

## **THE VIETNAMESE RELIGIOUS TOLERATION TOWARDS THE THREE RELIGIONS THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY OF VIETNAM**

**Huệ Khải** <sup>°</sup>

Since the first and second dynasties of the Common Era, the Vietnamese has accepted the Three Teachings. The dynasties of Đinh, Lê, Lý, and Trần during the 10th-12th centuries marked Vietnam's long-lasting independence and autonomy, opening a heroic period of both defending and building the nation.

The historical situations made the military leaders entrust the intelligentsia. The class of Vietnamese Confucian scholars was not formed then, and it did not culminate until the Later Lê dynasty (1428-1788). In the early stage of the nation independence, maybe Confucian scholars' private schools or classes were not available; therefore, Buddhist pagodas took the role of Chinese teaching spots for both lay disciples and priesthood.

To be able to read Buddhist sūtras, monks had to study Chinese characters via Confucian literature. Thus, it is not surprising that most of the then monks also mastered Confucian learning. Like Zen Master Vạn Hạnh (?-1018), some of them were experts in Confucian *Yijing* and Daoist *fengshui* (geomancy).

In short, most of the ancient Vietnamese intelligentsia were Buddhist monks and Daoist priests. These intellectual religious had national awareness, true patriotism, and profound knowledge of their own religious teachings as well as of sutras and literature of other religions. In consequence, having religious tolerance towards the Three Teachings, they soon stood together under the national flag to wholeheartedly support both domestic and foreign policies of the imperial court.

Under the Đinh, Lê, Lý, and Trần dynasties (968-1400), the historical situations turned Vietnam into fertile soil for the Three Teachings' to grow strongly with the Vietnamese religious toleration.

Such kings as Đinh Tiên Hoàng (reigned 968-979), Lê Đại Hành (reigned 980-1005), and Lý Thái Tổ (reigned 1009-1028) invited eminent monks and Daoists to the imperial court and made them advisors or national preceptors.

In 971, King Đinh Tiên Hoàng conferred *Tăng Thống* (General Supervisor of Monks) on Zen Master Khuông Việt (Ngô Chân Lưu, 933-1011), *Sùng Chân Uy Nghi* (Noble and Upright Majesty) on Zen Master Đặng Huyền Quang, and *Tăng Lục* (Monk Scribe) on Taoist Trương Ma Ni.

King Lý Thái Tổ had Vạn Tuế Pagoda and Thái Thanh Palace built in Thăng Long, the capital city.<sup>(1)</sup> The King also conferred *Quốc Sư* (National Preceptor) on Zen Master Vạn Hạnh (?-1018).

King Lý Nhân Tông (reigned 1072-1127) was close to Zen Master Giác Hải and Taoist Thông Huyền. Once, after testing the magical power of Giác Hải and Thông Huyền, the King admired them both and improvised the following poem:

<sup>°</sup> Dũ Lan Lê Anh Dũng, Hồ Chí Minh City.

<sup>1</sup> Lê Quý Đôn. *Toàn Tập* (Complete Works), Vol. 2: *Kiến Văn Tiểu Lục* (Miscellaneous Records of Things Heard and Seen), Social Sciences Press, Hanoi, 1977, pp. 368 - 387.

*Monk Giác Hải's mind is immense like the sea,  
Taoist Thông Huyền's power is beyond mystery.  
Their marvelous skills are supernatural,  
One is Buddha, the other an Immortal.*<sup>(2)</sup>

At the glorious beginning of the history of Vietnam, the then kings decided to recruit talented people on the results of two Three Religions examinations. The first was held in 1195 under King Lý Cao Tông (reigned 1175-1210); the second in 1247 under King Trần Thái Tông (reigned 1226-1258).

When advising or admonishing the kings, open-minded monks did not absolutely cling to Buddhist doctrine but used either Taoist or Confucian doctrine for persuasion.

When King Lê Đại Hành (reigned 980-1005) asked Zen Master Đỗ Pháp Thuận (915-990) about the destiny of the country, he was advised to apply Laozi's doctrine of non-action. The reply in verse reads:

*In chaos was once all over the country,  
Peace now is reigning.  
Should non-action be the imperial policy,  
Everywhere the clash of weapons will cease.*<sup>(3)</sup>

In 1130, when standing in Sùng Khai Palace, Zen Master Viên Thông (1080-1151) used the Yijing philosophy to explain to King Lý Thần Tông (reigned 1128-1138) the reasons of the ascent and the decline of a country. After emphasizing that the prosperity or the fall of a country did not come overnight, the monk concluded:

“Knowing this principle, ancient sage kings modeled themselves on the celestial way to unceasingly improve their virtue for self-cultivation. They modeled themselves on the terrestrial way to unceasingly improve their virtue to keep people in peace. For self-cultivation one must be as cautious as walking on thin ice layer [over a river]. To keep people in peace one must love his subordinates and be as scared as holding worn-out reins on a horse back.”<sup>(4)</sup>

In 1202, Zen Master Nguyễn Thường as *Tăng Phó* (Vice Supervisor of Monks) admonished King Lý Cao Tông as follows:

“I've learned that the Preface to the Odes says that the music of a troubled country sounds mournful to resent its wrong political affairs. The one of a lost country sounds distressing to wail over its people's destitution. Now Your Majesty indulges in immoderate pleasure, imperial court's punishment and rewards are not politically re-educational, and our people are in distress. So far the situation gets worse and worse. However, you still enjoy mournful music every day. Is it not the omens for the fall of and the trouble in the country?”<sup>(5)</sup>

Some historical events mentioned above show that throughout Vietnam's ancient times the Three Religions were in harmony in the nation with the Vietnamese religious toleration. This harmony is the seed of the theory of the Three Religions' common origin. /.

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Literature Studies. *Thơ Văn Lý-Trần* (Lý-Trần Poetry and Literature), Vol. 1, Social Sciences Press, Hanoi, 1977, pp. 434-435. 覺海心如海/通玄道又玄/神通兼變化/一佛一神仙

<sup>3</sup> Institute of Literature Studies. *Thơ Văn Lý-Trần*, Vol. 1, Ibid, p. 204. 國祚如藤絡,/南天裏太平/無為居殿閣/處處息刀兵.

<sup>4</sup> Institute of Literature Studies. *Thơ Văn Lý-Trần*, Vol. 1, Ibid, p. 142, Huệ Chi trans.

<sup>5</sup> Institute of Literature Studies. *Thơ Văn Lý-Trần*, Vol. 1, Ibid, p. 528, Phạm Tú Châu trans.