

Religions in the Areas of Ethnic Minority Compatriots in Vietnam*

NGUYỄN THANH XUÂN**

ABSTRACT: Vietnam is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country. Among various religious believers, a part is ethnic minority compatriots. In the revolutionary movement process, as well as in the social management and administration of the country, the Vietnamese Communist Party and Government have always been interested in and issued right policies toward religions and nationalities, thus achieved significant successes.

1. A General View on Ethnic Minority Compatriots in Vietnam

Vietnam has 54 brotherly nationalities, among them 53 nationalities belong to the ethnic minorities. According to statistics of the Nationalities Committee in 2003, the number of ethnic minorities in Vietnam was about 11 500 000 inhabitants, accounted for 13.8% of the total population, concentrated in 3 main areas which are the North – West, the Western Highlands, the Western part of South Vietnam.

The area of mountainous provinces in the North (called in common the North West) has more than thirty ethnic minority compatriots with over 7 million inhabitants, the most numerous are the Tày: 1 447 514 inhabitants; the Thái: 1 328 725 inhabitants; the Mường: 1 137 515 inhabitants; the Nùng: 856 412 inhabitants; the Mông: 787 604 inhabitants; the Yáo: 620 538 inhabitants.

The area of provinces in the Western Highlands, the high coastal region of Central Vietnam, in the South of the Long Mountain Range (called in common the Western Highlands) has more than 20 ethnic minorities with about 2 million inhabitants, the most numerous among them are Gia-rai: 317 557 inhabitants; the

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** . Nguyễn Thanh Xuân is a vice - Chairman of the Vietnamese Government Committee for Religious Affairs.

Êđê: 270 348 inhabitants; the Bahnars: 174 456 inhabitants; the Sêđăngs: 127148 inhabitants.

The area of the provinces of the Mekong delta (called in common the Western part of South Vietnam) with two ethnic minorities, the Khmers: 1043678 inhabitants; The Chăms: 20 000 inhabitants.

Ethnic minority compatriots in Vietnam live mainly in mountainous regions, on the border adjacent to China, Laos, Cambodia (Vietnam has over 5000 km of mainland border line). In general, on social aspect, ethnic minorities in Vietnam remain backward, some of them are still in the pre-feudal period, even some have not been free from the life style, the social organization of the clannish, tribal period. The organization degree of production is low, some ethnic groups still follow the practice of burning and destroying forests to cultivate in the nomadic living and shifting cultivation. In short, out of many causes, ethnic minority communities in Vietnam are still backward, their life-style, intellectual standard remain low, hunger, illiteracy, illness and infirmity are still the worry in a number of areas.

On the aspect of culture, belief, religion, each ethnic minority in Vietnam has very original features on culture, customs contributing to the creation of a Vietnamese culture with its diversity, its strong national identity. In the cultural, spiritual life, all ethnic minorities in Vietnam have the need of a spiritual, religious life. A part form the Khmers who have followed the Southern School of Buddhism since the far-off days, most of ethnic minorities follow pantheistic beliefs, with the conception of animism, the cult of ancestors and spirits of traditional habits and customs.

In the later time, religions such as Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism and Caodaism have been integrated into the areas of ethnic minorities in the North West, Western Highlands. The propagation of a number of religions in the regions of ethnic minorities has been linked with the process of occupation and exploitation of imperialist forces, with migration waves of the Kinh people from the plain to settle down there.

2. Process of Propagating Religions in the Regions of Ethnic Minorities

1. The Propagation of Catholicism

Catholicism was propagated into Vietnam since XVI century (1533). More than a century later, Catholicism began to be propagated into the areas of ethnic minority

compatriots in the North West and the Western Highlands. In 1876, Catholicism was propagated into the areas of the ethnic minorities of the North West, before in Lạng Sơn and then it expanded to the regions of Cao Bằng, Bắc Cạn, Thái Nguyên, Tuyên Quang, Hà Giang provinces. Though it had been propagated very early into the regions of ethnic minorities in the North – West, the results were very poor, less than a hundred persons in the whole North – West region followed Catholicism, they were mainly the Môngs who followed Catholicism in Sapa, the summer resort place of French officials and bourgeoisie.

In 1765, Catholicism was propagated to the Western Highlands, first in Kontum, and then in Gia Lai, Đắk Lắk, Lâm Đồng. The propagation of Catholicism in the region of ethnic minorities in the Western highlands had brought out better results than in the North West. In 1977, the Western Highlands had over 100 thousand believers, who were ethnic minorities from the dioceses of Kontum, Buôn Mê Thuật, Đà Lạt.

The propagation of Catholicism into the Mê Kông delta was carried out in 1679, but mainly among the Vietnamese and had not any result among the Khmers, the Chăms.

2. The Propagation of Protestantism

Protestantism was introduced into our country since late XIX century and early XX century by the Christian and Missionary Alliance, often called the CMA, belonging to the North American Protestantism. After founding a number of bases in the plain and organizing the congregation (Vietnamese General Protestant Church) in 1930, Protestantism began to organize predatory activities in this region. Later, other Protestant organizations like the Congregation of Catholicism, the Adventist and Pentecostal Congregations continued to propagate and build bases in Western Highlands. The result was, ethnic minorities have gradually followed Protestantism. The Cơ-hos followed in 1931, the Brus (Vân Kiều) in 1933, the Chăms 1934, the Êđê in 1934, the Hrê in 1937; the Mnôngs in 1940, the Pacô 1940; the Gia-rai in 1941; the Bahnars in 1941; the Kơ-tus in 1941; the Chơ-ros in 1952; the Roglais in 1952; the Stiêngs in 1953; the Sêđăngs in 1959, etc. Up to 1954, Protestantism in the Western Highland had over 6000 believers from the ethnic minorities.

In 1954 -1975, however, the Congregation CMA, the Vietnamese General Protestant Church (Southern region) and other factional Protestant organizations

pushed forward the propagation to regions of ethnic minorities of the Western Highlands with the material and spiritual assistance of foreign Protestant organizations. That was why in 1975, in the Western Highland, the Vietnamese General Protestant Church (Southern region) had 61 500 believers. On the organizational aspects, two separate areas were formed in the Western Highland (the High Center and the South Center areas) were relatively independent from the Vietnamese General Protestant Church (Southern region).

In the North West areas, the Protestant Congregation was propagated to the regions of ethnic minority compatriots since 1940s but only a small scattered number of person in Sơn La, Hòa Bình, Lạng Sơn provinces followed. After 1954, most of the mass abandoned the religion, returned to the ancient beliefs, apart from a Protestant base among Yao compatriots in Lạng Sơn province. In 1958, this base became the official church of the Vietnamese General Protestant Church (Northern region) and exists up to now with 1,533 believers in 9 communes of Bắc Sơn district, Lạng Sơn province.

3. The Actual Religious Situation in the Region of Ethnic Minorities

In the Western Highlands in the recent period, especially since the beginning of the 1990s, Protestantism had been restored and developed at a very rapid rate. From the investigation results of the Government Committee For Religious Affairs in 2004, the number of compatriots following Protestantism in the Western Highlands are 393546 persons with 1000 groups (Đắc Lắc and Đắc Nông: 130 000 believers; Gia Lai: 70 946 believers; Lâm Đồng: 68 500 believers; Bình Phước: 45 150 believers; Kontum: 8 950 believers; the coast provinces of the centre: 70 000 believers).

The later time, based on previously obtained results, Catholicism has also pushed forward the religious propagation and has developed believers in the regions of ethnic minorities in the Western Highlands. Up to 2004, according to the statistics at three Catholic parishes in the Western Highlands, there exist 256 910 Catholic believers from ethnic minorities in the total number of 772 484 believers (36% of the number). They are Kontum dioceses: 123 672; Buôn Mê Thuật diocese: 51 183; Đà Lạt diocese: 82 055.

Beside, up to 2005 in the Western Highlands there still exist 20 000 persons of the ethnic minorities who are Buddhist believers, and 1 000 persons who follow Caodaism.

In the North West area, apart from the Yao Protestant church at Bắc Sơn (Lạng Sơn) which exists before 1954, since the middle of 1980, Protestantism was propagated among the Mong compatriots under the name of *Vàng Chúa*, and among the Yao compatriots under the name of *Thìn Hùng*. In a short time the number of Mong, Dao people following Protestantism has been very numerous. From the data of the Government Committee For Religious Affairs in 2005 the number of Protestant Mong is over 100 000 persons with 700 groups (Điện Biên: 23205 believers; Cao Bằng 14 342 believers; Hà Giang: 12 556 believers; Bắc Cạn: 12 019 believers; Lai Châu: 11 307 believers; Lào Cai: 9 370 believers; Tuyên Quang: 6 020 believers; Thái Nguyên: 4 528 believers; Thanh Hóa: 4 011 believers; Sơn La: 2 688 believers; Yên Bái: 384 believers.)

In the recent time, together with Protestantism, Catholicism has also increased its religious propagation in the regions of ethnic minorities and has recorded definite results. According to the statistics in 2004 of the Catholic Church of Vietnam, in the North West area there exist 38.000 ethnic minority compatriots who are Catholic believers spreading among the diocese of Hưng Hóa, Lạng Sơn, Phát Diệm, Thanh Hóa, etc.

The Southern School of Buddhism among Khmer compatriots in the area on the West of South Vietnam

The Southern School of Buddhism was introduced into the Khmer compatriots of the Mekong delta since XIV century. In XIX century and in the beginning of XX century, the majority Khmer population in the Mekong delta followed the Southern school of Buddhism and most villages have a pagoda for worshipping Buddha. In 1965 there exist over 500 Buddhist pagodas of the Southern school of Buddhism of the Khmers.

In the development process, the Southern school of Buddhism had been closely linked to the Khmer people and had created the basic and striking characteristics of their culture. The Southern school of Buddhism has become the main spiritual, mental support towards the Khmers. The Southern school of Buddhism still plays a very important role in the cultural life, in education and in the management of the village community, and in the socio- economic development of Khmers. In 1981, The Southern school of Buddhism actively took part to unify Buddhism in organizing the Buddhist Congregation of Vietnam.

According to the data of the Government Committee For Religious Affairs in 2005, the Khmer Buddhism of the Southern School has 1 043.679 believers with 8490 monks and nuns and 433 pagodas (Sóc Trăng: 342 679 believers, 1 957 monks, 89 pagodas; Trà Vinh: 282 believers, 3557 monks; 141 pagodas; Kiên Giang: 198889 believers, 1 186 monks, 72 pagodas; An Giang: 88 038 believers, 790 monks, 64 pagodas; Bạc Liêu: 56 781 believers, 366 monks, 33 pagodas; Cà Mau: 28 222 believers, 68 monks; 6 pagodas; Cần Thơ: 33 909 believers, 344 monks, 26 pagodas; Vĩnh Long: 21 875 believers, 220 monks, 13 pagoda).

In recent time, Christianity, especially Protestantism also have carried propagation activities among Khmer compatriots and have attracted 1 032 believers, especially compatriots in difficult situations, living mixed with the Kinhs.

In the West of South Vietnam, apart from the Khmers community following the Southern School of Buddhism, there exists also the Chăm community following Islamism with a number over 25 703 persons (The Orthodox Islamism is called Chăm Islamism) without mentioning over 39 229 Islamist Chăm in the coastal area of Central Vietnam (unorthodox Islamism because of the mixture of matriarchy and Brahmanism, often called Chăm Bàn).

4. Some Problems which Merit Attention

With a part of ethnic minorities in the North – West, the Western Highlands newly following Protestantism, Catholicism in the recent period, a few problems merit the concern:

Persons following Protestantism, Catholicism are mainly people in the deep and remote areas, among subjects who meet particular conditions, especially difficulties in their economical lives or improvised events in their living. Especially Protestantism often develops rapidly among people undergoing a crisis in the religious belief, and still preserving backward customs and habits especially corrupted practices in marriages, weddings, funerals, etc. which prevent social progress.

The propagation of Catholicism, especially of Protestantism in the regions of ethnic minorities is carried out under many forms. Before all else, they are propagation activities from the religious organizations in the country, at the same time with the aid of international religious organizations. The Môngs, Yaos in the mountainous areas of North Vietnam in the beginning accept Protestantism from

foreign countries (from the Philippines, Hongkong, Thailand, Laos, China) through means such as broadcasting stations, cassette tapes, the Bible – called indirect propagation. Then they have the aid of religious organizations in the country.

The propagation and following of Protestantism, Catholicism in the regions of ethnic minority compatriots in the North West, the Western Highlands have brought out negative social effects such as: stagnation in the production, division in the families, lineages, communes, even they brought out disorders infringing the social security at some places, and the propagation of superstitions to earn money. Especially, in some places, bad forces have benefited from the propagation and acceptance of a religion to sow dissensions in the block of great national unity, especially in propagating the mean-spirited nationalism, separatism in the Western Highlands in close relationship with the activities of the Fulro organization.

Catholicism, especially Protestantism when spreading religion to the area of ethnic minorities have brought new life-styles different from the traditional customs and practices, especially Protestantism in preserving an extremist attitude on beliefs, has denied wholly all the beliefs, customs of the ethnic minority compatriots. Therefore, in the places where Protestantism and Catholicism are propagated, cultural conflicts often take place or more exactly speaking, reactions of beliefs and cultures of these places to the Protestant culture and life style. In a number of places these conflicts have led to contradictions and divergences between believers and non-believers which require intervention of the administrative power.

Initial stage of Catholic and Protestant propagation in the regions of ethnic minorities in the Western Highlands has often brought out negative effects. But later, negative effects are little by little reduced, while active elements appear and become more and more striking, especially active elements on morale, life-style like the elimination of backward, bad customs on funerals, marriages, the conjugal life with one husband and one wife, the custom of abstaining from wine, cigarettes, of observing the laws. In sum, a new cultural space is created in relation to Protestantism, Catholicism among ethnic minority compatriots in the Western Highlands and the North West.

Catholicism, Protestantism have increased rapidly in the recent time, though in many places, compatriots follow the religion by their sympathies, even by material stimulations, but along with time, Catholicism and Protestantism have become a reality in the regions of ethnic minorities. Especially among the believers, a religious

feeling has been born as an indispensable spiritual support and people always have the normal need of religion in their everyday lives.

5. Religious Policies towards Ethnic Minority Compatriots

As we have presented above, there exist in Vietnam three areas for religious ethnic minority compatriots. They are the North West, the Western Highlands and the area in the West of South Vietnam (The North West and the Western Highlands are linked to Protestantism, Catholicism; the West of South Vietnam is linked to the Southern school of Buddhism). In this article, however, we only emphasize the policies and performance of policies toward Protestantism in the Western Highlands and in the North – West.

Before dealing with the concrete performance of policies, we should emphasize some notions as a matter of principle in the policies toward religions in the area of ethnic minority compatriots as follows:

First, towards religious ethnic minority compatriots, the State has followed at the same time two policies: the National and religious policies.

Second, the State does not discriminate between persons following a religion and persons without religion, between religious ethnic minorities and religious Kinh.

Third, the State respects and ensures religious freedom of persons following a religion, but at the same time, it must have measures to struggle and prevent the activities making use of religions to create social disorders and infringe on the political stability.

On the base of the realistic situation of differences different Protestant sects in different regions, in the conditions of implementing the *Ordinance on Beliefs, Religions*, a text of high legal value, the Prime Minister has issued the 01/CT-TTg instruction on 5 February 2004 *On some tasks regarding Protestantism*. The instruction of the Prime Minister clearly states: “For Protestant followers in the Central Highlands, southern Trường Sơn region and central provinces:

To continue considering and recognizing eligible Chapters of the Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region) and create favorable conditions for them to build places of worship and train and assign dignitaries who will give religious guidance to those Chapters that have been recognized in keeping with stipulations by the law.

For places where conditions are not yet available for the establishment and recognition of a chapter, if local followers have a need for purely religious practice, and commit to observe stipulations by the law and not to act for FULRO, or to be involved with "Dega Protestantism" (which is actually an organization of the FULRO reactionaries), *the communal or ward authorities shall create conditions for them to conduct normal religious practice at home, or permit them to register for religious practice at a suitable place in the hamlet or village.*"

To a number of ethnic minority compatriots in the North West who newly follow Protestantism, one should base on the religious need to have an adequate policy. *"Protestant followers who have practiced Protestantism for some time and have genuine belief related needs should be, for the time being, guided to practice their religion at home, or register for religious practice at a suitable place in the hamlet or village. When conditions are available, they shall be facilitated to practice their religion normally in accordance with stipulations by the law."*

A decisive struggle is carried out against maneuvers and measures which make use of religions, of Protestantism to instigate, attract the people and create national dissention, to sabotage the country. One should inform the compatriots on acts violating the law of persons under the guise of Protestant dignitaries, at the same time: *"strictly prohibit acts designed to coerce people to follow or renounce a religion."*

To fully carry out the concrete context, the Instruction of Prime Minister, especially emphasizes that all levels, branches should *"thoroughly disseminate and fully implement the Party's guidelines and State's legislation concerning beliefs and religions, and policies on Protestantism"* to create unity and conformity in carrying out the work towards Protestantism.

On the base of previous reached results, after a year of implementation the 01 Instruction of the Prime Minister the situation of Protestantism in the two areas is as follows: In the Western Highlands, there exist 66 recognized sections, 711 points and groups for constant religious activities (80% of the Protestant number), 69 appointed pastors predicating the religion, 25 seminaries in theological classes at the Western Highlands are registering their religious activities together with systems which have been recognized.

In the North West, basically, the Protestants are preserving their daily religious activities at home. At the same time, a number of provinces have carried out the

registration of religious activities at 18 different points according to hamlets (2 in Lai Châu; 2 in Lào Cai; 4 in Bắc Cạn; 4 in Yên Bái; 5 in Thái Nguyên. After drawing experience from the registration of activities, the localities will expand their guide for the registration of religious activities according to groups and for the solution of other problems in accordance with the legal decisions.

The above-said results, though at a first step, have had positive results in the religious life of the areas of ethnic minority compatriots in the Western Highlands and in the North West. It shows that the religious policy of the Party and Government has entered the life, has provided an important transformation in the religious life of the areas of ethnic minorities in general and in particular in the areas of the Western Highlands and in the North West.