

ON NEW RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON

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1. A few words on new religious term

How can we understand the phrase new religious phenomenon? According to me there are at least two reasons to define connotation of this term: first, the great religions do not consider groups or communities which have just appeared to be religion; the second the social managers do not consider them to be a serious entity in legal aspect. In some measure the spiritual term may take place of the religious term. But I find that the word spirit is used freely. So I have to use phrase new religious phenomenon because I can not create other term, at the same time many scholars in the world have still argued concepts such as “sect”, “new religious movement”. Many foreign scholars use the term ‘religions outside religion’ to denote new religious movement.

At present, there are many questions for us. First, do we need to study the new religious phenomenon? Second, is religious situation in our country different from religious situation in other countries? Third, what experience can we draw from awareness and resolved method of other countries. Our general answer is that we should consider new religious movement.

In general, we begin to consider and study some manifestations of new religious phenomenon both on practice and theory. In recent years there are new religious movements in the world. However, the matter of these movements is not quite new.

In Vietnam, we have studied the new religious phenomenon for a long time. We have studied new religions such as Caodaism and Hoa Hao Buddhism from 1920s. We have different and severe opinions. For the world has many changes especially the globalization of the world economy and culture, Vietnamese religions have same characters as other countries. That is the appearance of new religious phenomenon. The birth of new religions is not in plan of any social class.

I use the term *new religious phenomenon* in order to distinguish it from the traditional religions (they came into Vietnam from the early 20th century) and native agricultural religions.

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In large meaning, this term denotes spiritual phenomenon, mystery, sham science are appearing in society.

2. Some opinions on sects and new religious phenomenon

If we would like to understand the new religious phenomenon we can not but mention *sect* concept so that sect becomes subject in debates on politics, law and education in some countries.

We should examine sectarian phenomenon because this phenomenon has appeared in the world and it has related with religious phenomenon which is examined in Vietnam, especially in late decades of the 20th century.

Theoretically, almost countries in the world have sectarian phenomenon. However, many questions on sect are set up: what is sect? What standard do we rely on to define a legal sect? How are modern sects different from the old sects? How does society respond to sects? We have to find answers for these questions to understand new religious phenomenon (1).

The opinions on sect can be divided into two main approaches – social managers' approach and researchers' one. Sometimes managers recognize the views of researchers, on the contrary, researchers recognize practical ness in outlook of managers. It is important to find definition on sect in social debates. When we have exact definition of sect we can settle sects sensibly. We should examine some definitions of jurists and researchers who raised a debate in France some years ago. At present this debate goes on.

First of all, we should mention the definition of managers. In the report of Board of Investigation of French Parliament in 1996 with the name *Guyard Report* (Guyard is name of MP of Socialist Party who drafts and report text) puts forth definition of sect as followings: a sect is 'a trend with religious character'. This trend has at least 10 following characters.

1. Unequable mentality;
2. Excessive claim for finance;
3. To make definitively a break with original environment
4. To do harm;
5. To attract minors;
6. Its arguments more or less resist society;
7. To break public order
8. To argue with judicial system;
9. To have ability to change traditional economic cycle;

10. To tend to penetrate public power.

Ten above characters are also 10 standards to distinguish between sect and religion. For managers, these characters are dangers to society.

Why does Guyard Report definite sect like this? If we would like to understand this definite, we should understand religious environment in France and other countries. Many terrorist attacks were carried out in France, America, Japan and Switzerland. Because of Jonestown attack in 1978, French parliament paid attention to sectarian problem from 198. In 1985 Vivien Report (to be named of MP Alian Vivien who drafted this text) was circulated in its capacity as 'informational mission'. This report helped lawmakers to find danger of sect and sympathize with anti - sect, laic associations and Catholicism. Specially, the mass suicide of Solar temple sect in Canada and Switzerland in October, 1994 and sarin poisoning of Aum Shinrikyo in metro in 1995 made French parliament to pay attention to sectarian problem again. As a result, the report was drafted after 20 sessions and 21 hours of listening to witnesses.

10 characters of Guyard report in particular and the Guyard Report in general caused immediately arguments between researchers and political circles. Because this report did not refer to any opinions of researchers in history, sociology, religion, ethnology, even very few jurists took part in this report. The arguments not only happened in France but also in Italy, America, Britain, Canada, and Belgium... because in these countries there were similar events like in France.

10 standard in Guyard Report were rejected violently by researchers and Catholic Church.

Immediately after Vivien Report came into the world, Bishop Jean Vernet, the leader of "bishop, sect and new belief" association raised his voice. He noted danger signal when law resisted sects. He wondered definition of sect because term sect "is inexact, unclear and subjective". He was worried that "all things what are called sect or religious group may be applied to religions and churches through institutions and their members: monasteries, seminary..." He asks himself "It is true that State has a habit of making a choice between "good" groups and "bad" group? What legal standards does State rely on except the common law? Who define the boundary between missionary work and brainwashing, between spiritual orientation and unequable mind when children come into conflict with their families?" These question show that he was worried about the definition of sect.

On the contrary, bishop Trouslard, a specialist in French Catholic Church had other opinions. According to him "sect is not defined by catechism, theory and belief but by harmfulness. For me all sects are dangerous. Sects do not differ in nature, but they differ in degree".

The controversy happened in Fact-Finding Commission of French Parliament. Although MP Jean Pierre - Brar, Mayor Montreuil, the member of Fact - Finding Commission of French Parliament, who left Fact-Finding Commission of French Parliament afterward did not define sect clearly, he provided the image of sect through Opus Dei sect. He considered Opus Dei as a sect because it "has secret societies, appointment, worship, founder and its financial system. With such elements Opus Dei proved that it is a sect". He said clearly that... "It is difficult to define sect but State is helped to establish consultancy. Thanks to consultancy, State can determine clearly which organizations are sects".

How are these definitions in Guyard Report criticized? Reactions come from many aspects. Firstly, it is the definition of sect. Because there is not quite exact definition of sect, Fact-Finding Commission chooses a definition which has moral characters. These above standards which distinguish sects from religion are negative and these above standards were born in different times

The researchers think that the definition of sect in Report is "illogical according to logical, social and scientific views... According to Massimo Introvigne, an Italian researcher who summaries the process of argument, "the sectarian definition of researchers is different from the sectarian definition in report. Let me remind you that he is independent of the organizations of church as well as anti - sect associations.

He asks whether 10 above standards can apply to Christian and original religions or not. He wonders if original Christianity is "unequable mind" or body - violation. Might Nero be right when he convicted Christians and considered Christians reasoning to opposite society? Massimo Introvigne brings out example of American President Bill Clinton who follows Baptist sect. Fortunately, Baptist, Quaker and Mormon sects are undangerous according to the Report so American President "feels happy because he follows undangerous sect".

The Report not only brings out sectarian definition but also the list and classification of sects. In the Report sects are divided into two kinds: "notable sects" and "combinative sects".

For example, Scientology sect inclines to psychological analysis and treatment. When dividing sects, the Report usually bases on its definition so sect is combination of ill - doers or breachers of moral standards.

Basing on book *Sect Nouvelles: Un Regard Neuf* (New Sects: A New Recognition) written by Jean Francois Mayer, the Report brings out the list of new sects. Most of them originate from great religions such as Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shinto and religious groups as Esoterism, Bionomics, and New Age group. None of sect originates from Islam. The number of sects in the Report is more the number of sects to be given by *Renseignements generaux* organization ⁽²⁾.

How are researchers' views on sect? In general, researchers are very careful to assess sect when they know it very little, at least in theory. Although Massimo Introvigne criticizes violently the Report, he summarizes his writing by following ideas:

Sociologists, religious historians are neither friends nor lawyers of new religious movements; because of their professions they represent true reality and do not hide the most difficult aspect; they do not accept a general definition for all sects. It is not simple to distinguish between new religious movements from historical religions basing on the number of their believers; if we would like to understand the nature of sects we should study deeply sects' influences and theories in their behaviour and practice.

Although, Massimo Introvigne is not unique representative of research circle on religion, his writing is the result of discussions of researchers in Europe and America. Many well-known researchers write on the event of Guyard Report.

Beside the opinion of Introvigne, we should pay attention to the writing of Philippe Gast with the title *Anylyse critique de la situation des mouvements religieux en droit positif francais* (Critical analysis on situation of religious movements in accordance with French law). The writing has 44 pages and it consists 4 parts: the beginning and three main parts. After reading this writing we can find that

After dealing with the appearances of Homo sapiens and homo religions and Nietzsche's opinions, Phillippe Gast discusses two terms which are used in the

². Please note that Massimo Introvigne gave figures over 20,000 on new religious movement in the world today in the conclusion of his article entitled "*Sectes*" et "*droit de persecution*": *les raisons d'une controverse* in the book *Pour en Finir avec les Sectes*, but he also identified that it was not too much ten denominations just as guilty and causing violence.

late 19th century. They are worship and religion. Two terms are very necessary and used many times in Europe because they are both evolutionary and stable. He thinks that if the traditional religious system is defeated, especially after French State and Church are divided from each other by the law on December 9th, 1905. At the end 20th century there is "religious development". He recognizes that although science and democracy have made great advances, they can not resolve all problems which are made out for mankind.

One of these problems is *immortality of sense*. This idea is constant of all religions. Religions teach such and such form of immortality in terms of individual (the longeval method of Taoism, reincarnation, rebirth) or in term of super humanity (nirvana, meditation). This problem is also related to philosophy. If sense is immortal, all bad or good actions of human beings are flighty. The result of these actions perishes. At present, philosophical ideology does not propose hypothesis which are related to immortal sense so they can not encourage human beings. There are incorrect directions ways in our materialistic society. Religions always provide the final aim of life. This aim is one of many reasons for renovation of religion. In legal aspect, it is difficult to define how new religious movements are. In the legal documents there are concepts of worship and religion, but there are not any comprehensive definitions of worship and religion. On legislation, they only know terms *worship* and *congregation* but they do not know terms *religion* and *sect*. It is necessary for us to find definitions of religious terms although this work is not easy. Many historians, philosophers, sociologists try giving some definitions but their definitions are not successful.

Some researchers use deductive method and experience for deducting constants. Some sociologists try their best to find the standards of rite, ideology, society, philosophy or metaphysics but they recognize that not all these standards are present in all religions. We do not know the selective standards of religion if we have not exact definition.

In the other way, Philosophy and Law often use deductive method and Decarte method but these methods are abstract. The best method is basing on etymology. In ancient times they found the direct relation between law and religion

Thanks to the transcendental definement of *relation* etymology, we find three relations in religion.

1- The internal relation - individual is manifested in the form of vertical axis. Human beings can find the changeable state of sense which different from

normal state such as sleep, dream... Here religious nature is dealt with. Basing on religious nature spiritual experience is established. If we study histories of religions we should find all founders of religions teach spiritual state to their followers.

2- The collective relation is manifested in the form of horizontal axis. This relation has social nature. Thanks to this relation people combine each other then they divide them into groups.

3- They often forget dogmatic relation. It is an important relation to find religion clearly.

If democratic and scientific standards are maintained, the honest on religious movements division will be manifested by

- The quality of spiritual experience;
- The collective relation;
- The dogmatic relation is key nature in all religions. It is also key nature of democratic and scientific standards that our society often bases on. Because of this relation religions often contradict with modern. May religious extremism originate from this relation? The dogmatic relation, however, exists in all religious structures in this level or in other level. They invent that this relation only exists in one group or in one community.

When looking for definition they find some problems. For example, the oldest religions in the world discuss secularity nowadays. This is long way. Until the reign of Henry IV the concept of secularity appeared in France, i.e. French people are independent of French religions.

After analyzing, Philippe Gast concludes that we are short of an exact definition of sect and Board of Investigation of French Parliament also recognizes this problem. This problem is very important both in method and law.

Philippe Gast goes on:

Scientific method uses three methods to definite object: deductive method, inductive method, affirmative method.

Deductive approach: it is approach of people who follow Decarte party. This approach is scientific approach. It is not interested in reality.

Inductive approach: this approach bases on definition or law in reality. This approach is used in sociology. Might Max Weber apply the opposition of sect and church when he found that sects were wide - open communities but

Churches was closed communities? Ernest Troeltsch denoted that churches would come to terms with surrounding societies but sects would not. Other social approaches intended to define sects through dangers by guess (basing on the bad meaning of sect which was originated from religious wars in history). But inductive approach has some contradictions both in method and in selected standards.

Affirmative method: this method bases on definition and exact standards. Then it studies generality which is assessed by definition. Sociology often uses this method but it does not determine clearly standards and quality of definition. This method is null and void.

Because there are not exact standards and definition in law so law changes from severe system to mixed explanation. P. Gast also spoke of the danger of mixed explanation because this explanation mistakes spiritual movement or religion for sect. It also mistakes political movement for sect;

Until 1999 the debate of sect has still continued. The book of F. Champion and M. Cohen with title *Sects at democratic* is an example. According to this book, sect is a prejudiced social and complex problem. Two authors also deal with social argument over the Report of Board of Investigation of French Parliament. They define sect as follows.

Generally, the term sect is an accusatorial term. But this term has wider meaning. According to Massimo Introvigne, within Catholic Church there are sectarian characters. In the eyes of Protestant founders Catholic Church is a sect. In sociology, the term *sect* has exact meaning and it opposes Church. There is difference between common meaning and social meaning so some sociologists consider sects as *new religious movements*. They would like to analyze sect as social event: for us the term '*sect*' consists of open meanings and we would like to stick our opinion to analyses".

Two author return to religious definition. Because they think that they only determine how sect is when they know religion by following question. What group is religion or sect? At present, legal definition on religion in West is definition which was founded in history and applied into Christianity, Judaism. It corresponded with social definition and it became notable definition in XVIII and XIX. But social definition on religion also develops in religions so it does not correspond with legal definition.

On the other hand, scientific definitions on religion are close to social definitions. Scientific definitions on religion are really Babel of definitions. Scientific definitions witness the decline of ancient religions while speaking

new phenomena having religious characters. If there is not a general definition on religion, the researchers should *bring social definition on religion to light similar to definitions which were founded in history*.

In fact the study of sociology and religious history of sect came into the world for a long time. Max Weber was the first researcher to study this level. Then Troeltsch enriched the content of research. Two scholars established religious geometry. Their views can be summarized as follows:

According to Weber and Troeltsch, salvation had dualistic feature. Weber added up forms and organizational ways of religious groups. Troeltsch stressed on the content of religious groups. The sense of sects only exists in interactive relation and it opposes to the sense of church. Church is an institution without choice but sect consists of voluntary groups and they have same belief. A human being was born in Church he can be born in sect. He only becomes a member of sect when he converts to sect.

Fchampion and M. Cohen think that the division of Weber and Troeltsch is not suitable to new development of situation. Two authors remark that the many researchers deal with freedom of religion. They respect the main human rights, the equality of religious followers.

Here I would like to introduce the book *Religious Sociology* written by Sabino Acquaviva and Enzo Pace. Although two authors do not deal with sectarian problem directly in their book, they are leading specialists in sociology and religious sociology.

Here, I cite the first part of book because in this part there are many options which deal with the change of religion at present and how we can approach religious phenomena as well as sectarian phenomena. We can summary following points.

Firstly, two authors think that we should recognize the change of religious sociology: we should analyze theories, ideas and conclusions of great thinkers then we discuss religious institutions, religious practices, the relation between religion and society.

“Nowadays, the study of profound changes in religious life and organization is respected very much” (NQT). They like to build new model of theory basing on the study of what is happening more than the study of expression of religious sociology. In current change, religious experience is unique stableness. Religion is not knowledge or an action but it is sentiment of individual. Psychologically, religion is not unchangeable reality.

(To be continued)