

Relations Between Vietnamese Governments in History and the Evangelical Church

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ABSTRACT: The paper examines the history of relations between governments, authorities and the Evangelical Church in Vietnam. After comparing with the present situation, the author puts forward useful ideas and suggests foundations for the perfection of social and religious policies which is now considered an important political and scientific task.

Foreword

In studying Evangelicalism in Vietnam we realize that the process of entering, existing and developing this religion has been governed and powerfully influenced by socio-political factors; concretely these are the policies of authorities, the legal system and socio-political conditions, etc.

Nowadays Evangelicalism is developing rapidly and widely, becoming a great issue relating to many areas of social life, to internal and foreign policies of the Vietnam Communist Party and Government. Therefore it is necessary to examine and study the history of relations between governments and authorities on the one hand and the Evangelical Church on the other in order to withdraw experiences and historical lessons. Comparing it with the present state, putting forward useful ideas and foundations for the perfection of social and religious policies is a necessary political and scientific task.

1. The French Colonial Authorities in Indochina with Evangelicalism

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the French colonialists completed its occupation of Vietnam; they consolidated their

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administering machine and began their first stage of exploiting the colony. According to the statutes laid down by the French colonialists, Vietnam was divided into 3 regions: Tonkin and Annam were half-protectorate and protectorate, Cochinchina was a colony of direct rule with the system of ruling mandarins from the Governor General (Indochina) to Residents Superior (Tonkin and Annam) and Governor (Cochinchina); the cities of Đà Nẵng, Hanoi and Hải Phòng were territories of concession.

Just at this point of time American Evangelical priests of the Christian and Missionary Alliance began their activities of exploring to prepare for carrying missionary work into Indochina.

The French colonialists in Indochina worried about the presence and activities of citizens and priests coming from interest-competing states (the United States of America) and socio-religious movements and communities created by clergymen might cause insecurity for their colonial rule. This was the starting point of the policy of prohibition and restriction to the missionary work of Evangelicalism during this period of time.

The French colonialists' policies and legal statutes towards Evangelicalism might be divided into two periods: from 1911 to 1939 and from 1939 to 1945.

The 1911 - 1939 period

During the time from 1897 to 1911, the priests of the Christian and Missionary Alliance sought to infiltrate Indochina many times through many ways; however they were unsuccessful (the French authorities impeded). Perhaps the thorough prohibition would influence the prestige of the French and might leave bad diplomatic corollary among imperialist countries, so in 1911 the French authorities permitted 03 priests of the Christian and Missionary Alliance to come to Đà Nẵng to establish the missionary headquarters. Seizing this opportunity, the Christian and Missionary Alliance increased the number to 09 priests to send to Hanoi and Hải Phòng to found bases to prepare for missionary work.

As the First World War broke out, worrying that the priests of the Christian and Missionary Alliance act as spies (some of them were of German origin), in December 1915 the French authorities ordered the deportation of 04 priests, shut down missionary headquarters and strictly forbade the expansion of activities in areas of the native people.

In 1916, Priest R.A. Jaffray from South China came to Hanoi to meet the Indochinese Governor General, pledging the missionary work would not imply political contents and not compete with Catholicism. After this event, the Christian and Missionary Alliance was formally permitted to operate in the French colonial territories: Hanoi, Hải Phòng, Đà Nẵng and the Cochinchina.

On the side of Evangelicalism: missionaries of the Christian and Missionary Alliance made the most of the opportunity to increase their activities. The number of priests was increased (from 03 persons in 1911 to 30 ones in 1928). They were in a rush to establish the Đà Nẵng Bible School (1921) to train the body of parsons to carry on mission in the indigenous country. In 1927, the priests founded 74 branches with over 4000 believers. The specific trait of Evangelicalism was democratic organization (with the principle of autonomy - self-reliance - autotroph); the Christian and Missionary Alliance was a small missionary organization with limited budget. In order to cope with the controlling policy of the French authorities (foreigners were not allowed to create and buy properties), in 1927 the priests established the native Evangelical Mission - the “Evangelical Mission of French Indochina (Evangélique de l’Indochine française)”.

The Charter in 1928 of this Evangelical Mission stated that “*those who stage the riot against the government cannot be the member of the Mission*” to soothe the French authorities. Then with this Charter, the Evangelical circle proposed the French authorities and King Bảo Đại to give it the legal status.

The above event made the French authorities deeply worried. During the period of time from 1927 to 1931 they continually steered Huế Court to conduct a lot of arrests and detainments of native parsons and missionaries (the French authorities and Huế Court did not arrest and detain priests of the Christian and Missionary Alliance). However these arrests and detainments met with protests and interventions by the French Evangelical circle on the forum of parliament and the press. The citation of 1884 agreement was also not all right because there was the debate around the term “Religion chrétienne”, etc.

The result was on 5 December 1929 the French authorities had to give guidance to Regent Tôn Thất Hãn to issue the imperial edict abolishing the prohibition of activities by Evangelicalism.

Nevertheless, the French authorities in Indochina did not overlook the infringement by American Evangelical priests to operate outside the permitted

colonial territory. The establishment of native Evangelical Missions by priests with regions in the charge of their messengers was assessed and guided by the Resident Superior of Tonkin as follows: "... *Studying the requirements of American parsons, we can see their very clear intrigues of dividing Annam region into a number of areas, similar to real dioceses and placing an American to head each area. It is impossible to admit a similar conception; it is contrary to the spirit of new stipulation and an organization according to such ranks in which the ties are obscure.*

Therefore I decide to give individual permission to one place or one zone. About Annamese parsons, they must submit their applications to me through intermediaries who are heads of areas, prefects or district chiefs in places they live."¹

The restriction and licensure for each individual priest, parson in each zone was maintained until the end of the 1930s.

The period from 1939 to 1945

The limited licensure could not obstruct Evangelical missionary activities (because these activities were not only done by priests), moreover there was no firm legal foundation. Besides Evangelicalism of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, in this period there appeared other religions of Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo and other missionary organizations. In Indochina at the time, the democratic movement and activities of patriotic organizations was surging high. Confronting this background the French colonialists wanted to put forward a new policy in order to alleviate the social instability; the decree-law on 16 January 1939 accepted the legal presence of religious missions coming into being at that time.

From the beginning, in preparation for this decree-law, the French colonial jurists brought forward legal definitions to distinguish *religious missions* from *religious congregations*. According to them, the former was a collective of many individuals having the purpose and desire to propagate a religion, founding the religious sentiment and implementation. The latter was defined as an organization of individuals assembling to one another to live together in a cloister or to keep the religious commandments more strictly or to propagate the belief.

However if this distinction was realized, the procedure to accept the legal status would be very complicated; each *religious congregation* had to have a separate

decree. Therefore, after many calculations, colonial legislators chose the following way: accepting the legal status of religious missions².

On 16 January 1939, the colonial authorities promulgated the edict (Edict of January 16 1939) accepting the legal presence of the religious mission in Vietnam with the following conditions: 1) Each mission had to have an Administrative Council comprising at least 3 people. This council had to be recognized by the Indochinese Governor General; 2) This Administrative Council had special spiritual personality and sufficient legal status; 3) With this legal status the Administrative Council had the right to create or buy, possess, maintain and transfer movables and real estates (in the name of the religious mission). It managed and used its lawfully acquired properties. It was subjected to taxation and declared their properties according to the law (it was exempt from taxation of the unprofitable real estate)³.

The Christian and Missionary Alliance and the Evangelical Mission of French Indochina (Evangélique de l'Indochine française) immediately adjusted their organization according to these new regulations. Nevertheless only when the Japanese troops entered Indochina, the administration and power of the colonial authorities existed only on papers did the Indochinese Governor General sign the document to accept the Administrative Council of the Evangelical Mission of French Indochina (Evangélique de l'Indochine française) (the Document N° 48 N/P on 19 January 1942).

- Eventually the legal status of the organization of the Evangelical authorities in Vietnam was recognized from the French authorities in the background of World War II breaking out, the business and financial source with the USA were cut, Evangelical priests were detained by Japanese troops in two years (1943-1945). The missionary operation almost came to a standstill.

*** Some remarks**

So the French colonial authorities applied the policy of maximum restraint towards American priests coming to Indochina to carry on Evangelical missionary work, though in colonial territories the implementation was more or less flexible. The acceptance of the legal status Evangelical Mission organization was only recognized in the final time of the colonial system. In the final years of the Vietnamese-French war (the nine-year resistant war), by dependence on the US aid, the attitude of the French authorities changed definitely. Instead of vigilance and restriction, they were

friendly and created all conditions to help priests in the activities. The noticeable thing was that the French authorities respected and did not interfere in problems belonging to internal affairs of Evangelicalism such as dogmas, religious law and rites, training dignitaries, nomination and appointment, etc.

On the side of Evangelicalism the above policy did not obstruct the missionary activities. At this time Evangelicalism achieved two targets which were: 1) To develop a certain force of believers and found the native organization of Mission; 2) Its legal status was recognized.

2. Saigon Authorities in Their Relations with Evangelicalism

After the Geneva agreements, by the US intervention, the country was divided into two parts. In South Vietnam during the time from 1954 to 1975, the authorities were created and governed by the US. In general this was the golden time, the most favorable period for activities of Evangelicalism. However in details there were a lot of noticeable problems.

2.1. The legal system of Saigon authorities towards the religious problem in general and Evangelicalism in particular

Nominally the article 17 of the so-called “Constitution of Vietnam Republic 1956” fabricated by Ngô family was written: *“Each citizen has the right to be free in his or her religious belief and to practise his or her religion and teach religion, provided that the use of these rights was not contrary to ethics.”*

However in reality Ngô Đình Diệm and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu authorities carried out the line and policy of unequal discrimination among religions, just as a Evangelical historian has written: *“Ngô Đình Diệm Government gave preferential treatment to the Roman Catholic Church. Where religious sects abandon political activities or have to be changed into pro-government organizations, then their believers are more or less free to practise their religion.”*⁴

Concerning the documents and law of statutes of religious organizations, Saigon authorities maintained the principle of “the law cannot be sued again.” The former laws, decree-laws and edicts which the French colonial authorities and Huế Court had promulgated earlier were still valid if there was no official legal document of the government to abolish them.

So, for the Vietnam Evangelical Mission (South Vietnam) the right to civil legal status according to article IV of the decree on 16 January 1939 promulgated by the Indochinese Governor General (attached to the edict on 23 February 1939) was still valid. Also following the form of document accepting the Administrative Council as in the French domination period, the Saigon authorities issued documents N° 9.574BNV/KS (30 August 1957) and 5.869ABNV/KS (13 May 1961), etc., accepting the Administrative Council (member of the Vietnam Evangelical Mission Managing Committee) of Evangelicalism. This was conducted in succession until 1975, after each time the Vietnam Evangelical Mission elected the new Managing Committee and handed in its document.

In early nineteen fifties, in South Vietnam the constituents of Evangelicalism changed rapidly. While in the French domination period, there had been only the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the Vietnam Evangelical Mission and the Adventist sect, in this time (from 1954 to 1975), about over 50 religious sects, missionary organizations, Evangelical social-charitable societies of the USA and the world appeared one after another and operated. According to stipulation these religious organizations and sects had to present their applications of permission enclosed with regulations and charter to state their purpose and spheres of operation etc. Then the Ministry of Interior (the General Bureau of police), the socio-political Research Service studied and investigated to present their ideas to the President Palace to consider the authorization. Nevertheless by the US impact, all of them were licensed in a short or long time.

2.2. Relations between Saigon Authorities and Evangelicalism

Relying on remaining materials kept in archives, official and unofficial documents and books and newspapers of Saigon authorities and Evangelicalism we can consider these relations according to the following division of stages:

* The period of time South Vietnam was under Ngô Đình Diệm regime

Ngô family, Diệm authorities based on the Roman Catholic foundation. The old Catholic - Evangelical enmity clearly left an impression in their consciousness and judgement. Moreover though they relied on the US, with the “small national spirit” they were always suspicious and vigilant with Evangelical organizations and American priests.

Although declaring “free religion”, Diệm authorities only deserved privileges and interests for the Catholic Church. Other religions if did not submit they would be heavily repressed (Buddhism, Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo, etc.). In a specific way there were some events towards Evangelicalism as follows:

The Diệm authorities wanted to dominate and govern the heads of the Vietnam Evangelical Mission (South Vietnam) and by this means they mastered this organization. In September 1955 a campaign of “communist accusation” was launched at the annual General Assembly of the Vietnam Evangelical Mission. The Assembly Head and Deputy Head was accused of “pro-communist” and corruption, etc. However with the influence of priests the internal affairs were then ignored and the declaration “Evangelicalism does not engage in politics and is not related to politics” was still maintained and was the thorn towards Diem authorities.

- In 1956, the priests of the Christian and Missionary Alliance visited Ngô Đình Diệm, complaining about the obstruction of mission on the Central Highlands.

- Evangelical organizations and sects coming from the USA were suspected and delayed in giving license.

- With the circular 166/TTP/TTK/1 on 23 September 1960 Diem authorities compelled all religious missions (the purpose was aimed at Evangelical organizations) to apply for a permission from the President when they want to create and buy the real estate without distinction of nationality purpose. This made the Vietnam Evangelical Mission take legal proceedings until this rule was abolished by a circular on 31 December 1965.⁵

* The period from the end of 1963 to 1975

In November 1963 Diệm Administration was replaced by the US. The US troops flocked into South Vietnam, the war expanded. Saigon authorities were thoroughly depended on US military and civil aids. US experts, military and civil advisors impetuously entered South Vietnam; they were followed by Evangelical organizations and sects. Evangelicalism operated freely without any inhibition.

* On the side of Evangelicalism

The Vietnam Evangelical Mission though still kept the standpoint of “standing out of politics”, maintaining a certain distance between the administration and the church, it had dynamics of taking advantage of this specially favourable background to carry on missionary work and develop its forces.

- Composing prose and poetry to continuously ask for the establishment of the mission of Evangelical chaplains, directly belonging to the Bureau of Psychological Warfare of Saigon troops.

- Making thorough use of the aid and affectionateness of the authorities such as free Evangelical broadcasting, transporting and receiving relief materials, making use of planes, helicopters and armored cars as a means to carry on missionary work.

The force of foreign priests increased vigorously with very complicated constituents. Special attention should be paid to the role of linguistic priests (the Summer philological association) in the Central Highlands. Even in the rank of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the second generation of priests (most of them young) also had some activities outside the personality of mission in the Central Highlands.

*** Some remarks**

Although there were a few breakdowns and contradictions, in general the US-puppet authorities consciously deployed the policy of employing religion (chiefly Catholicism and Evangelicalism) as a tool, an ideological weapon to oppose the revolutionary force, stirring up the enmity and division between the Catholic masses and “atheistic Communists”.

On the other side, the label “free belief, free preaching and free practice of one’s religion” put forward by Saigon authorities, in reality in the contemporary social condition and background only brought about advantage for Christianity (Catholicism and Evangelicalism). With powerful organizations, means, finance and materials from abroad and the assistance of the authorities, Christian missions (especially Evangelicalism) really imposed “the freedom of Evangelization” of this nation, hampering and annihilating traditional belief and religion.

For Evangelicalism, the constituents and tendencies were very complex. Although the Christian and Missionary Alliance and the Vietnam Evangelical Mission still kept a “loosely eclectic” standpoint (according to its tradition), they also saw the common interests with the authorities in the contemporary background. They actively took advantage of the circumstances and preferential conditions to develop their mission.

3. The Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam with Evangelicalism

The first event, which marked the starting milestone of this relation according to Evangelical historians, was the day of Independence Declaration 2 September 1945. On the rostrum for the appearance of the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam there were three representatives of three religions invited to attend, among them there was the Evangelical delegation.

However also according to the Evangelical circle, in a view-exchanging meeting in Hanoi (September 1945) President Hồ Chí Minh recommended Parson Lê Văn Thái to found “Evangelicalism for national salvation”. Parson Thái refused with the reason “Evangelicalism does not do politics”⁶. Nevertheless during nine years of resistant war, the majority of Evangelical dignitaries and believers took part in the resistance war, sharing weal and woe with the national community. Many of them left the city according to the scorched-earth policy of resistance war, taking part in the Inter-Vietnam United Front, the conscripted labourers on the firing line, etc. contributing their efforts to the common cause.

When peace was restored in 1954, 50% of Evangelical believers and most dignitaries migrated to South Vietnam. 13 families of parsons for missionary work and 1054 believers remained in North Vietnam.

Satisfying the aspiration of Evangelical dignitaries and believers, the Government helped them with conditions to rebuild the organization of mission according to the direction of autonomy and self-reliance. In 1955, over 200 representatives of various branches met in a General Assembly to vote on the adoption of founding the Vietnam Evangelical Mission (North Vietnam). In 1962 new statutes of the Vietnam Evangelical Mission in North Vietnam were approved by the Government in which the section of guideline was written: “*Wholeheartedly worshipping Jehovah The Trinity. Loving the Fatherland, defending peace, carrying out fairness, humanity, freedom, equality and labour.*”⁷

For the first time, an Evangelical organization the missionary product of the Christian and Missionary Alliance has renounced its inherent standpoint “having no connection with politics, do not do politics”. The Vietnam Evangelical Mission (North Vietnam) clearly stated its attitude as follows: “*The Evangelical Mission has the task of educating believers’ patriotism, citizen’s duty, the sense of respecting the people’s authorities and the law of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam; the*

Evangelical Mission together with the entire population unite to build peace, unity, independence, democracy, prosperity and strength for the Vietnamese Fatherland.”⁸

This was a new point, reflecting the growth in consciousness of the North Vietnamese Evangelical community, a progressive charter discarding the influence of foreign parsons. In the aspect of dogma, traditional religious reasons were maintained and kept intact. In the aspect of organization, there remained only two grades Branch and General Assembly.

*** Some Remarks**

This was a success and progress in the relation between the Socialist State and the Evangelical Mission in Vietnam. Under the impact of the Government, this organization has had the positive and progressive direction of operation, propagandizing the community of believers to take part in the building and defense of the Fatherland, the struggle to carry out general election to reunify the country, against the aggressive war, etc.

This was also the success of international diplomatic significance, contributing to courting the sympathy and support of a lot of people and friendly countries in the world (where there was the cultural tradition of Evangelicalism).

However in straightforward consideration with the time, by the separation from world Evangelicalism, by the unsuitable social and political conditions and the difficult situation of the war period, so indeed Evangelicalism in North Vietnam had little development. The existence of this organization was chiefly relied on the assistance from the Government. This has influenced the character of self-reliance, self-nourishment and the principle of democratic organization of Evangelicalism and has manifested complex dark sides inside their organization at present time.

4. Some Noticeable Respects on Particular Traits and Character of Evangelicalism in Vietnam

Different from the situation of Evangelicalism in some countries in the area, in Vietnam over 80% of Evangelical believers have concentrated in two organizations which are the South Vietnam Evangelical Mission and the North Vietnam Evangelical Mission, the missionary product of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (USA). Other Evangelical sects have small scale with little real strength.

The Christian and Missionary Alliance is originally a small Evangelical Mission with many sects and is decisively influenced by Calvin theology, Presbyter. According to Calvin's principle, the Evangelical Church is independent from the State. Therefore in the same family of Evangelicalism, Lutheranism and Anglicanism remain national religions in some countries, while Calvin sects have always kept a distance between the world affairs and theocracy.

From this it is possible to understand that the standpoint of "standing outside politics" of the Christian and Missionary Alliance and the Vietnam Evangelical Mission in periods of history originating from the conservative theocratic tradition.

The Vietnam Evangelical Mission, the missionary product of the Christian and Missionary Alliance originally follows the pattern of the mission of *Republic Regime*, different from *Justice Regime* (Baptism, Congregationatism), *Parson Regime* (Anglicanism, Lutheranism, Metodism). The character of this mission has the traditional unshakable particular trait and needs special attention in studying Vietnamese Evangelicalism.

Nevertheless the Vietnam Evangelical Mission is an entity without standing isolated. During the 1954-1975 period, by the source of assistance from the Christian and Missionary Alliance was limited (because this organization was a small mission) the Vietnam Evangelical Mission received aid, financial assistance and missionary documents from over 50 US and world Evangelical sects. This has clearly left complicated corollaries to the internal situation of this organization as well as the present Evangelical state.

Nowadays Evangelicalism in Vietnam has become a religious entity. Although foreign parsons have left, international links of this religion as well as their influence still exist; moreover they are more or less increased in the present background of extending international exchange.

After over 25 years the South Vietnam Evangelical Mission has understood that the only present proper way is "to live evangelically, serve Christ, the Fatherland and the Nation." Its old inherent standpoint "standing aloof from politics" has been changed with the commitment "Abiding by the Constitution and law of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam... educating believers in patriotism, the citizen's duty, the sense of respecting the law, the unity with the whole population to build the Fatherland and defend peace."⁹

This is a positive step in the relation between the Government and the Evangelical Mission. With the acknowledgement of the legal status of the South Vietnam Evangelical Mission by the Vietnamese Government in 2001, this organization was officially recognized and could operate in the framework of the law.

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