

# Religious Transformation in Vietnam in the Context of International Integration

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**Abstract:** Impacts caused by globalization and international integration have led to changes in Vietnam religious life in various dimensions. The paper presents some religious changes in three fundamental aspects, namely: faith, practice and community. In terms of faith, religious transformation is shown most obviously via religious conversion (or change in faith); In terms of practice, it is shown via some factors such as characteristics, scale, degree etc.; In terms of community, there is emergence of new religious communities, especially in the North-west, the Central Highlands, and the South-west. The religious transformation in Vietnam in the context of international integration has raised some issues, such as preservation and conservation of Vietnamese traditional cultural values generally and religious values particularly.

**Key words:** Transformation; integration; international; religious; globalization.

## 1. Introduction

International integration is an inevitable process, resulting from objective factors and internal needs of nations as well. Together with globalization, international integration creates development opportunities for nations involved. Besides, international integration causes risks and challenges. For example, national independence and sovereignty may be violated; cultural identities may fade out; and, traditional values may be eroded, etc. International integration unavoidably results in changes in many dimensions of social life, including changes in religious faith, about which the author would like to outline some main features in this paper.

In Vietnam, international integration started more than 20 years ago. Owing to the renovation (*Đổi mới*), a socialist-oriented market economy was built and international integration were carried out, bringing great positive changes to economic, political, cultural, and social development. In the religious field, impacts caused by international integration have led to religious transformation

and changes in religious life. This is at least shown by changes in three fundamental aspects, including: *religious faith, religious practice and religious community*. In this paper, we are not describing what religious transformation means (in terms of concepts, nature, and content etc.), but we just focus on changes and conversion of religions (via the three above-mentioned aspects) due to impacts of globalization and international integration.

## 2. Religious transformation

Globalization and international integration accelerate activities of exchange between different cultures, nations, and ethnic groups. In this context, religions, religious factions, and new religious phenomena get favorable conditions to be disseminated into Vietnam, resulting in a picture of religious diversity in Vietnam. In such an environment of religious diversity, it is inevitable that competition between religions will occur.

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On the one hand, religions have to make every effort to strengthen the faith among the current faithful; on the other hand, they have to build more faith among those, who are not followers yet. As a result, a change in religious faith is created. The change in faith happens to not only one religion or a group of religions, but also all religions, including both traditional and local-created as well as those introduced from outside<sup>(1)</sup>. One of the most obvious manifestations for the change in faith is religious conversion. At present, it is relatively common that people change from the polytheistic to the monotheistic faith, or from the traditional religion to the Catholic or Protestant Church, especially in the Northwest, the Central Highlands, and the Southwest Vietnam. In the Northwest specifically, a lot of H'mong and Dao people have converted from their traditional religion to the Protestantism. In other ethnic groups, such as Tày, Thái, Nùng etc., some people have also become Protestant now, but they just make up a little proportion. In the Central Highlands, people of many ethnic minorities have converted from the traditional religions to the Protestantism. At present, there are about 440 thousands of Protestant followers in the Central Highlands, making up nearly 50% of the total number of Protestant followers in Vietnam. Remarkably, about 90% of the Protestant followers in the Central Highlands are people of ethnic minorities; most of them started to follow the Protestant Church during the period of *Đổi mới*, when market economy and international integration were carried out. In addition, there are also conversions from the Catholicism to the Protestantism or Buddhism and vice versa. In the Southwest Vietnam, a number of people have converted from the Theravada Buddhism to

the Protestantism (Trần Hồng Liên, 2014: Vol.5). In the meanwhile, a number of people have converted from the traditional religions as well as the Catholicism, the Protestantism, and the Buddhism to new religious denominations such as the Ho Chi Minh Spirit and the Consistentism etc.

Regarding to the nature and the level of faith, we haven't had enough data to conclude whether the religious faith has been greater or lesser in the context of international integration. The rapid increase in the number of religious followers and places of worship or the return of traditional religions as well as the active participation of followers in religious activities do not show this precisely. It is necessary to take into account of many factors, in order to affirm whether the religious faith has been greater or not. In our opinion, however, the religious conversion that has been taking place popularly in Vietnam due to international integration does not deprive of an outstanding characteristic of religious faith among Vietnamese people, which is the religious diversity or also named by some scholars as the harmonious mixture of religions. This makes Vietnamese people have faith in different gods at the same time. As described in the work "*On religious faith in Vietnam at present*", Đặng Nghiêm Vạn argues that: "*Each Vietnamese person may take part in activities of different religions. Followers of each religion easily accept the placement of*

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<sup>(1)</sup> In this paper, we do not mention changes of local-created religions such as Cao Dai (Cao Đài), Hoa Hao Buddhist (Hòa Hảo), Buu Son Ky Huong (Buu Son Kỳ Hương), Tu An Hieu Nghia (Tư An Hiếu Nghĩa) etc., as we did not have favorable conditions to carry out relevant surveys on them. Thus, we just focus our analysis on changes of traditional religions as well as those introduced from outside under impacts of international integration.

*other religious deities on their own religious shrine*” (Đặng Nghiêm Vạn, 1998: 134). In other words, the religious faith of Vietnamese people is really diversified; they can believe in many different gods at the same time; *“they spread out their faith to many deities, since all deities will be trusted the same in their eyes, if the deities help to satisfy what they pray for or meet their religious psyche. Thus, they sometimes have more trust in ghosts than the Buddha or have more trust in the Buddha than the Saint etc.”* (Đặng Nghiêm Vạn, 1998: 135-136). Conversion from one religion to another religion, especially from the faith in the traditional religions to the faith in monotheistic religions such as the Catholicism and the Protestantism, does not mean that they “completely break with” the traditional religions, but possibly they still remain taking part in activities of the traditional religions.

Vietnamese people by the nature have polytheistic beliefs; they can place trust in many different gods. In the context of international integration, activities of exchange and communication between beliefs and religions are carried out more actively; different overseas religions are introduced to Vietnam; more Vietnamese people go abroad to study or work etc. As a result, new religions are adopted, making the religious faith more and more diversified. This can be seen at all levels, including: individual, family, and community. There is, for example, a phenomenon that members of the same family do not share the same religion.

Another manifestation of the change in religious faith under the impact of international integration is shown in *changes in structure of religious faith and mechanism of faith formation*. International integration and globalization have resulted in an information boom, leading to introduction of various

religions into Vietnam by different ways, such as: tourism, study courses, conferences, literature dissemination, and the mass media etc. In the meanwhile, big religions in the world always try to disseminate their ideology, aiming at getting more and more followers. Many new methods of religious dissemination are applied to meet requirements in the new context as well as to improve the competitiveness among different religions. This has really diversified further the adoption and formation of religious faith among local people. In the past, for instance, to adopt a new religious belief, people had to come to the place of worship or they must get direct guidance from religious officials or missionaries. At present, however, people can adopt a new religious belief just via the radio, video-cassettes, publications, and internet websites. For the past few years, there have been even “Online Temples” (Mai Thị Hạnh, 2014: Vol.12).

In the past, therefore, a common characteristic of religious faith among Vietnamese people was that “most of people believe in Buddhist and they started to follow the Buddhism owing to rituals but not the Buddhist dogmas”. However, this has changed. At present, religious faith of Vietnamese people is not completely based on feeling as before, but it is also based on reason. More precisely, *there has been more reason in religious faith of Vietnamese people*. Dang Nghiem Van made a comment: *“Followers are no longer obedient as before; now they have a feeling of doubt about dogmas; there is a sign showing that people start to support the tendency to return to the national and original nature”* (Đặng Nghiêm Vạn, 1998: 137). In the past, people had religious faith due to factors of feeling and it was ruled over by affection. In the present context, however, people have better understanding of religions,

owing to development of information, communication, and religious publications. Consequently, they can make a more thorough choice, before adopting a religious belief.

In addition to the above-described change in religious faith, there are also changes in religious practice. At first, it is very easy to recognize changes in practice of traditional religions, especially among ethnic minorities. The changes take place by two opposite tendencies: “simplification” and “complexification”. According to a research work done by Vuong Duy Quang, some activities of traditional religions, which were too complicated, wasting a lot of time and money, have been adjusted to be more appropriate. In a funeral ceremony of H’mong people, for example, complicated rituals to offer condolences and return courtesy have been cut down; instead of kneeling and having a drink for three times as before, they just have to celebrate the head and drink a little symbolically. In many areas of Dao people, the biggest worship is Bàn Vương Worship, but it is now carried out less often and offerings are also simpler; “the sacrifice pigs” are no longer so big as those in the past, but it is just necessary to have two pigs as regulated by the custom; the worship steps are also cut down. Contrary to the above-mentioned tendency of simplification, traditional rituals are now carried out more expensively and animatedly in some areas, where living conditions are better, for they want to show off their position in community. In many areas of Tày and Nùng people, for example, living conditions have been much better, owing to renovation. As a result, some festivals with traditional rituals, which used to sink in oblivion for years or were even considered as superstitious in the subsidy period, are now revived. Remarkable examples include

the restoration of the Rain Praying festival among Nùng people and Lồng Tồng festival among Tày people etc. (Vuong Duy Quang, 2011: Vol.7)

Additionally, changes in religious practice are shown in forms, styles, scales, and levels of religious activities. As mentioned in the above part of this paper, the emergence of “online temples” is an indicator to show the change in religious practice under the impact of globalization and international integration. We all realize that in the past, people had to come to places of worship such as a temple, a pagoda, a shrine etc. in order to show their faith. After coming to the places of worship, they personally carried out activities of religious practice and directly “contacted” sacred objects. In the present context, however, many people do not have favorable conditions to go to the place of worship to practice religious activities, due to living constraints caused by industrialization and modernization. Instead, they carry out religious practice indirectly. In the paper “Online temples and Buddhist modernization in the contemporary social context in Vietnam”, Mai Thị Hạnh argued: “The emergence of the online temples can be viewed as a way to modernize Buddhism. Specifically, owing to the online temples, Buddhist modernization is shown via the way to make Buddhist worship, the way to carry out Buddhist practice, and the way to propagate Buddhist dogmas” (Mai Thị Hạnh, 2014: 51). Can the online temples with indirect practice replace real places of worship? And to what extent? To answer these questions, it is necessary to conduct further research. Herein, we are just presenting some preliminary assessments, as below: the online temples probably help to satisfy the need of getting understanding of Buddhist dogmas and classics, as well as

methods to sit in meditation etc. At the same time, the online temples may provide Buddhist followers and those, who have faith in Buddhism, with the way to pray, the way to organize a prayer meeting, and the stages in leading a religious life etc. The online temples can hardly replace real temples, in terms of contacting sacred objects. Furthermore, traditionally religious practice sets up high community cohesion - an extremely important characteristic, which cannot be provided by the online temples.

Apart from the online temples, the phenomenon of online worship has also existed recently. It is actually a service of spirituality. This is also seen as one of the forms to have indirectly religious practice. Due to geographical and time constraints, some people cannot come to the graves of ancestors to burn incense on the occasion of the Tết holidays or the anniversary of their death etc. They, therefore, have to use such a service to make the worship, burn incense, and take care of the graves of ancestors.

In the context of international integration, a common feature of both religious faith and religious practice, particularly for traditional religions in Vietnam, is that they are pragmatic, exploited, and commercialized. We do not mean that international integration is the sole reason for commercialization of religious practice and faith. In other words, international integration is just one of the reasons for the above-mentioned changes. More specifically, religious practice and faith in Vietnam have been commercialized and pragmatic, because the fact that one takes unfair advantage of religious faith and practice to earn profit has become rather popular now. Some phenomena, such as divination, necromancy, and votive offering burning etc., are carried out rather extensively and widely in religious life of people at

present. One of the manifestations for the commercialization of religious practice and faith is that people struggle against each other to get offerings at places of worship and ceremonies etc., as written in a lot of newspaper articles in 2015. As religious practice and faith have become pragmatic, some places of worship and some ceremonies are sometimes overcrowded. A lot of people believe that they will get supports from the god, if they not only come to the places of worship “to burn incense” with a sincere heart, but they also have to give offerings as much as possible. As a result, they find it necessary to bring offerings to the Buddha personally, in order to get his support. Another manifestation of the pragmatic religious practice and faith is that some followers make religious conversion just for the sake of material needs. According to the survey conducted in the Central Highlands, we realize a phenomenon, which we temporarily name as “frog followers”; i.e. followers easily change from one religion to another religion, from one faction (the Protestant, for example) to another fraction, aiming at getting material benefit. One of the reasons why a part of people of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands have converted to the Catholicism or the Protestantism is that they think “it costs less to be followers of the Jesus”. Thus, in such cases, the acquisition of religious faith does not merely stem from “the faith in sacred objects”. It is possible to see the above-mentioned pragmatic and commercialized practice and faith as an indicator for degradation of religious practice and faith.

In addition to changes in religious practice and faith, there are also changes in religious community under the impact of globalization and integration. We can realize this easily, when looking at religious

community from the ethnic and local perspective. For ethnic minorities in mountainous areas such as the Central Highlands and the Northwest, it is relatively popular that people have converted from a traditional religion to another religion. Yet, this has not happened to Kinh people in the plain areas such as the Red River Delta. On the contrary, traditional religions of Kinh people in those areas have developed more than before. In terms of religious practice and faith, therefore, there is a difference between mountainous and plain areas as well as between ethnic minorities and ethnic majorities (Kinh people, for example). For ethnic minorities in mountainous areas, religious practice of traditional religions and beliefs tends to be cut down and simplified; whereas, for Kinh people in plain areas, it tends to develop more in terms of both scale and extent.

### **3. Some recommendations**

*Firstly*, international integration has resulted in an increase in activities of cultural and religious exchange and adoption, enriching the traditional culture and religions in Vietnam. It is, however, necessary to take into account of preservation and conservation of the traditional culture before the encroachment of inappropriate cultural values from outside. Recently, the mass media revealed that overseas-originated sacred animals, which were not appropriate with Vietnamese traditional values, started to appear in many places of religion, places of culture and public places as well. This made officials of cultural management promulgate and implement strict measures. On 8<sup>th</sup> June 2014, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism issued the official document No.2662/BVHTTDL-MTNATL, warning individuals/organizations not to use and advising them to move the symbols, products, and sacred animals, which were

not appropriate with habits and customs of Vietnamese people, away from vestiges, offices, and public places. By now, a number of inappropriate sacred animals have been moved away from cities/ provinces as well as religious places.

*Secondly*, in the context of international integration, issues involved with religious practice and faith are no longer limited within a small area such as a village, a commune, or a region etc., but they have been internationally related issues. Thus, religious practice and faith are also impacted by international community. One of typical examples is the Pig-killing festival held in Nem Thuong (Ném Thượng) Village (Bac Ninh Province). Local people in Nem Thuong Village are now facing the fact that they probably will be forbidden holding the festival, due to the pressure from domestic as well as international public opinions.

*Thirdly*, in the context of international integration, the increase in cultural and religious exchange as well as religious contact and dissemination surely results in an environment of diversified religions and beliefs. Apart from positive impacts, however, the diversification of religions and beliefs may lead to contradictions and conflicts. This must be taken into account in the context of international integration and globalization at present.

*Fourthly*, as described above, religious practice and faith are exploited to become a source of benefit earning; consequently, they have become pragmatic and deteriorated. Thus, it is necessary to pay more serious attention to this, aiming at bettering the situation. There must be orientations and measures to make religious practice and faith “purer”.

### **Conclusion**

Based on all the above-described parts, we realize that religions are always impacted

by the historical and social context. Together with some factors such as advanced development of sciences and technology as well as broader telecommunication, globalization and international integration have resulted in a lot of changes in religious life. The religious changes have taken place in all aspects, such as faith, practice, and community as well as in all levels such as individual, family and community. Changes in religious faith do not only reflect the tendency of religious demands, but they also show characteristics of social faith. It is possible to affirm that religious faith is more profound than other types of social faith, but it may change quickly in a new environment and new conditions, especially under the impact of international integration, as we have mentioned in this paper.

Religious transformation in Vietnam under the context of international integration is an inevitable phenomenon in the historical and social evolution. In the one hand, the changes contribute a part into supplementing and adopting new values as well as filtering out inappropriate values, improving the vitality and competitiveness for religions. On the other hand, they may lead to negative social changes and even result in social complications, contradictions, and conflicts. Herein, we would like to make a comparison (which may not be very appropriate). In the economic field, if we do not know how to take full advantage of opportunities and we do not have sound strategies, Vietnam possibly will become a dumping ground or a production workshop for the world; we will become much dependent on international integration. In the cultural field generally, and the religious field specifically, if we do not pay proper concern and we do not have suitable policies, our culture and religions surely will become miscellaneous and we will lose

our identity, depending on other culture and religions. At that time, a lot of sacred animals, symbols, and images etc., which are not appropriate with Vietnamese culture, will be used in various places of worship and religious works. As a result, we will have to spend time and energy “tidying up”, like what the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism did recently. This is a really alarming issue that we have to concern about now.

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