

## THE VIEW OF VIETNAMESE COMMUNIST PARTY ON RELIGIOUS, BELIEF ISSUES AND RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS IN THE PERIOD OF RENOVATION

---

Nguyễn Phú Lợi<sup>(1)</sup>

### 1. The view of Vietnamese Communist Party on the issues of belief and religion

In cause of renovation, Vietnamese Communist Party gradually has changed its awareness of religion and of religious affairs. The turning point in the renovation of our Party's thought is the birth of Resolution No 24-NQ/TW of the Politburo dated 16<sup>th</sup> October 1990 on *Strengthening Religious Affairs in the New Situation*.

On awareness, Resolution No 24-NQ/TW has stated "three main subjects" of religious and belief matters: first, *belief and religion are spiritual needs of a segment of the population*; second, *religion will continue to exist*; third, *some aspects of religious ethics correspond with the cause of building new society*. In order to have new thoughts, Vietnamese Communist Party has studies and applied creatively Marxism and Hồ Chí Minh's thought to religious situation in Vietnam. In the process of renovation, Party's thought on religious issues has been supplemented and improved. On March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2003, the Politburo of the 9<sup>th</sup> Congress passed Resolution No 25-NQ/TW on *Religious Affairs* with following contents.

First, *Belief and religion are spiritual needs of a segment of the population*. It is the first renovation of Vietnamese Communist Party's thought on religious issues. This view can explain "ontologism" of religion because it can answer the question *what religion is*. Formerly, religion was approached from the angles of philosophical and political thought with two classic definitions "*religion is form of social sense*" and "*religion is opium of people*". Generally, this approach is right, but it is not enough according to new thought of Vietnamese Communist Party on religious issues. Because religion is not only philosophy (religion is a part of superstructure to reflect world outlook and outlook of

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr., Center for Religious and Belief Studies, Hồ Chí Minh Academy of Politics and Public Administration (HCMA).

life), political problem (religion can be took advantage by bad political forces) but also historical problem (religion can reflects historical process of human kind), awareness (religion can explain the world and human beings). Religion is also culture (religion can contribute to establishment of civilizations and cultured style life of human beings), ethics (religion has a part in correction of human beings' behaviors towards the genuine, the good, the beautiful)<sup>2</sup>. Religion is style life (religion contributes to establishment of the style life of believers). Religion is a social entity (religion has believers and the organization of church. The true religions help to strengthen community and stabilize society)...

With new views, Vietnamese Communist Party no longer recognizes religion in scope of philosophical and political thoughts but our Party recognizes religion in many different aspects. It is an important issue to show the thought of Vietnamese Communist Party on religious issues. It affirms that Vietnamese communists respect the spiritual life of people, true needs of believers. The respect, guarantee and satisfaction of the spiritual needs of people are similar to guarantee of other rights of human beings such as the rights to liberty, to health defense, to democracy...

*Second, Resolution No 24 not only affirms that "religion continues to exist" but also determines clearly that "religion and belief will continue to co-exist with the nation during the process of building socialism in our country*

If the first subject of Resolution no 24 deals with "ontologism" of religion, the second subject of Resolution deals with "the origin and existence of religion". Formerly, when explaining the birth, the existence and the development of religion, we often emphasize natural and social origins of religion.

*On natural origin:* Because of limited knowledge, human beings could not explain the natural world. They were in fear of nature so they always thought natural phenomena were made by deities. Lenin showed that the fear made gods.

*On social origin:* When antagonist class and oppression were established in society, "Impotence of the exploited classes in their struggle against the exploiters inevitably generates the belief in a better life after death, even as the helplessness of the savage in his struggle with nature gives rise to a belief in

---

<sup>2</sup> See: Nguyễn Thanh Xuân. *Returning to new views of renovation on religious affairs in Resolution No 24*, Religious Affairs Review, No 2 (10/2005) pp. 7-8.

*God, devils, miracles*<sup>(3)</sup>. It means that human beings seek religion to get protection and rescue.

The new view about the natural and social origin of religion is right but it is not enough because the birth of religion and religious existence base on many other reasons including awareness and psychology. Generally, religions try their best to explain the main problems of philosophy: such as where human beings were born? Where human beings go after they died. How the livings get in touch with the dead? Religions explain the next world attractively. Whenever human beings have not overcome death yet, religions have existed. When people cannot avoid misfortune and unexpected events so religions can continue to exist and develop<sup>(4)</sup>. Moreover, people follow religion to express their deep gratitude to their ancestor, grandparents and to people who had done great services to their country.

With new view, Vietnamese Communist Party thinks that religion will exist long. We cannot think simply that religions will died when people conquer nature or material life is raised. It is right and scientific analysis of our Party. It reflects the objectiveness in existence and development of belief and religion. According to Friedrich Engels *“When the man does not make plan but makes a success of plan, then the ultimate alien power that is reflected in religion will be lost and religious reflection will be lost. At that time there will be nothing to reflect.”*

From the subject “religions have existed long” Vietnamese Communist Party affirms that “religion will continue to co exist with nation in process of building socialism”. This view shows creation of our Party in applying Marxism - Leninism and Hồ Chí Minh’s thought to reality of Vietnam. It reflects the law of objective existence of belief and religion during the period of transition to socialism. It not only concretizes view of “religion will exist long” in Resolution No 24 but also develops view that “religion will exist long and coexist with nation during process of building socialism in our country”. This view has avoided unnecessary questions *“how long religions have existed”*. At the same time, this view has overcome the subjectivism that religions will pass away during process of building socialism.

---

<sup>3</sup> *Lenin Complete Work*, Vol 12, Matxcova Publisher, 1979, pp. 169-170 .

<sup>4</sup> See: Nguyễn Thanh Xuân. *Returning to new views of renovation on religious affairs in Resolution No 24*, Religious Affairs Review, No 2 (10/2005) pp. 7-8.

According to Marxism - Leninism, religion only passes away when economic - social bases including the bases of psychology and awareness of religions do no longer exist. It means there is nothing to reflect religion. During process of building socialism in our country, the relation between the man and the man, the man and natural world has many irrational matters. The wrong side of market mechanism, the gap between the rich and the poor, illness are objective bases for religious existence and development. It is difficult for us to guess how long religions have existed. We are sure that religion is an existent entity in socialism.

Third, our Party has not only recognized *ethics of religion* but also affirmed *cultural values and good tradition of religion and the resemblance of religious ideas with the purpose of socialism. Religion is considered as cultural constituent*. This view deals with the role, the function and the influence of religion. This approach to religion essentially bases on Hồ Chí Minh's thought and Vietnamese Communist Party's one in people's democratic revolution. This approach is supplemented and improved in the period of renovation. In process of existence and development, religion has shows two aspects: active aspect and negative one. In our struggle for national liberation, we often opposed hostile forces who took advantage of religion to destroy revolution. Therefore, we often paid attention to negative aspect of religion. With its new view, our Party not only restricts negative aspect of religion but also respects and promotes the active values of religion including religious ethics. Religion can correct human beings actions. Religion can make people towards the genuine, the good and the beautiful. Religious believers believe in the Supreme Being and the in the permanent life in the next world. They are afraid of retribution or karma so they have moral actions. Dogmas and religious teachings advise human beings to cultivate virtue and morals. Religions not only deify their morals norms but also correct believers' actions, so religious ethics contribute to correcting social actions of people.

Vietnamese Communist Party not only recognizes that religious ethics corresponds with the cause of building new society but also affirms that religion is an element of culture. Actually, Hồ Chí Minh dealt with this view in 1940s. He wrote “ *Because of existence and purpose of life, human beings created and invented language, writing, ethics, law, science, religion, literature, art, tool, modes of production. All creations and inventions were*

*culture*<sup>(6)</sup>. Because we had to carry out the duty of national liberation, so we could not implement completely Hồ Chí Minh's thought on religion. In the period of renovation, Hồ Chí Minh's thought on religion in general and the moral and cultural values of religion in particular are developed by Vietnamese Communist Party. Instruction No 37 of Politburo (2/7/1998) pointed out: "the good values of ethics and culture of religions should be respected and promoted"<sup>(7)</sup>. The Resolution of 5<sup>th</sup> Conference of 8<sup>th</sup> Central Committee on *building Vietnamese culture deeply imbued with its national identity*. The article 8 of this Resolution deals with "*Cultural policy towards religion*". It affirms "*encouraging justice, of humanity and benefaction of religions*"<sup>(8)</sup>.

Religion and belief are not only matters of spiritual life but also those of culture, ethics and style life. Therefore, Vietnamese Communist Party considers religion as an element of culture having some good values in the cause of building new society. Besides negative aspects, religion has many elements that correspond with the cause of building new society. These elements contribute to building Vietnamese culture deeply imbued with its national identity. Moreover, all true religions advise their believers to do good things. It is similar to our renovation with aims "wealthy people, strong country, just and civilized society". Because of right Party's policies, religions have corrected to adapt themselves to new society in during process of building socialism. Religious believers actively take part in the movements of patriotic emulation to establish the life "for better secular and religious life". Our Party encourages development of cultural values of religion. Our Party promotes patriotic spirit of religious believers and advises them to struggle against reactionary tone of hostile forces who take advantage of religion to destroy socialism in our country.

Our Party recognizes that the resemblance of religious purpose and the socialist ideal. It is new view of Party. It shows the clever application of Hồ Chí Minh's thought to development of good values of religious culture and ethics. On the one hand, this views defeats distortion of enemy that atheistic communism destroys religions and violates the right to freedom of religion and belief. On the other hand, this view limits the negative aspects of religion

---

<sup>6</sup> *Hồ Chí Minh Complete Works*, Vol 3 National Politics, Hanoi, 1995, p. 431.

<sup>7</sup> Institute for Religious and Belief Studies. *Argument on Religion and Religious Policies in Vietnam* (Referential document), Religion Publisher, Hanoi, 2007, p. 323.

<sup>8</sup> Vietnamese Communist Party. *The instrument of 5<sup>th</sup> Conference of 8<sup>th</sup> the Central Committee of Vietnamese Communist Party*, National Politics Publisher, Hanoi, 1998, p. 67.

and promotes the active aspects to create resemblance in society. The aims “wealthy people, strong country, just and civilized society” are resemblance and linking of humane values of religion and of socialism. These aims mobilize the power of great national unity in process of renovation of our country. Citizens have the right to follow or not to follow religion. However, the struggles for prosperity of our country and for happiness of people are the ideal and purpose of our people as well as aspiration of religions. Therefore, religious believers have strong attachment to all people in the block of great national unity. Hồ Chí Minh wrote: the lofty purposes of Buddha and of Jesus were the same: Buddha and Jesus hoped all people have food, clothes, equality, liberty and the world harmony<sup>(9)</sup>. “We carry out war of resistance for national salvation, emulation in production, economy and land reform for land to the tillers and all people have the right to freedom of belief. What our government and people do to be suitable for the spirit of Gospel”<sup>(10)</sup>.

In each religion, there are philosophical features and deep human values. The “mercifulness” of Buddhism, “benevolence” of Hoa Hao Buddhism, “humane spirit” of Christianity and “the national pride” of cult of ancestors are similarities of culture, ethics of religions to national culture. All people in the world are trying their best to achieve these aims. Hồ Chí Minh summarized ethical and cultural values of great religions: he wrote “Jesus Christ teaches: Morality means compassion; Siddhartha Gautama teaches: Morality means mercy; Confucius teaches: Morality means humanity”<sup>(11)</sup>. Almost of our people love our country and go with nation in the struggles for national independence and in process of building our country. Almost our people take part in preservation of national identity and sovereignty.

In order to promote these are similarities, we should combine the common interests of our country with the special interests of religious believers on both aspects: material life and spiritual one including religious needs. This motive power promotes patriotic movement of religious believers and helps them to carry out socio-economic duty and religious motto and to observe the religious laws. We should promote these similarities to help religious believers to struggle against the hostile forces who take advantage of religions to undermine the unity of religions and the block of great national unity.

---

<sup>9</sup> Hồ Chí Minh. *On Religious and Belief Problems*, Social Science Publisher, Hanoi, 1996, p. 194.

<sup>10</sup> *Hồ Chí Minh Complete Works*, Vol 7, National Politics, Hanoi, 1995, p. 197.

<sup>11</sup> *Hồ Chí Minh Complete Works*, Vol 6, National Politics, Hanoi, 1995 p. 225.

Vietnamese Communist Party affirms that religious believers are a part of Vietnam's great national unity. Before becoming religious believers, they are Vietnamese citizens so they are anxious for national fate. Our Part recognizes that religion and belief are spiritual needs of a part of people; religious ethics have something corresponding to the cause of building new society; religious believers are a part of the block of great national unity. Moreover, our Party affirms that we should realize consistently the policy of respect for the right to freedom of religion and belief, the right to religious practice of religious believers according to the laws and guarantee the equality of religions. The respect for the right to freedom of religion and belief is initial step to create condition for religious practices of religious believers. We should care for vital interests of religion believers. We should resolve opportunely needs of religious activities of religious believers according to the law. We should raise material and spiritual life of religious believers.

Fourth, our Party affirms that we should “*preserve and promote the active values of the ancestral worship and respect for people who deserve well of nation and people*”. This affirmation is new and significant. It shows the creation of Vietnamese Communist Party on religious and belief issues. It is the first time the connotation of religious belief is referred in Party's official documents. This view is quite right. It reflects our tradition in worship of our ancestor and respect for people who deserve well of nation and people. Vietnamese people always think that worship of ancestors and respect for people who deserved well of nation and people are not only kinds of belief but also moral standards of our nation “when drinking water, remember its source”. This long tradition has rooted in consciousness, spiritual, cultural life of Vietnamese. It has become the non- physical cultural heritage deeply imbued with its national identity. Therefore, the exogenous religions including Catholicism also have recognized and received traditional beliefs. In book *Culture and Renovation*, the later Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng remarked on the tradition of ancestral worship as follows “In the old days our country had not religion in the normal sense as many countries. However, religion is worship; all people worship their grandparents and ancestors.... From the cultural angel I find respectable character of Vietnamese is respect for people who deserved credit for establishing of current life in each family and each village.”<sup>(12)</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Phạm Văn Đồng. *Culture and Renovation*, National Politics, Hanoi, 1994, p. 75.

Our Party acknowledged the good values of traditional ancestral worship and respect for people who deserved well of nation and people. This acknowledgment is great significant. It helps religions to travel with nation. The promotion of good values of ancestral worship is a necessary factor in overcoming spaces in the cultural and spiritual life. Our State and Party consistently a policy of unity of religions. Our State and Party encourage our people to preserve and promote the good values of tradition of ancestral worship and respect for people who deserved well of nation and people. Our State and Party prohibit any one who discriminates in treatment on the basis of belief and religion. Our State and Party prohibit any one who takes advantage of religions in order to abuse the laws and policies of the state. These are dialectic views of our Party in religious and belief level.

## **2. Vietnamese Communist Party's view on religious affairs**

From new standpoints of religious issues, Resolution No 24 raises three new views about religious affairs. First, religion affairs are interested in resolving religious needs of people and wary of anyone who takes advantage of religion to undermine revolution. Second, the main content of religious affairs is mobilization of people; Third, religious affairs are the responsibility of the entire political system. These views are more and more supplemental and perfected throughout conferences, congresses and instructions of Party, especially Resolution no 25 dated March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2003 on religious affairs.

First, *religion affairs are interested in resolving religious needs of people and wary of anyone who takes advantage of religion to undermine revolution.* In this view, our Party stresses on two important contents of religious affairs. Religious affairs are looking after religious believers' living conditions and struggling against anyone who takes advantage of religions. Because religion is defined as sentiment and spiritual need of a part of people, Vietnamese Communist Party advocates carrying out consistently the policy to respect and guarantee the right to freedom of belief and religion of people. Everybody has the right to follow or not to follow any religion. Followers of religions can carry out religious activities freely at home and in the places of worship. Resolution 24 deals with the recognition for religious organizations. An organization shall be recognized as religious organization if it meets conditions: having a charter and statutes depicting the goal, objectives and action orientation that are in close association with the nation according to with law. After being recognized, religious organizations can carry out their



charters and statutes and hold meetings, conferences. Religion organizations can train their believers, appoint their dignitaries, publish bibles and religious books; build the places of worship; wide their international relations... These views are very important for us to treat each religion. On the one hand, they create good condition for religions to operate legally and care for life of their believers. On the other hands, they lead religious activities into the frame of state management and abolish heresies in order to make religious activities healthy.

When our country was invaded, aggressors tried their best to take advantage of religion to undermine revolution. Nowadays, hostile forces still seek to take advantage of religion to serve their political aims. While our Party respects and guarantees the right to freedom of religion and belief of our people, our Party still heightens its vigilance and struggles against activities of hostile forces that take advantage of religion. Two duties have close relation with each other. Our right solutions to spiritual needs of people will make religious followers to believe in the leadership of our Party, in our regime and in the cause of renovation and help them to understand clearly hostile forces' scheme. Since then religious followers will heighten their vigilance to struggle against hostile forces and defense the right to freedom of religion and belief and national security. If our struggle against opportunity of religion wins successfully, environment of good religious activities is founded and religious followers feel secure.

When defending the organic relation of two above duties, Vietnamese Communist Party has resolved the problem of religious need of people before the struggle against enemy to take advantage of religion. Because we would like to overcome the state when we much pay attention to struggle against enemy's opportunity of religion, we are not interested religious and belief needs of people. Some regions, religious followers are identified as people who take advantage of religion to undermine revolution<sup>13</sup>. We unintentionally drive a part of religious followers to disadvantage.

*Second, the main content of religious affairs is mobilization of people*

This view shows our Party's thought on public relations in general and religious affairs in particular. When speaking that the main content of religious affairs is mobilization of people, Vietnamese Communist Party would

---

<sup>13</sup> See: Nguyễn Thanh Xuân, *ibid.*

like to stress the nature and deciding role of mobilization of people in religious affairs. After all, the mobilization of the masses is also mobilization of religion followers. They are the special masses. They are similar to the other people but *they* have different features. They carry out both civil responsibilities and believers' ones. Therefore, the mobilization of religious followers not only propagates and educates religious followers but also gathers all religious followers in mass organizations. The mobilization of the masses is to "strengthen education, health, culture, science, technology and to raise cultural standards of religious followers"<sup>(14)</sup>. On religious aspect, the mobilization of religious followers has to carry out religious policies well and guarantee the right to freedom of religion and belief but is not to propagate the worldview on science, a revolutionary outlook on life. The mobilization of the masses is to help religious followers having a comfortable life. In short, the mobilization of religious followers makes religion believers "to have happy life of spirit and matter"<sup>(15)</sup>. If we do that we shall create good condition for religious followers to live "better secular and religious life" and to carry out the aim "wealthy people, strong country, just and civilized society".

Third, *good implementation of religious affairs is the responsibility of the entire political system under the leadership of our Party*. Because our Party defines clearly that religious affairs have special features, religion affairs not only resolve policies over religious believers, dignitaries and organizations but also struggle against enemy's scheme that takes advantage of religion. Vietnamese Communist Party points out that in new period, the forces who take part in religious affairs consist of Party, governments, Fatherland Front and political organizations. The entire political system takes part in religious affairs, but each branch has a concrete duty. Party plays an important role in leading different branches to carry out religious affairs. Levels of administration manage religious activities and conduct religious activities to obey the law. On the other hand, levels of administration have to care for living condition of religious followers. Fatherland Front and organizations have to propagandize the masses and religious followers to take part in political and social organizations<sup>(6)</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Resolution No 24 of Politburo on "Strengthen Religious Affairs in New Situation dated 16<sup>th</sup> October, 1990.

<sup>15</sup> *Hồ Chí Minh Complete Works*, Vol 10, National Politics Publisher, Hanoi, 1996, p. 606.

<sup>6</sup> See: Nguyễn Thanh Xuân, *ibid*.

Fourth, religious propagation and activities have to obey the law and Constitution. It reflects that religious life of our country is increasing more and more. However, some complicated problems of religious life should be corrected. We not only affirm the right to freedom of religion of religious followers and legal religious organizations but also prohibit individuals and organizations that are not recognized by State to propagate religion. Simultaneously, we forbid any one who takes advantage of religion to propagate heresy and superstition and to force people to follow a religion. We do that so religious activities obey the law and socio - political situation is stable.

Religious activities, especially missionary work often have social characters and influence many aspects of social life. Therefore, they have to obey the law and are managed by State. Some how, states have policies of religious management and of missionary activities to stabilize their political situations and safeguard their cultural values.

In short, in the cause of renovation, our State and Party have gradually perfected policies on religious affairs. Our Party's awareness of religious and belief issues is more and more developing. It is an important condition to decide success of religious affairs and to contribute to stableness and development of our country. /.