

## RELIGION UNDER THE WAY OF LOOKING AT CULTUROLOGY

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When studying and teaching of religion, we often think that religion is spiritual need of people. But I myself pay attention to inversion of problem: Religion is not only need, religion is the way of settlement of needs. These *needs are need of worldly life, need of nation and need of people*. According to me it is the aspect of religious culturology.

Phan Ngọc defines that “ culture is kind of selection”. I sympathize fully this definition. The needs of people, of each region’s people, of each community are not different but the ways of settlement of needs are different. Because each region’s people, each group of people or each community chooses the different solutions. For resolving living needs some regions choose cultivation but other regions choose nomadism so the culture of cultivation is different from culture of nomadism. When eating, people in some regions use chopsticks but people in other regions eat with their fingers so we can say on the culture of using chopsticks and culture of eating with fingers....This is the land of culturology: culturology has duty to find the reason why cultural phenomena and characteristic can exist. It means that culturology has to find what real needs can exist behind each cultural phenomenon and why people choose this settlement but not other settlement.

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I cite a few phenomena of religious and belief phenomenon in Vietnam to illustrate my above way of looking.

### **1- Religions meet the ideological need of Vietnamese nation**

The story of Chủ Động Tử left rich trade for entering into religion. He was venerated Chủ đạo tổ. This story has reflected the urgent need of our nation in the period of establishment and struggle to affirm the existence of our nation. In the past Vietnam was a small nation. It had to face perdition because its neighbored countries were strong countries. At that time the first need of Vietnamese nation was existence but not wealth. Vietnamese nation can only exist when its people unite. Solidarity and unification are vital and obligatory selections of our nation. Vietnamese history has proved that when our nation unites, we have gained full independence and defeated all enemies. Trần Hưng Đạo said that “King and mandarins are whole-hearted, brothers live in harmony”. Hồ Chí Minh said that “Unity, unity, great unity; success, success, great success”. These sayings were experimentalized from history and they have permanent significance. During nearly one thousand years of domination by Northern invaders, our people constantly rose up against oppression. We sometimes achieved independence and established State apparatus, but our people did not enjoy peace for a long time. Why? Our nation did not unite, did it? the unity of race, of culture and of language had not enough if we were short of united ideology. Buddhism was brought to Vietnam from the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century. After hundreds of years Buddhism could become national religion and Vietnamese leaders thought highly Buddhism as ideology of

our nation. Kings of the pre-Lý, Đinh- pre Lê- Lý –Trần dynasties followed their forefathers to give prominence to Buddhism. Since then our nation has had enough power to achieve and maintain our independence. The story of Chử Đồng Tử who learned religion and brought religion to our nation may be not true. But his story has been the story of our people. It has reflected the true need of our people - the need of learning religion. Behind this need has been the need of ideology. The need of ideology has been heightened higher than the need of enrichment because it has decided the matter of life and death of the nation. In 10<sup>th</sup> century Buddhism became an important factor to contribute to the cause of national reunification on different aspects (culture, customs, aesthetics, morality and lifestyle). Buddhism became united ideology of nation. Buddhism met the need of national reunification on ideology and helped our nation to have enough power to rise up and maintain independence of Dai Viet country. Since then our country and nation entered the period of independence and sovereignty. Our people defeated all Northern invaders.

In XVI- XVIII the Nguyễn Lords continuously thought highly of Buddhism. It was clever selection of the Nguyễn Lords. This selection met need of ideology. Basing on this foundation, the Nguyễn Lord could unite the forces in the South to confront the Trịnh Lord in the North and expand our territory in the direction of the South.

Every ideology, however, has historical limitation, so does Buddhism. Before the danger of Northern invasions and attacks of Chăm Pastor, the royal dynasties of Đại Việt gradually looked for

Confucianism . Comparing to Buddhism, Confucianism dealt with the organization of State must. It established social rules. Because Vietnamese country would like to become powerfully so Confucianism gradually replaced Buddhism in the capacity of orthodox ideology.

## **2- Religions and belief play the important role to protect national culture and maintain national tradition**

From the 15<sup>th</sup> century when Confucianism became the orthodoxy ideology, national culture faced new challenges. Confucianism had many severe principles and it dignified the authority of State to villages so it came in conflict with native culture and faiths. The cultural of king came in conflict with the faith of worship of village's divinities. The law of centralistic State came in conflict with self-governing characteristic of villages. The law of land came in conflict with village 's regulations. The moral of Confucianism came in conflict with customs and old habits especially it could not accept customs which were hiding behind prosperous belief . This belief was popular belief in Vietnam. In this background the culture of village – the soul of Vietnamese culture confronted with danger. *The contradiction of villages and State became the contradiction on politics, culture and belief.*

Facing with that situation, traditional culture backed to village pagoda and old village deities so new form of belief came into the world. That was belief of tutelary spirit. It inherited the worship of deity. A village's deity was nominated for the position of tutelary spirit by State. He became both deity of village and of State. The communal house in village represented State in village. Tutelary spirit was sacrificed in the

communal house in village so the communal house became representation of village to State. *After the belief of tutelary spirit and the communal house in village came into the world, they harmonized the confliction of village and State. They helped to unite benefits of village and State. The belief of tutelary spirit and the communal house in village met both the needs of building feudal centralistic State and defending village community* . As was stated above, the contradiction of villages and State was the contradiction on politics, culture and belief. It explained why the cult of tutelary spirit and communal house in village contained political, cultural and belief functions. Under the form of worship of Confucianism and words “ king long live!” there were village deities whose origins might be river god, mountain god or God of snake... village festivals, customs and popular belief etc. Many villages festivals, customs maintained games, amusements and types of worship which did not correspond with Confucian spirit.

Although seeing the light late belief of tutelary spirit met the urgent need of national life so it developed in the whole country. During two centuries 17-18 tutelary spirit became the most popular belief to such an extent that almost Vietnamese villages built communal house in order to worship tutelary spirit.

### **3- Religion played an important role in changing waste land into cultivated areas in the South because they met the need of unity of Vietnamese community in new lands**

#### *3.1 The belief of tutelary spirit in new land*

The firmness of belief of worship of village deity then belief of tutelary spirit originated from the need of defending village community. The belief of tutelary spirit also originated from the characteristic of wet rice cultivation. The regulation of level of water in fields was one of the most important elements in wet rice cultivation (our peasants have words: first important element is water, the second is fertilize, the third is hard working and the fourth is rice varieties). Each individual or each family could not decide to supply water or drain water in his field because water had to run through many fields of different families. Many families, individuals should cooperate in agricultural production, first of all regulation of water. This cooperation was the base for maintenance of a general correctable organization so village community was established. The belief of worship of village deity was spiritual guarantee for village community. The belief of tutelary spirit in Vietnamese village was called “Thanh Hoang” . Although his name might be Chinese name, he was native deity and his functions were different from Chinese deity’s functions<sup>2</sup>.

Vietnamese people emigrated to the South 300 -400 years ago. Their community did not follow them. In the new land they should unite to fight against natural calamity and enemy inflicted destruction so they had need to establish a new village community following the model of their old village community.

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<sup>2</sup> Nguyễn Tiến Dũng and Nguyễn Duy Hinh wrote on this problem very clearly ( See Nguyễn Tiến Dũng Le Đình et le genie tutélaire in Cultural Review no 3, 1973 in Saigon and Nguyễn Duy Hinh The Belief of Tutelary spirit in Vietnam, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 1996

The communal houses were built in new lands. The village deities in the South were different from the village deities in the North. They had not their histories, origins and names. They were called by: *Thành hoàng bổ cảnh* (the common name). Their temples had only one word “Deity”. This phenomenon helped us to find authentic need of people behind the belief of tutelary spirit. The village deities were not sure to defend villagers but villagers worshiped them and respect them as tutelary spirit. Because villagers needed a deity to unite different members in new community. So new members of different regions had a common belief. The communal house was the place of worship and the place of community activities. The unreal tutelary spirit only represented common belief of villagers and of common spirit of village community. So the belief of tutelary spirit continuously played temporal role in new land of the South.

### *3.2 The case of Caodaism*

It was no accident that some new religions were established in the South. Among them there was case of Caodaism

Caodaism came into the world in 1926 in the Tây Ninh. Caodaism met many difficulties. The internal division caused Caodaism to have many sects. Anyhow, Caodaism attracted many believers ( sometime the number of followers reached about 2 million) and it has still existed firmly after 80 historical years. Why did Caodaism exist while other new religions were withered?

According to estimation of colonial government Tây Ninh province there were 120 thousands of people in 1936<sup>3</sup>. At that time Caodaism has established for 10 years and ten thousands of people arrived to Tòa Thánh Tây Ninh (Tây Ninh Holy See) to make their home permanently. It can say that before Caodaism was established, residents in Tay Ninh in general and Holy See in particular were thinly scattered. Caodai followers emigrated to Tay Ninh by many times. Until 1970s Holy See maintained an organization which is responsible for settlement. Caodaism played an important role in changing waste land into cultivated areas. It also played in settling production and the life of settled people. After leaving old community the new settlers adhered rapidly to new community. Caodaism satisfied the need of new settlers on community activities. Residents helped each other in production, funeral ceremony, marriage etc. This interdependence also had religious significance.

Religious activities did not separate from productive and workaday activities. The community activities wore the cloak of religious activities. Parish replaced village community in the old land. Holy house, oratories of Caodaism became the centers of community activities . In this aspect they replaced communal houses, pagodas. Because Caodaism played an important in stabilization of life and manufacturing of settlers so it has had a durable vitality. We can explain why Caodaism has hardly developed in the North where village

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<sup>3</sup> According to J.S. Werner Peasant Politics and Religions Sectarialism: Peasant and priest in the Cao Dai in Vietnam, Yale University, Southeast Asia Studies, New Haven, 1981, p. 32

communities have existed firmly for a long time so peasants did not need to find another belief.

### 3.3- *The other native religions in the South: cloisterers, Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Hòa Hảo Buddhism*

“ In the first time the work of opening up virgin lands in the South was unprompted, unorganized and unregulated work. The court could control this work. In the struggle for existence, the role of individuals was stressed. They were leaders of new regions who were able to organize manufacture, community life and settle disputes in their communities...*In the unregulated and unprimed condition human morality and individual prestige were very important* (is it true that these reasons explain straightforward nature of Southern men as well as the role of individual in the movement of the masses in the South afterwards”<sup>4</sup>

In such condition there were *cloisterers* who practised religion originally in the South. The *cloisterers* could hospital treatment and preached doctrine by reading poems. They became prestige men in regions. Some *cloisterers* led their villagers to changed waste land into cultivated area. They established new villages. Their religions only developed in their villages and their prestige only were thought highly by their villagers, for example Trần cloister in Long Hải (Bà Rịa- Vũng Tàu). Because of large sphere of action some *cloisterers* have had great influence in the South, for example monk Tây An. Monk Tây An with

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<sup>4</sup> Đặng Thế Đại The special feature of the Southern culture and religion: the opposition and similarity of Caodaism and Hòa Hảo Buddhism. Religious Studies Review, no 2 , 1999

his disciples went to regions in the South to recruit people and establish new villages. Because he had ability for organization and hospital treatment so he established Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương sect. Although this sect came into the world in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it has still existed now. Basing on Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương movement, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa and Hòa Hảo Buddhism saw the light. Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa has developed in Southern- Western border. Hòa Hảo Buddhism was established by Huỳnh Phú Sổ. Huỳnh Phú Sổ considered him reincarnation of Monk Tây An. Hòa Hảo Buddhism has developed in the West of the South. Its followers have been about 2 million followers. It has existed firmly from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to now.

Although *cloisterers*, Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa and Hòa Hảo Buddhism have special features, they created a special religious current in the South. The doctrine of these religions have thought highly human morality and considered human morality as religious principle. These religions have paid attention to the Four Debts of Gratitude (to our ancestors and parents; to our country, to Three Treasures- Buddha, Dharma and the Buddhist Church; to our fellow countrymen and mankind).

According to us condition and human morality had special role and decisive significance in reclaiming wasteland so new religious current was born. All religions have attached much importance to practicing human moralities but Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa and Hòa Hảo Buddhism have considered human moralities as religious principles and the way of religious practice. *These religions*

*have raised human moralities in tradition into the main contents of their doctrines, or we can say the human moralities have been religionized.*

The new religious current was the special phenomenon in the South. It was born to meet special need- giving prominence to human moralities of settlers who reclaimed the waste lands. This religious current has continued Vietnamese cultural tradition. Moreover, it has contributed and enriched Vietnamese cultural tradition in special historical condition in the South.

These above examples are only few of many religious phenomena in Vietnam. If we look at them from the culturology angle we should find that they were established and developed to satisfy the urgent and workaday needs of nation, of each community and of each region