

## **CULTURAL INTEGRATION - THE INEVITABLE TREND OF EXOGENOUS RELIGIONS IN VIETNAM IN GENERAL AND OF PROTESTANTISM IN PARTICULAR**

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The two concepts of Culture and Religion, in everyday life, seem separating in the view of all people and perhaps not even a few persons have to pay attention. Then what are the problems between the national culture and the large exogenous religions In the case of Vietnam that should be noted? Whatever presented in this essay may pose a view that is still humble about the main topic as stated, a personal solution, with several points that we need to discuss.

To evaluate these issues, it is necessary to recognize the problems from historical aspects with a broad view. Throughout the course of history, Vietnam has gone through many events, but changes in Vietnamese history followed long cycles, and the following developments always reserved many elements of the previous time, and the history of religion and culture in Vietnam had no exception. People by themselves have to raise questions:

- How the exogenous religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism,□) having propagated for more than a thousand years could have a firm status in the spiritual and cultural life of the whole nation -the people, also over the time penetrated deeper, in spite of the vicissitude of economic life and social form?

- Further questioning these religions, in the process of propagating and existing, have they transformed themselves to mix in with the lives of the people who cultivated rice (wet rice cultivation or dry rice cultivation ) as the

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main source of living, the people who did not have habits of expressing through use of text, writing, grant theories, but used usual language, customs, traditions, norms, signs of symbolic and characteristic actions, feelings of a simple soul, but containing the basis of deep thoughts, eventually receiving the essence of external religious doctrines?

- Furthermore, what were the inadequate points from the exogenous religions when spreading their knowledge outside, seemingly there were religions that were unfit for the national culture?

Perhaps this integration brought to Vietnamese culture some new spiritual colors. On one hand, it confirmed what it had; on the other hand, it also gave new contributions (though not always synonymous with goodness), and the important result created the Vietnamese people and soul as they are today. Who could deny the values that Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Confucianism have brought to the Vietnamese people and other ethnic people of Vietnam, from ethics, ways of life to economics, politics, ideology and transcendent thought. Who can show evidence of futility that Hinduism, Islam brought to the Cham people's culture? Likewise, the Catholics and the Protestants in Vietnam have their own reason to talk about the advantages that their religions brought? The reason is that to say there were no "advantages", why certain ethnic people of Vietnamese nation would follow them, although these two religions did not have the same cultural "origin" and their propagating time was still relatively new in contrast with the other religions.

To this point, the important eras in the religious history of Vietnam must be mentioned. There are at least four eras to pay attention to:

- The era before Christ (BC) and Anno Domini (AD),
- The 10th and the 11th centuries,
- The 14th century,
- And finally the twentieth century.

Approximately each cycle lasted seven or eight hundred years in the religious history of Vietnam, left a deep imprint in spiritual life at that time and in later periods. Those four important milestones showed the different cycles, long and short, sometimes entering into the common flow of religions in the region and in the world, but also taking their own rhythm steps.

The first era to pay attention to in the religious history of Vietnam is the time around one or two centuries BC and AD. During that time, the propagating waves of Buddhism and Hinduism to the ancient Asian countries showed a characteristic of similarity between the two religions, and they even joined each other to enter the new lands. With a broad view, the entire territory of Vietnam at the time, although it was not yet a unified country as it is presently, was influenced by the Indian religious waves. What was in those waves that some people did not adequately evaluate is that through religion Indian civilization entered the new lands and left there traces of splendid architectures, arts, writing, which are still can be seen today in Asian countries. The Indians not only promoted their own religions, but they also transferred other religions of the world in the next centuries to enter the Asian countries, as an example, Islam. With a closer view, the propagation of Buddhism to Viet Nam and ancient Indochina peninsula caused different consequences. For example, when Buddhism came to North Vietnam, Chinese civilization had already established a firm position. Therefore, Buddhism and Hinduism had to find a way to coexist; they could not have the superposition as they had in South Vietnam and in other parts of the Indochina peninsula. In the period around before Christ (BC) and After Domini (AD), South China and North Vietnam suffered a formidable religious wave case stirred up by Chinese rulers: religions like Confucianism and Taoism. Disregarding minor details, it was an unprecedented force in the history of the Bach Viet people at that time. It was a force because the Vietnamese aborigines have had a long traditional culture and their own religions that researchers refer to as Animism<sup>(1)</sup> and Polytheism, and along with these religions, there were ceremonies, festivals that took place in the seasonal cycle of cultivation and weather of small communities (communes or villages) or regional communities. We can find numerous proofs of these religions in the lives of the Vietnamese people and other ethnic groups at the present time. Animism does not has a form of existence like the large religions (also referred to as established religion and redemptive religion, and many large religions have their own origins and undeniable traces of Animism) established on the foundation of ancient civilizations. Through a

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<sup>1</sup> Animism, the doctrine of this religion believe in attached the concept of soul for every animal, every natural phenomenon and every object, we can use Vietnamese idioms of *the soul of banyan tree and kapok tree* to express this definition.

different perspective, the large religions and Animism have no heterogeneous levels of reflection in the human religious sense that was derived from the “regular” phenomenon of the uneven development in human history, as C. Lévi-Strauss<sup>(2)</sup> commented: that is a cumulative and gradual process. It means that civilization (or religion) cannot be equally shared among humanity at the same time. If we based on the evidence of written data and objects, which existed, we certainly know that at the time of 3000 BC, Animism and Polytheism dominated the whole religious life of humanity. Yet until now, we still find that they concurrently exist and intrude into the large religions despite the fact that time and historical circumstances have changed.

Looking back to the primary centuries AD and the period ruled by the Chinese in the North, there may be the situation: when Animism and polytheism dominated the life of the rural communes in Vietnam, the large religions of China and India were basically concentrated just around the bases of the rulers. This situation did not exclude part of the countries in southern Vietnam, Champa and Phu Nam (Funan). It can be inferred that the large religions sought to interfere with the spiritual foundation of the indigenous agricultural society that had existed as a type of the rural commune of Asian mode of production. We can just infer because there was no event that could be proven with certainty in time and space of the interfering process, especially in the situation of Chinese rulers seeking to assimilate the indigenous populations. Their bibliographies always described the nations and the ethnic neighbors in a model way. In contrast, the nations and the ethnic groups influenced by Indian civilization have borrowed the expressions of Indian bibliography to express their culture.

The second noteworthy period of the religious history of Vietnam is the 10th and the 11th centuries, the beginning of the era of autonomy and independence of Dai Viet. By that time, Vietnamese agricultural rice civilization had established its own appearance. It sufficiently converged the factors of a uniform regime as a centralized monarchy, the king and the royal apparatus reigned over numerous rural communes.

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<sup>2</sup> C. Lévi-Strauss, *Race and History*, translation, The Society of History Science of Vietnam, Hanoi, 1996.

There was an unexpected tendency in history: what foreign rulers in the North imposed on the Vietnamese in the past thousand years but failed were applied and completed by the Vietnamese monarchy when bringing Chinese civilization to impose on the nation, including the religions in the 10th and 11th centuries. These events have molded the face of Vietnamese culture for many centuries later. The next generations often identified this frame with traditional ethnic culture. Nguyễn Trãi confirmed that it was at the highest level when he equated Vietnamese civilization with Chinese civilization. The large religions at the time were Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, often referred to as the tri-religion in history books. To pass the time and through the Vietnamese monarchies, these religions have managed the spirit of the tri-religion coexisting. We can point out a few key points of this process. They were actively supported, honored and imposed on the rural communes-villages of the state. The cases -as Buddhism, Taoism under the Ly and the Tran dynasties, Confucianism under the Le and the Nguyen dynasties- were typical for the imposition. This trend was more determined, conservative, and rigid along the time. The states in the south were not different when receiving Hinduism and then Islam.

At the beginning of the Dai Viet civilization, it was phenomenal that the large religions have actively participated in the social and political life, and the Buddhist monks and Taoist clergymen had a huge role in the construction of the dynasty. There is no doubt that the totalitarianism of Confucianism has dominated every aspect of life in the society during the periods of Le- Nguyen dynasties. In fact, Confucianism had to give a concession to Buddhism, Taoism and Animism. In the south, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism also faced with Hinduism and Islam.

However, the new and positive factors of the large religions that have contributed to the nation's cultural heritage should be mentioned. These religions were very important sources in the creation of written and imperial culture (mainly the Chinese figurative square block's character and sharp horizontal Indian character as Sanskrit and Pali). These religions inspired the creation of national language and script. They meant to transfer cultural values, just as a bridge for indigenous culture and exogenous exchange, and have also been a means for Vietnam to join the common culture of humanity in the contemporary. It is necessary to emphasize the features of the religious

activities of the Dai Viet period that there were no wars in the name of a religion literally. Of course, it could not avoid discrimination, depending on how each State honored which religions and doctrines.

However, the religious life throughout centuries has shown that the large religions could not make Animism and Polytheism vanish. They just sank in the bottom and flowed as an underground circuit in the heart of the communes-villages. Their actual presence has forced the state to recognize and treat them as an essential part in the religious life of the nation. The recognition of the Patron God of the village is the most typical example. In their turn, the large religions had to seek popular beliefs and practices, turned them into a part of the ritual and festival of Buddhist temple, Taoist temple and village. This is a two-sided behavior of the state and those who were responsible in religion: on one hand, they regarded the popular worships as "nonsense", but on the other hand, they had to use these worships to be able to integrate into the lives of the farmers, the subjects of Dai Viet society. In terms of religious behavior, the throne of the Buddha was not different from the throne of the Divine in the view of the people. What can be better than the example of the existence of the indigenous religions through village festivals in the spring and in the autumn with agricultural rituals and surviving ancient fertility rites? Obviously, the characteristic can be seen through the religious spirit of the Vietnamese history: the spirit that did not value theory and doctrine as practicality and harmony, the spirit that did not uphold ancient things but did not break tradition, the spirit of reception but did not totally renovate.

The third remarkable period in the religious history of Vietnam is the 16th century. That was the time of propagation of Christianity <sup>(3)</sup>. In the context of the world, capitalism has formed in Europe and was expanding into other continents. The trend of geographical discovery and colonial conquest, in order to expand the market and resources, Christianity, one of the world's largest religions, has supported these expansions with two largest branches: Catholicism and Protestantism. Vietnam and other countries in Asia were also caught up in the cycle of the era of capitalist expansion.

The missionaries went to every place they could. They brought Christian dogma and ritual, moreover, spread the Christian culture wherever they

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<sup>3</sup> Christianisme in French.

infiltrated. In Western literary work at the time and later, they were regarded as brave, holy and ascetic friars who spread the faith without tiredness. Although deaths caused by war and persecution stalked them, they gradually formed another kind of culture and religion where they could come. A minority of them was assimilated into the indigenous population, and understanding the customs, appreciating cultural values of the indigenous people, and with European manner, they wrote their experience and created a collection of detailed and extensive documents about the ethnic people. Later these documents were used by social sciences and humanities researchers of the countries that escaped from colonialism. A few of them, moreover, made some contribution to create the writing (of course using Western characters) for the natives. Nothing is better than taking the national writing (Quốc ngữ) of Vietnam as an example. To be truly Objective, there were negative sides of the Christian movement of expansion: if we affirmed the achievements that this movement brought to the new lands, this movement was also closely associated with Western colonialism, a very typical relationship between religion and politics. Achievements of Christianity coincided with the pain and sufferings of the people in the colonies. A number of missionaries actively participated in the process of colonization, while others were less active in this movement but supported the intention of using it as a measure to quickly expand influence, not just merely for religion but also for the institution, the state of the Vatican. It is a paradox of history. Coming together with newness are blood and tears, divisions and discrimination. Although self-justification to whatever extent and for whatever purpose, the Western colonial centuries and Christianity in parallel still remain a dark mark in the history of religion in general and Christianity in particular.

Nowadays, we need to have a fair view. We cannot let the past haunt us because the nature of our culture is openness, tolerance, understanding and continuity. Let's raise the noble spirit as an immortal spirit in every direction, the people for the peaceful society.

To pay attention, the relationship between Christianity and other large religions in Vietnam at the time was not always completely good, not to say that they even humiliated one another. Thus, in our opinion, cultural collision obviously has to occur in that cultural and social context. But in general, the peoples who settled by the rivers and the sea were not included in the four

groups of people (Tứ Dân- intellectuals, farmers, craftsmen, businessmen), or even some people from the four groups at the later time, did not have disapproving attitude. They also quickly found in Christianity a new place of spiritual life for hardship. Expansion In the later time and different historical situations of the branches of Christianity, though have changed, Christian culture became a part of the culture of Vietnam.

The 20th century is the fourth period to be noted in the religious history of Vietnam. There were many religious trends and philosophical movements coexisting and fighting. It was the period of religious crisis and separation, but some religions revived and integrated into the trend of development of society, culture and contemporary civilization on the basis of human perception with great changes. A century of vibration and full of world-scale events, once again, religions are in the center of human thinking. Vietnam is not exceptional. This century has clearly shown two trends of religious intolerance and tolerance coinciding, occurring in Vietnam.

To conclude this presentation with a comment: All the exogenous religions, when they come to Vietnam, they need to integrate into the national culture, they need to show adaptation to the national culture. To adapt or not doesn't depend solely on the national culture but depends on the exogenous religions themselves. /.