

Some Thoughts on Religious Freedom and Religious Freedom in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT: The paper presents some thoughts on religious freedom and particularly this issue in Vietnam. After looking at history of religious freedom the author comes to some remarkable judgements. Discussing on the present situation of religious freedom in Vietnam, he believes that the concept of a civil society as the best environment for the development of religions is taking shape. However, like any other social phenomenon, it takes time, patience and a cool head.

Today, religious freedom is mainly meant pluralism in the sense that whether monotheistic countries accept minor religions or religions of minority groups brought in by immigrants. In Vietnam, probably there is no need for such a question. One may wonder what Vietnam's religiosity is like, since the Vietnamese have absorbed so many alien religions. Historically, in Vietnam, western religions were at times viewed as "western heresy" (Catholicism) and "American religion" (Protestantism). Given their flexible religiosity and pluralism, however, the Vietnamese have comfortably accepted all those religions.

Notably, the already-diverse religious system in Vietnam has become more diversified with "new religious movements", and these movements render no hindrance to Vietnam's religious harmony or the tradition of "unity of the Three Religions" (though Vietnam is not the origin of this tradition). To explain why there have been no *wars of religions* in Vietnam, many researchers look to the traditional and enduring *nationalism* in the country's history of national construction and defense, which brings religions and the nation together. Nothing binds a nation together so closely like religions and nothing separates ethnic groups so widely like

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religions. Fortunately, Vietnam has been able to maintain that binding. Vietnamese Buddhists have an interesting statement: *Buddhism is linked to the nation as milk is dissolved in water*.

Vietnam's Catholicism ranks third in Asia, after the Philippines and East Timor in population percentage with 5.6 million followers. Protestantism came to Vietnam in 1911 in Đà Nẵng and was recognized by the French colonial government in 1938. It is true to say that Vietnam's Protestantism originated from *Christian and Missionary Alliance* of the US and Canadian pastors and is now the main Protestant faction in Vietnam with approximately 1 million followers. Today there are a variety of Protestant denominations in Vietnam. The majority belongs to Evangelicalism while the rest belongs to Pentecontism and *other* Protestant groups (which belong to no denomination).

In Vietnam and other Asian countries, the right to religious freedom used to be a luxury in terms of legal institutionalization until colonialism came to an end on this continent. Oriental feudalism *stood above all religions* and controlled religions. In Vietnam, though Buddhism and Confucianism assumed certain political and social roles (the 11th to 13th centuries for Buddhism and the following centuries for Confucianism), in my opinion, there has never been a national religion (or dominant religion) in its true sense.

The 20th century is "the age of extremes", in which religion has been a critical issue. In the cold war of ideological confrontation, the conflict of atheism and theism was pushed to its peak. It was also the first and only time in Vietnam's history - between 1954 and 1975, the Ngô Đình Diệm and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu governments entirely relied on Catholicism to fight the "atheistic communists" and oppressed non-Catholic religions in the southern part of the country.

It might be strange that in the context of fierce national liberation, notwithstanding the influence of leftist ideas in the international communist movement which called for an abolition of religions, the Vietnamese kept a cool head over "religious realities" thanks to traditional nationalism and Hồ Chí Minh's ideology.

It should be noted that the execution of the right to freedom of religion in Vietnam should be put in the context of *decolonialization* and *confrontation* in the cold war. Thus, such an execution in the country does take some time.

However, what has been happening in terms of the exercise of the right to religious freedom in Vietnam, particularly since 1945, when a new Vietnam was born, has been “far beyond imagination” as religious scholars once said.

The US of America has the right to be proud that even before the French Capitalist Revolution in 1789, the Declaration of Independence of the USA referred to the rights to freedom of religion. Such ideologists as John Locke laid the first bricks for that right when he said that religion is an issue of individuals rather than of society and that the state is not to encourage religion but to protect the rights of individuals to follow their own religious belief. Locke also made it clear that the linkage between religious ambition and individual power will come to an end only when the linkage between the state and the church is broken.

As early as 1946 in Vietnam, President Hồ Chí Minh publicly acknowledged himself as a student of Buddha, Jesus, Marx and Sun Yat-sen. Just one day after becoming the first President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, on September 3 2006, President Hồ Chí Minh declared “freedom of religion, catholics and non-catholics solidarity” as a major point in the new Government’s working agenda.

If aspiration for Independence – Freedom was the thread linking Religion and Life in the past, today’s common goals of wealthy people, a strong nation, a just, democratic and civilized society have been serving as a consensus between nation, socialism and religion. Such goals are also fundamental factors for better execution of the right to freedom of religion.

It is widely known that religious freedom is an important part of human rights. However, religion is also an important component of ethnic and national identity. Furthermore, there should be a harmony between international standards (international conventions like the Human Rights Declaration 1948 and the UN Declaration on restrictions to violence and discrimination in religion and belief in 1981) and various concepts of freedom of religion of each nation. More recently in 1996, John Witte in *Basic Rights and Freedom of Religion in the US*, highlighted “certain differences” between the US laws and provisions in above-mentioned conventions in terms of religious freedom.

It is true that the rights to freedom of religion is a long story for humankind. We respect the basic values of these international documents. However, as the American scholar David Little analyzed, the first difficulty lies in whether the state is able to define the concept of “religion”, whether the rights to freedom of conversion is

absolute, universal and protected (Islam for example) or whether these declarations should be considered provisions of international conventions?

Like other civilized nations, Vietnam has been integrating international conventions and the popular rights to freedom of religion in its domestic laws.

To execute the rights to freedom of religion, the separation between the Church and the State should be respected in all secular societies and has long been a concern for the sake of peace, justice, freedom and life quality. If my memory serves me right, Sir William Penn, the founder of the theory of separation between the State and the Church in late 17th and early 18th century stated that: since religion is a matter of individuals, the Government should advocate all religions rather than one.

In Vietnam's context, it turns out that the state's non-religious Marxist perspective serves as a basis for the state to have a non-biased and fair attitude towards all religions, a must for a multi-religious country to avoid religious conflict. In Vietnam, in theological terms, there have been no traces of religious extremism like fundamentalism or integrism.

Despite different forms of secular states, every country must adopt popular principles of a secular regime and handle well the relationship between the state and religious organizations.

Vietnam has so far recognized legal status of 16 religious organizations of 6 major religions, namely Buddhism, Catholics, Protestantism, Islam, Caodaism and Hoa Hao Buddhism. Since early 2005, together with Directive 01 of the Government, many Protestant sects and other religious sects have been recognized; most recently, *Ba'hai*, *Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa*, *Tịnh Độ Cư sĩ Phật hội*, etc.

The majority of above-mentioned religions follow the development of the nation under various mottos like *"to live gospel amidst the nation"* (Catholicism); *"to serve the God, to serve the Nation"* (Protestantism); *"Dharma, Nation and Socialism"* (Buddhism); *"Glorious nation-Bright faith"* (Caodai and Hòa Hảo Buddhism).

Though today, "the perception of secularization theory", which is considered modernization of religions and has been losing its dominance – is challenged in terms of principles, particularly after 11 September 2001¹. In addition to the concept of religious extremism, there has emerged the concept of violent religion. In Vietnam, however, there have been no signs of this phenomenon.

This issue is evidently related to the development of a civil society, which took European and American societies centuries to complete.

Robert A. Seiple, in his *Religion, Civil society and Security* article in that book, cites 7 attractions of a civil society, highlighting “shared values”, “responsible governance”, “moderation” and “respect” to come to a conclusion that “we must creatively and proactively seek that place where freedom *to* and freedom *from* become one, toward the end of a values-based civil society that is the true foundation for enduring security”².

The *Universal Declaration on Secularism in the 21st centuries* by EM BARGO publicized on 9 December 2005 also states that secular institution must be seen as principle of national laws, which have secular, democratic and social characteristics. This principle will ensure the execution of the rights to freedom of religion in the new century, even when that sensitive and complex right is becoming increasingly more diverse and complicated.

The *Đổi mới* door over the past 20 years in Vietnam has led to a comprehensive and strong transformation of the entire country. The concept of a civil society as the best environment for the development of religions is taking shape. Like any other social phenomenon, it takes time, patience and a cool head.

It is not my opinion that in Vietnam everything in the relationship between the state and religions is fine and “there is no problem” in Vietnam. However, I could state that all religions in Vietnam today are enjoying their spiritual, faith and social life in the general atmosphere of greater *social consensus*./.

Reference:

1. Dennis R. Hoover. “*Religion becomes a Reality*” in Robert A. Seiple and Dennis Hoover (eds). *Religion and Security, the New Nexus in International Relations*, Rowman and Little Field Publishing House, USA, 2004.
2. Robert A. Seiple. “Conclusion: A Lively Experiment, a Most Flourishing Civil State” in Robert A. Seiple, Dennis R. Hoover (eds). *Ibid*, p. 186.