contrary, he treated power as a means to safeguard the community, not as an instrument for his personal ego or establish autocratic rule. The military, diplomatic, and domestic policies under Emperor Tran Nhan Tong demonstrated a leadership style based on consensus, unity, and moral responsibility rather than pure coercive violence. In the context of war, Tran Nhan Tong's resolve was inseparable from a spirit of tolerance and compassion. After victory, he advocated reconciliation instead of perpetuating hostility a choice of moral depth rarely seen in medieval political history. This "non-attachment" approach to power laid the foundation for a leadership model in which power is neither deified nor rejected, but guided by wisdom and compassion.

- Tran Nhan Tong as Zen Master: From Imperial Authority to the Founding of Truc Lam:

After fulfilling his historical mission as emperor, Tran Nhan Tong voluntarily abdicated the throne to pursue monastic life. This decision should not be interpreted simply as a personal withdrawal, but as a consistent extension of a life free from attachment to power. The relinquishment of the throne at the height of power demonstrates a profound philosophical conviction: power has value only insofar as it serves moral purpose and communal well being; once that mission is accomplished, it must be released. As a Zen master, Tran Nhan Tong did not withdraw from society. Instead, he founded Truc Lam Buddhism, a Zen school with a distinctly Vietnamese identity, integrating the essence of previous Zen schools with Vietnam's historical and cultural experience. Truc Lam was not a form of reclusive asceticism, but a form of Buddhism of awakening within everyday life. In Tran Nhan Tong's view, enlightenment did not entail disengagement from social responsibility. On the contrary, it enabled active participation in society without attachment to ambition, fear, or hatred. Therefore, Tran Nhan Tong's role as a Zen master did not negate his earlier political leadership; rather, it deepened and completed it at the spiritual level.

3.2.2. Tran Nhan Tong as a thinker: "Living in the world while finding joy in the Dharma" as a philosophical proposition

Transcending his two historical roles as king and Zen master, Tran Nhan Tong should be recognized as a creative thinker who bequeathed to Vietnamese Buddhism a philosophical proposition of enduring significance: “*Living in the world while enjoying the Dharma*”. This is not just a slogan for spiritual practice, but a coherent philosophical thesis that re-examines the relationship between worldly life and the path to liberation. “*Living in the world while enjoying the Dharma*” affirms that worldly life is not an obstacle to enlightenment. On the contrary, it is precisely within the conditions of power, responsibility, conflict, and suffering that individuals have the conditions to realize wisdom and compassion. This view fundamentally challenges the dualistic opposition between “*transcendence and worthy engagement*” that has shaped many religious and philosophical traditions. In Tran Nhan Tong's thought, transcendence does not mean withdrawal from the world but liberation from attachment; engagement does not imply indulgence in power or desire but participation in life with a selfless mind. It is this transcendence of duality that constitutes the philosophical foundation of the post-secular spiritual leadership model discussed in this article. At this level, Tran Nhan Tong was not only a transmitter of Buddhism, but also a restructurer of Buddhism in relation to the history, politics, and culture of Dai Viet. His thought demonstrates a rare capacity to transform particular historical experiences into philosophical principles of universal relevance.

Overall, the historical context surrounding Tran Nhan Tong reveals the formation of a personality and ideology that transcended conventional boundaries. As a king, he wielded power without absolutizing it. As a Zen master, he attained enlightenment without withdrawing from society. As a thinker, he overcame the duality of renunciation and engagement with the world to create a new vision of humanity, power, and morality. It is precisely within this historical and ideological context that Tran Nhan Tong's model of post-secular spiritual leadership can be fully and convincingly understood.

3.3 *Truc Lam Buddhism as the Foundation of a Post-Secular Leadership Model*

3.3.1 “*Living in the world while enjoying the Dharma*”: A Leadership Philosophy

The philosophy of “*Living in the world while enjoying the Dharma*” is often understood as a practical motto; rather, it functions as a philosophical proposition concerning leadership and social existence. “*Living in the world*” signifies more than physical presence; it implies active engagement in social, political, and historical structures. “*Finding joy in the Dharma*” does not denote passive tranquility, but an inner freedom achieved through such engagement.

Not Detached from Society: Unlike many ascetic practices that emphasize withdrawal from the world, Truc Lam Buddhism affirms that society is not an obstacle to enlightenment, but an environment in which enlightenment is tested and deepened. In this framework, leadership is not seen as a deviation from spiritual life, but as a form of ethical practice enacted at the communal level. This perspective is particularly significant in a post-secular context, where modern societies can neither exclude religion from the public sphere nor accept the dominance of theocracy. The philosophy of “*Living in the world and finding joy in the Dharma*”, therefore, proposes a third path: engagement without assimilation, engagement with the world without assimilation participation in public life without succumbing to secular reductionism.

Not equating power with ego: A key point of this philosophy is the principled distinction between power and ego. In Truc Lam Buddhism, power is not an extension of the self, but a temporary function linked to social responsibility. When power becomes identified with the ego, it generates violence, ambition, and alienation. When power is exercised in a spirit of selflessness, it becomes a means of serving the community. It was precisely this non-identification that enabled Tran Nhan Tong both to wield supreme authority and to relinquish it voluntarily an uncommon phenomenon in world political history.

3.3.2 Selflessness and Power Management

If “*Living in the world while finding joy in the Dharma*” is the overall orientation, then selflessness constitutes the core operational principle of leadership within the Truc Lam Buddhist model. In Buddhism, selflessness does not negate individuality; rather, it deconstructs attachment to the self as the center of all values. Transposed to the political sphere, this insight becomes a profound principle of power management.

Power is neither accumulated nor sanctified: In Truc Lam thought, power is not accumulated as personal or dynastic property, nor is it sanctified as the embodiment of an absolute divine mandate. It exists only insofar as it serves social order, peace, and the common good. When that limit is exceeded, power becomes something to be relinquished and transferred. This principle situates Truc Lam Buddhism in opposition to both authoritarianism and theocracy. According to Truc Lam Buddhism, power always requires inward self-criticism grounded in awakened awareness.

Leadership as a process of “letting go at the right time”: One of the most important contributions of Truc Lam Buddhism to leadership theory is the idea that leadership involves not only capacity of exercise power but also the wisdom to relinquish it at the appropriate time. Letting go does not imply evasion of responsibility; rather, it signifies the fulfillment of responsibility. Tran Nhan Tong’s voluntary abdication of the throne after national stability had been secured was not merely a personal act of morality, but a political-philosophical declaration: power has no intrinsic value; its value lies in its return to the community when its mission is accomplished. In this sense, the Truc Lam leadership is “*post-secular*” it employs power without becoming possessed by it.

3.3.3 Truc Lam Buddhism and Public Ethics

The third axis of leadership in the Truc Lam Buddhist model is public ethics, where Buddhist values are realized in social life. Unlike ethical models that only emphasize personal cultivation, Truc Lam Buddhism underscores social responsibility as the concrete expression of compassion and wisdom.

Social Responsibility: In the spirit of Truc Lam Buddhism, social responsibility is not an imposed duty, but a natural outcome of enlightenment. An enlightened leader cannot be indifferent to the suffering of the community, since such suffering of the community reflects collective ignorance. Therefore, leadership becomes a conscious commitment to minimizing suffering and creating conditions for common well-being.

Peace – Reconciliation - Tolerance: Peace, reconciliation, and tolerance form the pillars of public ethics in the Truc Lam Buddhist model. Peace signifies not merely the absence of war, but the presence of durable social balance. Reconciliation is not just the end of conflict, but the transformation of memories of violence. Tolerance is not passive concession, but wisdom that transcends hatred. These values show that Truc Lam Buddhism is not an inward-looking Zen tradition, but a socially engaged ethical system capable of guiding public life. In the contemporary world marked by religious, political, and cultural conflicts, it offers an ethical framework that is both spiritually profound and socially practicable.

Overall, Truc Lam Buddhism is not only the spiritual foundation of Tran Nhan Tong personally, but also the theoretical basis for a post-secular model of spiritual leadership. Through the philosophy of “*Living in the World while Finding Joy in the Path*”, the principle of selflessness, and a robust vision of public ethics, Truc Lam Buddhism constructed an approach to leadership in which power is exercised without absolutization, spirituality is practiced without withdrawal from society, and ethics is realized in politics without falling into theocracy. From this foundation, Tran Nhan Tong’s leadership model can be articulated as a theoretical contribution of global significance.

3.4 Tran Nhan Tong as a Post-Secular Leader

3.4.1 Three Pillars of Post-Secular Leadership in Truc Lam Buddhism

Post-secular leadership in the spirit of Truc Lam Buddhism rests on three dialectically interacting pillars: personal enlightenment, political responsibility, and social ethics. These three pillars do not follow a linear sequence, but rather, they form a dynamic whole, in which each element conditions and reinforces the others.

Personal Enlightenment: In Truc Lam Buddhism, enlightenment does not imply detachment, but rather awakening within the specific historical life. For Tran Nhan Tong, enlightenment did not lead him to abandonment of leadership; instead, it fundamentally transformed the manner in which leadership was exercised. Power was no longer seen as a personal identity, but it was understood as a contingent, temporary, and relational. This very selfless awareness allows leaders to avoid identifying themselves with the throne, not viewing power as an extension of the ego. Here, enlightenment is not merely a metaphysical attainment, but rather an inner capacity to limit power from within, something that external legal frameworks alone cannot fully secure.

Political responsibility: The second pillar of the model is political responsibility, conceived as the practice of the Dharma at the community level. In the Truc Lam Buddhism, governing is the country is not a secular activity that needs to be “purified” from spirituality, but rather, it is the arena in which spirituality is tested and refined. Tran Nhan Tong assumed political responsibility during moments of national crises without absolutizing power as an end in itself. Therefore, political responsibility does not contradict enlightenment, but becomes a means of expressing enlightenment. This distinguishes the Truc Lam model from technocratic leadership paradigms that separate governance from moral depth.

Social Ethics: The third pillar is social ethics, through which personal enlightenment and political responsibility are transformed into public values. In the Truc Lam Buddhist model, ethics are not imposed by religious authority, but realized through policies and practices aimed at peace, tolerance, and the preservation of life. Social ethics is not a rigid code, but a dynamic process, always linked to historical circumstances. Such flexibility enables the Truc Lam Buddhist model to avoid both formal ethics and dogmatism.

3.4.2 Transcending the Purely Rational Secular Model

A significant theoretical contribution of the Tran Nhan Tong model lies in its capacity to transcend the limits of the purely rational secular paradigm, which dominates much modern political thought and often excludes spirituality as an element from the public sphere.

Not Excluding Spirituality: Unlike the view that spirituality in public life inevitably breeds conflict or irrationality, the Truc Lam Buddhist model shows that spirituality can function as a source of self-reflection and morality, rather than as a system of transcendental commands. Spiritual insight does not directly determine policy; instead, it shapes the character of leaders, their capability for self-regulation, and their awareness of power's limits. In an age marked less by administrative incompetence than by ethical erosion and crises of meaning, this inward dimension of leadership is especially significant.

Not Deifying Politics: At the same time, the Truc Lam Buddhist model also firmly rejects the deification of politics. Tran Nhan Tong did not instrumentalize Buddhist teachings to legitimize his unlimited power, nor did he portray himself as the absolute embodiment of religious truth. His voluntary relinquishment of power after fulfilling his historical mission exemplifies this stance. By refusing to sacralize power, the Truc Lam Buddhist leadership model preserved social legitimacy without relying on coercion or fear. This is a fundamental distinction between secular leadership and disguised forms of theocratic rule in history.

3.4.3 Tran Nhan Tong as a Self-Contained Leadership Structure

Rather than placing Tran Nhan Tong within conventional comparative frameworks, it is necessary to view him as a self-contained leadership structure, coherent and comprehensive enough to become an independent analytical category. The value of this model does not lie in its resemblance to other cases, but in the internal consistency between thought, action, and historical context.

The key point of the Tran Nhan Tong model is the simultaneity of enlightenment and supreme power. Enlightenment neither precedes power as a purely contemplative ideal, nor follows it as a post-impairment act; rather, it unfolds within the very exercise of power. This simultaneity breaks down common assumptions in leadership theory, which often place spirituality and politics in two different time periods or spaces. This model compels post-secular theory to expand its conceptual scope: Leadership is not merely a matter of institution or personal ethics, but the ability to maintain a state of mindfulness at the very heart of power. Tran Nhan Tong, therefore, is not just a special historical case, but a theoretical challenge, requiring contemporary social science and Buddhism to rethink the relationship between power, spirituality, and social responsibility.

In this sense, Tran Nhan Tong is not simply a model of post-secular leadership that allows us to transcend the limitations of both purely rational secularism and the political theocracy. In this model, personal enlightenment, political responsibility, and social ethics are not mutually exclusive, but mutually supportive. It is this integration that makes Tran Nhan Tong a universally valuable theoretical contribution, not only to Vietnamese Buddhism, but to global leadership and political ethics in the post-secular era.

3.5 Theoretical Contributions to Buddhism and Social Sciences

3.5.1 Contributions to Buddhism

- Affirming the Theoretical Creative Capacity of Vietnamese Buddhism:

One of the most fundamental contributions of this research to Buddhism is the affirmation of the independent theoretical creativity of Vietnamese Buddhism. In the history of modern Buddhist scholarship, Vietnamese Buddhism has often been portrayed primarily as a recipient or local adaptation of major traditions such as Indian or Chinese Buddhism. This approach inadvertently obscures the creative thinking and conceptual contributions of Vietnamese thinkers.

The Truc Lam Buddhist model shows a different reality: Vietnamese Buddhism not only assimilated external influences but also restructured and rearticulated them in light of its own historical experience. Concepts such as "Living in the world while finding joy in the Dharma," the application of non-self to power management, and the integration of enlightenment with governance are not mere repetitions of earlier doctrines but ideological propositions forged through the concrete historical conditions of Dai Viet.

- Expanding Buddhist studies from individual practice to social theory:

The second contribution lies in broadening the scope of Buddhist research. Rather than limiting Buddhism to individual practice, meditation, or metaphysical liberation, the Tran Nhan Tong model situates Buddhism at the center of social and political life. This repositioning does not diminish its spiritual depth; instead, it demonstrated that Buddhist wisdom can operate within the most complex dimensions of collective existence. In this sense,

Buddhism is not only a science of individual liberation, but also a source of theory for social ethics and power management. Such a shift is crucial for enabling Buddhism to engage contemporary social sciences on equal intellectual footing.

3.5.2 Contributions to Leadership Studies

- Proposing a "Post-secular Buddhist Leadership" Model:

In leadership studies, most modern models focus on managerial competence, organizational effectiveness, or personal moral qualities, while they often marginalize spirituality as methodologically problematic or normatively irrelevant. This study proposes a new model, which could be called Post-secular Buddhist Leadership, built on the philosophy of Truc Lam Buddhism. This model does not view spirituality as a tool for creating influence or legitimacy. Rather, it functions as an internal resource that enables leaders to cultivate self-reflection, self-limitation, and the capacity to relinquish power when appropriate. Therefore, leadership becomes more than a managerial technique. It is viewed as the ethical practice in which power is exercised without being absolutized.

- Redefining the concept of "effective leadership":

Another contribution lies in redefining the concept of effective leadership. In the Truc Lam Buddhist model, effectiveness is not measured purely by short-term growth or stability. Instead, it is assessed by the preservation of social life, the maintenance of peace, and the orderly transfer of power. This perspective challenges technocratic leadership models, which often neglect the moral and psychological costs of power. The example of Tran Nhan Tong illustrates that leadership achieves its highest effectiveness when the leader does not equate personal identity with authority. Such non-identification fosters long-term institutional sustainability and moral legitimacy.

3.5.3 Contributions to Post-Secular Studies

- A Fully Indigenous East Asian Case Study:

Post-secular studies have mainly focused on Western or South Asian contexts, each shaped by distinct historical and religious presuppositions. Incorporating Tran Nhan Tong and Truc Lam Buddhism into post-secular discourse provides a complete East Asian case that does not rely on externally derived conceptual frameworks. Crucially, the Truc Lam Buddhist model is not a "*post-secular*" application in the modern sense, but rather a pre-modern form of post-secularism, shaped by specific historical needs. This suggests that post-secularism is not only a phenomenon of modern society, but can appear in different historical contexts when the conditions of interaction between religion and politics converge.

- Expanding the theoretical map of post-secularism:

The final contribution is the expansion of the theoretical map of post-secularism. The example of Tran Nhan Tong challenges the assumption that post-secularism is merely a by-product of Western secularization. Instead, it can be reconceptualized as a broader ideological configuration in which religious and political spheres renegotiate their relationship through mutual limitation and moral dialogue. In this sense, Tran Nhan Tong is not simply an empirical illustration of post-secular theory. He contributes to its reformation. This is a clear indication that Vietnamese Buddhist studies have the capacity to engage in dialogue and co-create global knowledge, rather than simply supplying local data.

3.6 Contemporary Significance and Applicability

- Global Leadership Crisis and the Lack of Moral Depth:

A prominent feature of the current leadership crisis is the growing disconnect between power and morality. Many political leaders possess high administrative capabilities but lack the capacity for self-reflection; they may manage effectively in technical terms but fail to cultivate social trust. This leads to the erosion of the legitimacy of political institutions and increased public skepticism. The model embodied by Tran Nhan Tong raises a fundamental question for contemporary leadership: Can power be exercised without corrupting the moral character of the ruler? The answer suggested by Truc Lam Buddhism is affirmative, but only when political leaders possess sufficient inner awareness to avoid identifying themselves with authority. It is precisely this dimension of interior depth that many modern leadership frameworks neglect.

- Political Ethics and the Capacity for Self-Limitation

A central problem in modern politics is the proliferation of power accompanied by a decline in moral responsibility. Legal systems and institutional checks can regulate power externally, yet but they cannot

substitute for internal self-restraint. Tran Nhan Tong exemplifies a model of political ethics in which power is always bounded by the principle of selflessness. Power is not treated as an extension of ego, but as a provisional means of serving the community. His voluntary relinquishment of power upon fulfilling his historical mission illustrates a principle of leadership: True leadership lies not in the ability to hold power for a long time, but in the ability to relinquish power at the right time. In the context of many nations facing the threat of authoritarianism, this model provides an important ethical standard for evaluating and guiding political behavior.

- Peace, Environment, and Cultural Conflict:

Global challenges such as climate change, armed conflict, and cultural religious tensions all share a common feature: They exceed the problem solving capacity of fragmented purely technocratic paradigms. They require an integrated approach in which ethics, spirituality, and politics interact constructively. The compassionate and selfless ethos of Truc Lam Buddhism opens up a different perspective on the relationship between humans and nature. When power is exercised in a spirit of selflessness, nature ceases to be viewed as an object of unlimited exploitation, and is recognized instead as part of a network of interconnectedness. This perspective contributes to the development of environmental ethics, an area often lacking deep philosophical foundation.

In the realm of cultural and religious conflict, Tran Nhan Tong suggests a model of reconciliation approach based on wisdom that transcends rigid duality. Rather than confrontation between value systems, this model encourages dialogue based on an understanding inherent in all institutionalized truths. This is a significant contribution to building sustainable peace in pluralistic societies.

- Tran Nhan Tong as an inspiration for 21st-century leadership:

It is important to note that Tran Nhan Tong should not be regarded as a model to be replicated mechanically in contemporary institutions. His relevance lies in the spirit of his leadership, rather than in specific institutional forms. That spirit comprises three core elements: inner awareness, social responsibility, and the capacity to relinquish power. For 21st-century political leaders across politics, education, business to civil society, the Tran Nhan Tong model suggests that leadership is first and foremost a process of self-cultivation, not just a management skill. When the inner self is not dominated by the ambition for power, leaders can make long-term visionary decisions, aimed at the common good of humanity and the planet.

4. Conclusion

This study affirms a central claim that Tran Nhan Tong not be merely a historical figure or a cultural-religious symbol of Vietnam, but a complete symbol of post-secular leadership, possessing independent theoretical value and the ability to engage in dialogue on equal footing with major discourses in contemporary Buddhism and social sciences.

Through the analysis of Tran Nhan Tong as a king, Zen master, and thinker, the article demonstrates a form of leadership in which personal enlightenment, political responsibility, and social ethics are not separate but mutually supportive within a unified whole. This thesis is developed on the foundation of Truc Lam Buddhist thought, particularly the proposition “*Living in the world while finding joy in the Dharma*” as a principle transcending the duality between renunciation and engagement with the world.

From this perspective, the article indicates that Vietnamese Buddhism not merely absorbs foreign intellectual traditions but also possesses an inherent capacity for creative theoretical development, capable of contributing new categories to global thinking on leadership, ethics, and power. Tran Nhan Tong, in this sense, is not a "special case" requiring an exception, but rather a self-contained theoretical framework that compels existing theoretical frameworks to expand their conceptual scope. Tran Nhan Tong's global value is most clearly demonstrated in his ability to address a core problem of the contemporary world: How to exercise power without being dominated by it, how to integrate spirituality into public life without falling into theocracy, and How to cultivate political ethics in pluralistic and conflict-ridden societies. The post-secular leadership model of Truc Lam Buddhism shows a middle path, in which spirituality operates as a discipline of self-reflection and self-restraint, rather than as an instrument of ideological control.

Academically, this study positions Tran Nhan Tong as an intellectual subject capable of co-creating knowledge on a global scale, rather than merely an object of study in Vietnam. Placing Tran Nhan Tong at the center of dialogues on post-secularism, leadership, and political ethics is not intended to “*globalize*” a historical figure, but rather, to enrich humanity's intellectual map with a complete and independent East Asian experience.

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In conclusion, Tran Nhan Tong emerges not as a memory of the past, but as a vibrant possibility for the future, especially in a world yearning for leadership models that combine power with compassion, effectiveness with mindfulness, and politics with sustainable peace. Future research may extend this line of inquiry by comparing the Truc Lam leadership model with other Buddhist traditions in Asia in order to clarify both the universal and distinctive features of post-secular leadership. At the same time, applying this model to specific fields such as public governance, education, and business leadership represents a promising direction. In addition, further interdisciplinary studies are needed to examine the model’s practical applicability in the context of globalization and the contemporary crisis of values.

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