

# SOME THOUGHTS ON RELIGIONS AND RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS AT PRESENT

Đỗ Quang Hưng<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In recent years, festive problem has attracted so much people's attention. In present society with social, economic and cultural changes, may people come back spiritual world? So spiritual atmosphere that seemed to vanish in the past has restored and developed strongly at present. In recent years, the reverse of this development has proclaimed that the festive performances are excessive and costly. In festivals, worldly interests are dignified so the spiritual sense of festivals is reduced; superstitious activities are more obviously in festivals. That is reason why many people say, "We have not attended festivals for a long time because cultural elements in festivals are more and more weak"<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this article would like to study religious aspect in order to explain the variants of festivals. On the other hand, we try to propose some resolutions in order to preserve and promote the true cultural and spiritual values of festivals and restrict wrong activities of festivals.

### **1- Festival: the role spirit- religion in traditional structure of festival**

#### ***1.1 Rite and festival: The twin categories***

In Vietnam as well as in many different countries, festivals have consisted two united elements- rite (spiritual religion) and festival (sentimental manifestation of community). Rites always have accompanied by festivals so that rites can attract many people. Festivals have to accompany with rites so they can become sacredly. Furthermore, not all

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<sup>1</sup> Prof. Dr. Political Department, Hanoi University

<sup>2</sup> Vuong Tri Nhan: The world and Vietnam magazine vol. 17, 2007

forms of religions and beliefs can be established without festivals. Festival is language of action of community. Festival have attracted people and rooted deeply religious consciousness and sentiment of people in general and religious believers in particular.

Festival plays an important role in popular culture because in festival people can express community psychology.

As you know, in festivals, there are religious characters and people can leave the worldly burden and contact with spirits and saints. People can find supernatural beliefs in festivals so many games in festivals have religious nuances.

Many festivals often connect with *pilgrimages*. However, the pilgrimages are more and more meaningful when religious believers perform religious action in Holy Land. Many pilgrimages in our country such as the pilgrimages to the Huong pagoda, to Yen Tu, to Black Virgin Mountain, also have psychological effect.

In the structure of festivals, there are two elements such as festival and rite. The relation of these elements is dialectic relation, but rite plays key role. Now nobody can affirm that all present festivals ensure this principle. It is easy for us to find the cause of festive inflation.

## ***1.2 The influence of spiritual and religious problems on festivals***

If you would like to know how spiritual and religious problems influence on festivals you should trace back two twin concepts: spirit and spiritual culture and spirit and religion. If you do not understand these two twin concepts, you cannot realize essential impetus of festive problem in our country as well as moral activities of communities related to spirit and religion.

### ***1.2.1 On the concept of spirit and spiritual culture***

*The first, the concept of spirit*

From 1990s up to now, the word “*spirit*” is mentioned many times in books as well as in daily life. This word *spirit* becomes boring, as the Europeans have been allergic to the word *modernity*. Although they are unhappy with the word *modernity* they cannot leave it

In our country, there are many different definitions of spirit.

The function of dictionary is to explain concepts compactly. However, in recent years many dictionaries only explain concepts generally. For the word “*tam linh*” (spirit), many dictionaries explain that “*tam*” is heart, “*linh*” is lucid and holy so “*tam linh*” means lucid and holy mind.

Many dictionaries also explain some words such as spirit, psychology, belief and religion. At present, we do not mention the difference between belief and religion because definition on religious concept is long problem in comparison with finding the definition of spiritual concept. At present, we can find the definitions of spirit as follows.

When discussing “Vietnamese consciousness”, Vu Ngoc Khanh, the author of the book “*Approaching to Folklore treasure of Vietnam*” thinks that “spirit is the supernatural force with interference of sacred power”. He defines that “spirit is synonymous with consciousness, mind, psychology, heart.” In his opinion, spirit and consciousness originated from human thoughts when human beings contact with things they have feeling so that metal structure (consciousness and unconsciousness) has been established. The metal structure is the basis of faith, belief and religion.

*The psychological dictionary* of Nguyen Khac Vien (Culture and sport publisher, 2001) defines the word “*tam*” (mind) such as metal disorder, metal illness, innermost heart, inner feeling, strength of mind, state of mind etc. What a pity, Nguyen Khac Vien did not define the word *tam linh*

(spirit). According to his explaining we can find that spirit and psychology are alike.

The book *Spirit of Vietnam* written by Nguyen Duy Hinh (Encyclopedia Publisher, 2007) defines that “Spirit is premonition of invisible phenomena to influence human life. Human beings feel these phenomena through experiences in their life. The premonition of sacredness influences life and death of human beings...”

Some researcher also incline toward the concept that spirit is sacred in daily life as well as in religious beliefs. Therefore, spirit is abstract and mystical. Some writers think that superstition is also spirit but superstition is blind and negative phenomenon of spirit in spiritual life (for example witchcraft, magic, burning votive paper...)

Many intellectuals in religions also take part in “this discussion”. Venerable Thich Duc Thien said, “Many people often mistake religion for spirit. Religion has many problems concerning spirit but spirit is not only related to religion but also many problems. For example, the *telepathy* is spirit but not religion. At present, spirit is research subject of *spiritual science*. The spiritual science is different from other scientific branches such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, medicine because it does not use calculations, formulas, laboratory but it only uses assumed arguments”<sup>3</sup>.

The above definitions of spirit are different from each other but they often link spirit with sacredness. Sacredness is the great invention of human beings. It is considered as the sublimable values of “earthiness”. Sacredness has been the most important factor to develop belief, religion for a long time. It is said that, sacredness in the contemporary world has new values and nuances

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<sup>3</sup> *The health and the life* newspaper, November, 2006

Since 1930, Einstein wrote, “the most beautiful thing that we have experienced is mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom the emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand wrapped in awe, is as good as dead- his eyes are closed”<sup>4</sup>. Einstein did not use the word *tam linh* (spirit) but he warned that human being need to keep “sacredness”, “mysteriousness” and “transcendence”. His observation is considered to be foretelling because in present world, there are many changes and human being seem to lose their sacredness. On sacredness, many people think that not only great religions are interested in spirit but also many fields are interested in spirit. In the late XX century. Malreaux, French prophet foretold, “XXI century is the century of spirit or of nothing”.

The religious researchers consider telepathic spirit, a special power of human beings, as *near-religion*. It means that spirit has not been religion yet and belief but it is very close to religion and belief. Human beings sometimes worry about spirit.

We can find the complication of spirit. Human beings also want to explain and image this special psychological state because it is necessary in the contemporary life from the East to the West. On the other hand, in actual life, the use of spiritual values gives trouble to people.

Some people think that Asian countries and Oriental peoples have traditions to respect values of wisdom so they use the spiritual values in favorable condition although the definition of spirit is very complicated and contradictory.

Actually, it is difficult to distinguish the words: *spirit*, *religion* and *mystique* in the West.

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<sup>4</sup> Einstein *The World as I see*, 1930

In Europe, since the ancient time Christianity used the word *esprit* (spirit) with flexible significances like the word *spirit* in Viet Nam with following significances: mind, sacredness, brave soul, strong will. Some Catholics remark that the words “*spirit, religion and mystique*” also have different significances like the words “spirit, belief and religion” of Vietnamese language.<sup>5</sup>

*Second, the concept of spiritual culture.*

Since 1900, the concept of *spiritual culture* has become more popular. In fact, spiritual life is connected with Vietnamese culture as what Vu Ngoc Phan wrote in *Approaching to folklore treasure of Vietnam*. We also think that spiritual life cannot separate from social life as well as cultural life. In other words, spirit is also an element of national culture. In “Learning about national cultural identity of Vietnam” (Hò Chí Minh publisher, 1997), the author Tran Ngoc Them considers belief as an organizable form of individual life. Although writer has not any definition of belief but he stresses on the character of belief. According to him, belief is spiritual need of people in order to direct to sacredness and miraculousness.

Many authors also affirm that spirit connects with thought of people. and spirit has become” spiritual culture” in common culture through reality<sup>6</sup>. Some people think that the elements, which constitute spiritual culture, consist of customs (wedding ceremony, funeral, and rite), festivals and religious beliefs.

However, many elements of spiritual culture have not explained clearly. The worship of ancestor is typical example. Many people consider the worship of ancestor as belief to manifest moral principles on “when drinking

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<sup>5</sup> Priest Phan Tan Thanh *Spiritual life* Roma, 2011

<sup>6</sup> Nguyen Dang Duy *Spiritual culture*, 1996

water, remember its source” or “repaying ancestors’ kindness”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, they affirm that the worship of ancestor is not religion or superstitious activity. Some others still affirm that the worship of ancestor is a national religion.

We think that it is the complicated problem concerning to spirit. We know that the values of spirit and mind of Vietnamese people have established the concepts of *soul, live principle, and vital spirit* for a long time. These concepts are unique; they reflect the life after death. We cannot say that the worship of ancestor only commemorates the dead because people always pray the dead to help and support them when they worship their ancestors. Some Western scholars as Cadiere, P.Huart, and M. Durand also gave similar analyses.

The values of spiritual culture connect with the values of religious culture and belief. Sometimes they cannot separate from each other. It looks as if the values of spiritual are soul, essence and motive power of religious culture. So that they are not only the problem of individual life and the psychological aspect of the individual.

The awareness of spiritual culture is complicated problem. At present festivals are developing more and more (although not all the rites of festivals have religious significance) so spiritual activities of the individual or social groups are mistaken or abused.

Now, in our country there are 8902 festivals, among them there are more 7000 popular festivals, 407 historical festivals, 1399 religious festivals and 64 festivals of cultural tourism and cultural holiday. Besides these above festivals, we have 25 festivals, which are imported from other countries. With simple operation, we can find that we have 20 festivals a day so

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<sup>7</sup> Hoang Quoc Hai *Custom culture* Women publisher, 2007

nobody can attend all festivals. Because such spiritual activities connect with religious activities so the spiritual problem becomes more and more complicated.

At present, not only the adults go to pagodas but also many students, pupils do that, especially businesspersons diligently go to pagodas. According to Ph.D thesis “The private temples in Hanoi”, we find that in Hanoi there are about 500 private temples. Therefore, that money for building these temples amounts to billion *dong*

The satisfaction of spiritual need in worried and changeable condition is true problem. Because of the outbreak of festivals, economic market and psychological motive take advantage of festivals so that spiritual problem becomes complicated .

### *1.2.2 On the concept of religion – spirit.*

Religion and *spirit* are popular social phenomena. They connect with human life and society.

In general, the belief term consists of religious belief and popular belief. The *religious belief* is the faith in supernatural power according to given principles of religious practice. The *popular belief* is the faith in deities through simple rites. The popular belief often connects with traditional customs and habits. It is a part of popular culture. It reflect spiritual wish of human being as well as of community. The spiritual concept is seldom used by scientific world. Connotation of this term is not clear. However, this term is rather widespread in our country. At first, we can understand that “*spirit*” is the state of religious consciousness; or ideas of livings when they think about the dead<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> See Nguyen Van Huyen in *Vietnamese civilization*, 1994

As already stated, on religious aspect, form of spiritual activities are considered as the form of “near- religion”. This problem is rather popular in XXI century. On the one hand, spiritual element affects powerfully on religious life. Because of changes of spiritual life, many new religions come into the world. On the other hand, *the form of near religion* influences festivals.

In our country, almost festivals is taken advantage of by human beings. The outbreak of festivals satisfy spiritual need of people but “what a pity the rites of festivals are unprompted and uncontrolled so many festivals are little short with commerce.”<sup>9</sup>

Many festivals intentionally create strange stories. For example, the festival of Madam Chua Kho only bases on oral transmittance. The story of Madam Chua Kho causes a lot of arguments. Many festivals, which relate to Madam Chua Kho, Y Lan or the temple of Hoang Muoi have arrangement of human beings in order to increase spiritual element of festivals. Many festivals are inclined towards performing. Therefore, the officers dealing with management of festivals should pay attention to these above problems. They should have strict rules when they consider and recognize festivals.

In short, if we would like to understand the complicated problems in developmental tendency of festivals we not only put these problems in present condition of politics, culture and society but also study active principle of festivals, first the influence of these above concepts that we dealt with

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<sup>9</sup> See Mai Thanh Hai in *Understanding traditional belief in Vietnam* Information and Culture Publisher, 2005 p. 85

