

Religious Activities of Foreigners in Vietnam*

NGUYỄN KHẮC HUY

ABSTRACT: The paper briefly summarizes the religious activity of foreigners in Vietnam at the present. Although the state of Vietnam has realized its care for this activity of the foreigners via the Ordinance on Religion and Belief, more appropriate measures, according to the author, are still needed to better respond to religious needs of foreigners, in line with Vietnamese laws, and in accordance with international convention.

Vietnam is a country of many nationalities, with over 80 million inhabitants of 54 brotherly nationalities. Each nationality has its own traditional culture and religious beliefs, with many belief forms often centered on the people's belief of the cult of ancestors, and the cult of persons having greatly contributed to the nation or to the community. Different religious beliefs in Vietnam have either existed from time immemorial or been introduced in the second half of the 20th century. All of them are preserving their normal and stable activities at their basic cult-places or in their own groups.

Regarding religions in particular, there exist at present over 20 million believers, over 60 thousand dignitaries and priests, over 22 thousand cult-bases, with 17 religious organizations that have been recognized and are stably functioning. They include the Vietnamese Catholic Church, the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha, the Vietnam General Protestant Church (Northern region) and the Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region), the Hòa Hảo Buddhist Association, nine Sacred Cao Đài congregations, 2 representative committees of the Islamist Community, and the Council of Monks and Nuns of Ninh Thuận. Beyond these, there exist a number of other recognized religious organizations that have registered and are being instructed to follow the proper government procedures, in order that, once they have met the conditions prescribed by Vietnamese law, they too may be officially recognized. These include the General Association of Vietnamese Pure Land Buddhists, the Vietnamese

*. Nguyễn Khắc Huy is the head of the Department of Legislation, the Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs. This paper has been presented at the International Conference of "Religion and Rule of Law in Southeast Asia: Continuing the Discussion", 3-4th November 2007, Hanoi, Vietnam.

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Religions in Vietnam, whether foreign or native, have a common characteristic: they are bound up with the nation. Their dignitaries and believers realize a good way of life "toward their living and their religion" and most of them have relationships with co-religionists in other countries.

With a current trend toward integration into the international economy coupled with strong development of international exchanges, the number of foreigners coming to Vietnam for a legal residence, be it to learn, to work, to cooperate in production, or to invest, has been increasing day by day. Many of them are believers of certain religions and they have religious needs. They want to respond to their religious demands in conditions which make it possible to satisfy spiritual needs. To meet the religious needs of persons living in Vietnam is necessary and legitimate, as it is an expression of the Vietnamese policy of respecting religious freedom, while at the same time it will contribute to and step up the investment activities of other countries in Vietnam.

The June 16, 1999 journal issue 3/1999/TT-TGCP for The Government Committee for Religious Affairs stipulated that foreigners living legally in Vietnam who had needs of individual religious activities would be assisted by different levels of government and by legal religious organizations of Vietnam in their common religious activities. These could take place with Vietnamese religious believers at the corresponding legal religious bases, and in activities that have been registered with the local power. If they needed to form a group for their own religious activities at a religious base of Vietnam, they must obtain the permission of the President of the People's Committee of the local province. If a group of foreigners must have a religious dignitary to perform a number of religious rites or to predicate, they may make a proposal to the corresponding legal church in Vietnam to provide appropriate conditions to assist their religious activities. They should also report to the state organization in charge of religious affairs of the local province where the dignitaries live, and only the People's Committee of the province level may assist foreigners in their religious activities. Persons with individual religious needs during their stay in Vietnam, whether they are entering Vietnam to visit or work on the invitation of a Vietnamese organization, or to travel in line with the program of a Vietnamese travel company, or to visit their relatives, may take part in religious activities together with Vietnamese believers at a corresponding cult base. Foreigners in Vietnam may request of the Vietnamese religious dignitaries to organize a number of special religious rites which are especially necessary to their individual

desire, if these rites are not contrary to the Vietnamese law and cultural tradition, with the approbation of the competent state organization. The issue of foreign dignitaries entering Vietnam to preach to foreign believers living legally in Vietnam was not solved.

The Ordinance on Belief and Religion from June 18, 2004, regarding foreigners entering Vietnam, stipulated the following: foreigners may bring religious publications and other religious articles for their personal needs in compliance with Vietnamese legal regulations; shall be provide with conditions to practice religion in religious establishments similar to Vietnamese believers; shall be entitled to invite religious dignitaries who are Vietnamese nationals to perform religious rites; foreign dignitaries and priests might preach at Vietnamese religious bases. Foreign organizations and foreigners may enter Vietnam to perform international activities respecting to religion once they have been accepted by the main state organization in charge of religious affairs.

In recent years, within the framework of economic and cultural cooperation with different countries, many foreigners that have religious beliefs enter Vietnam to live, work and study. According to the initial statistics of provinces and towns, there exist at present thirty-one thousand foreigners living and working; among them over 3.500 are religious, most of these being Protestants, Catholics, Buddhists and Islamists. Concertedly speaking, there are about 15.000 persons living in Hanoi (about 400 are religious believers); in Hồ Chí Minh City there are about 6000 persons (over 2000 are believers); in the provinces of Bình Dương, Đồng Nai, and Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu there are over 10,500 persons (about 1000 are religious believers).

The above-mentioned number of foreigners work at diplomatic agencies, at international organizations or are participating to the programs, in projects of non-governmental organizations which are being carried out in Vietnam. In general, the religious activities of foreigners legally living in Vietnam in the past years have been conforming to legal regulations. One can quote a number of regular religious activities of foreigners at a number of places as a reference as follows: in Hanoi, on every Friday midday, Islamist believers of Libyan, Malaysian, or Pakistani etc. citizenship attend to celebrate the services at the mosque at No. 12 Hàng Lược street; from 1994 onward, on Wednesdays and Sundays, Korean Protestants concentrate into different groups at the Protestant Church No. 2 Ngõ Trăm. At the Catholic Church of Cửa Bắc there are Catholics of American, English, French, Spanish, Italian, Brazilian, etc. citizenship participating in religious activities, with Vietnamese dignitaries to guide their services

in English and French. In, the Catholics have weekly activities, such as the English-speaking group at Chánh Tòa Church (cathedral), the French-speaking group at Mai Khôi Monastery, and the Korean group at Vườn Xoài Church. Elsewhere in Hồ Chí Minh city, the Korean Buddhist group meets at Hưng Phước pagoda; Korean groups of Protestant sects meet at different churches, such as the Presbyterians at Nguyễn Tri Phương Church, Baptists at the Baptist Society, and Southern Baptists at Bàn Cờ Church, which belongs to the Vietnamese Protestant Church. A number of other groups follow religious activities in private homes, such as the Mormons, with some dozen persons. In Bình Dương, there is a group of Kwang Protestants with Koreans conducting their religious activities at the Protestant Church of Lái Thiêu, which belongs to the Vietnamese Protestant Church. In Đồng Nai province, there is a group of Korean Protestants which meets at Long Thành Church. All of these religious groups follow the Vietnamese law on religious beliefs, and operate under the leadership of the appropriate State agency.

A number of foreigners enter Vietnam to visit and work on the invitation of Vietnamese organizations and offices. They visit their relatives or travel in connection with traveling agencies. They participate in normal religious activities at cultural bases together with fellow religious believers in Vietnam. A typical example during the APEC Conference (Hanoi, 2000) is the participation of chiefs of States, such as the president of United States, the president of the Philippines, and many officials, in services at Hanoi churches.

Foreign dignitaries and priests coming to Vietnam on the invitation of agencies and organizations have conditions to carry out their religious activities for their individual needs. They follow the registered content when they are seeking entry visas, such as when the delegation of the Vatican Holy See visited and exchanged views on issues relating to the Vietnamese Catholic Church. Especially in November 2005, when the Cardinal of the Sacred Mission, the Head of the Holy See Delegation presided over the Mass for the nomination of 57 new Vietnamese Catholic priests at the main Catholic church in Hanoi (St. Joseph's Cathedral). In 2006 and 2007, under the direction of Most Venerable Thích Nhất Hạnh, the group of monks of Làng Mai, Paris, together with about 200 bonzes belonging 30 different nationalities, visited and carried out religious activities at many places throughout the whole country. In the La Vang pilgrimage in 2007 at La Vang Church, Hải Ninh commune, Hải Lăng district, Quảng Trị province, there was the presence of bishops and priests from the United States, France and Thailand.

In past years, especially after the stage of renovation known as “Đổi Mới”, and integration into the countries of the area and of the world, the answer to the religious living needs for legally residing foreigners in Vietnam has received an ever growing attention. This has been expressed not only in the system of legal documents but also in the content of religious activities. In recent times religious activities of foreigners, however, still meet some problems as follow:

- At the present, among the foreigners having need of religious activities in groups, the most numerous are the Koreans, with an ever growing number. However, there are still not enough places in corresponding cult bases in Vietnam for their religious activities. On the other hand, people from Korea in Vietnam follow different sects; holding common activities, therefore, meet many difficulties because of differences in beliefs and dogmas.

- Among foreigners coming to Vietnam to work and study, some follow religions that do not exist in Vietnam such as Anglican, Orthodox, etc. They must be taken care of, and conditions corresponding to their needs of religious practice and activities should be created.

In conclusion, functional organizations are examining these difficulties. More appropriate measures are needed to respond to the religious needs of foreigners in line with Vietnamese laws, and following international convention.