

CHRISTIANITY WITH THE PROBLEM OF CULTURAL CONFLICT AND INTEGRATION: THE FIRST STEP TO STUDY AND COMPARE CATHOLICISM AND PROTESTANTISM IN VIETNAM

Nguyễn Hồng Dương (*)

Introduction

The Catholics and Protestants in Vietnam are both familiar and strange to the word "Christianity" because Vietnamese Catholics call themselves as Christians; Vietnamese Protestants consider themselves as Christians. In fact, both Catholics and Protestants are Christian believers. If they are asked what their religions, they will answer that they are Catholics or Protestants so that Christianity becomes strange to them. Historically, Catholicism, Protestantism, the Orthodox Church and Anglican Church were the great parts of Christianity. Later these religions were separated.

When speaking of Christianity, we only think of *Catholicism and Protestantism*

Catholicism entered Vietnam in 1615s. Priest F. Buzomi began missionary work in Hội An (Quảng Nam province). Protestantism was brought to Vietnam in 1911. Catholicism was present in Vietnam earlier than Protestantism three centuries. But Catholicism was present in Vietnam later than Vietnamese traditional religions 16 centuries. Comparing to Vietnamese traditional religions, Protestantism was appeared later than them 19 centuries. Both Catholicism and Protestantism are monotheistic religions. Strangely, the first time of these religions was in Central Vietnam; it is easy to understand for the first missionaries came to Vietnam by sea. At that time, Hội An and Đà Nẵng were great seaports in Central Vietnam. Catholicism was brought to Vietnam from Western European countries (Italy, France, Spain, and Portugal). Protestantism was introduced from North America. Because they were

* Ass. Prof. Dr., Institute for Religious Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

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monotheistic religions, they were unfamiliar with culture, beliefs and traditional religions in Vietnam. They had met many difficulties for a long, so the number of their believers did not develop.

On the aspects of cultural conflict and integration, we find that Catholicism and Protestantism have the different features. We shall deal with cultural conflict and integration of each religion, and then we give our remarks.

1 The cultural conflict and integration of Catholicism in Vietnam

Until July, 2012 Vietnamese Catholicism has 6,2 million believers and makes up 6,84% population with 4,044 dignitaries. On organization, Vietnamese Catholicism has 26 dioceses with 9,000 parishes, 9,000 places of worship and 7 grand seminaries⁽¹⁾.

Catholicism had presented in Vietnam at the beginning of the 17th century. On political aspect, Catholic preaching and development has met many difficulties in Vietnam. On cultural aspect, Catholicism has shown clearly its conflict and integration with Vietnamese traditional culture

1.1 Conflict

When carrying missionary work in Vietnam, priests recognized Vietnamese culture basing on Christian culture, concretely, on the culture of Western Europe. They dignified Christian culture and lowered Vietnamese culture. Because they did not care Vietnamese culture especially the culture of belief and of religion so they did not understand Vietnamese culture. They ignored and opposed Vietnamese culture. They evangelized inflexibly. That is why Christian culture conflicts with the Vietnamese traditional culture. This is an important problem which is dealt with by many researchers in and outside the Catholic Church. In this article we only focus on two views of the conflict. The first view, priests considered Vietnamese people as the ungodly; the second view, they considered Vietnamese traditional religions as false religion.

1.1.1 The ungodly

Not only Catholicism but also other monotheistic religions, such as Islam, considers non religious man as the ungodly. This rigid appreciation is expressed clearly in missionary work and development of Catholicism in Vietnam.

¹ The document of The Government Committee for Religious Affairs.

Priest Thiện Cẩm told over and over “the wrong verse” when the Catholic Church taught believers how to differentiate between good — natured man and wicked man. Ask: who is “good - natured man”? And who is “wicked man”. Answer: good - natured man is a religious man; wicked man is non-religious man. Priest Thiện Cẩm commented: according this statement we think that non Catholic man are wicked men⁽²⁾.

Before the Second Vatican Council, many official documents of the Catholic Church as well as the documents of Diocesan Conference and Pastoral Letters considered non - Catholic man as the ungodly.

1.1.2. The false religion

In this part, we deal with the Pastoral Letter under heading: *on false affairs* written by Bishop Peter Dong in Hanoi, on 8th May, 1905. This letter dealt with 4 matters.

1. The objects that should not be worshipped;
2. On service: The things which should not be done;
3. On piety: The things which should not be done;
4. The falsities which should not be believed.

We quote the first issue: *the objects that should be worshipped*

1- What is worship of saints? Who is a saint? Saint may be this man or that man in the world or the death. They believe him to help them.

2- The worship of Buddha: Buddha is called *Bụt* or *Thích Ca* (Sakyamuni) so that Buddha was a man in the world. He had parents, wife and children. Vietnamese worshiped Buddha because the King of Great Ming country who invaded our country and tricked our people into building pagoda for worship of Buddha.

3- The worship of Confucius: Confucius was a man like Buddha as already discussed (□). At present, saint and Buddha or Confucius died they can not help anybody. Anyone who worships them was cheated.

4- The worship of ancestors (□). All believers know how to pray. Those who pray their ancestor are cheaters

² Priest Thiện Cẩm, OP. *Lòng tin có còn tồn tại trên trái đất (Belief has still existed in the world?)* Catholicism and Nation Monthly Review, N^o. 213, September, 2012, p. 7.

Alexandre de Rhodes, a Jesuit, was considered to have integrative thought but he thought that the traditional religions were false religions. His thought was showed in the book *Catechisms*

Because Catholicism ignored Vietnamese traditional culture and regarded Vietnamese traditional belief and religions as false religions, so it was forbidden by Le - Nguyen regimes. Vietnamese people turned their back to Catholicism. At the first time, the religious forbidden policy of Lê - Nguyễn regimes had no political problems; two regimes were anxious that “Catholicism might damage our national customs”.

1.2. Integration

The cultural conflict and integration of Catholicism and Vietnam happened at the first time when Catholicism entered Vietnam. But the integration of Catholic culture and Vietnamese culture has still continued. The cultural conflict was made by the Church. But the cultural integration has been carried out by Catholic believers who have lived in parishes. The process of cultural integration is not happening regularly. Sometimes the integration has been unintentional, sometimes it has been intentional. While missionaries tried their best to compel believers keeping ‘Catholic regulations’ but believers have carried out lifestyle of Vietnam⁽³⁾. Because of following two reasons: first, Vietnamese people have imbued with their traditional culture before converting to Catholicism. Second believers have lived in their villages they have not wanted to become the strangers in their communities. Catholic regulations are too severe so Vietnamese Catholic believers want to carry out life style of Vietnam⁽⁴⁾. We dealt with this matter more completely in the book *Nghi lễ và lối sống Công giáo trong văn hóa Việt Nam* (Rite and Catholic Lifestyle in Vietnamese Culture, 2001). In the book *Tôn giáo trong mối quan hệ văn hóa và phát triển* (Religion in the Cultural Relation and Development in Vietnam, 2004) we also deal with the position of Catholicism in some levels such as architecture, press, literature, linguistics, lifestyle.

After the Second Vatican Council (1962- 1965), the Vietnamese Catholic Church has officially discussed the integration of cultural Catholicism and Vietnamese culture.

³ This terms has been dealt with recently by Vietnamese Episcopal Conference, in fact, Vietnamese Catholics have carried out life style of Vietnam for a long time.

⁴ See: Nguyễn Hồng Dương, *Nghi lễ và lối sống Công giáo trong văn hóa Việt Nam* (Rite and Catholic Lifestyle in Vietnamese Culture), Social Sciences Press, Hanoi, 2001.

Frankly, Catholicism in Vietnam has created a new vitality to change some levels including the level of integration. Before the Second Vatican Council, Vietnamese Catholic Church discussed some problems of integration, such as Jesuit missionaries proposed to recognize the ancestral worship. This proposal caused the contradiction of the Jesuit missionaries with missionaries of Dominica Order. Because of the interference of the Holy See, Catholic regulations were back as before.

Until the Second Vatican Council, the Vietnamese Catholic Church has just officially discussed the matter of integration, why so? There are many reasons, but in my opinion, the following is the main reasons.

- Before the Second Vatican Council, Catholicism was influenced by the dogmas of Nicene Council and of the First Vatican Council. These Councils put the Church on “the defendant”.

- The missionary work and development of Catholicism were done by foreign missionaries. They did not care to train Vietnamese priests. A number of Vietnamese priests were few. “Vietnamese priests were trained to comply with orders” (Trần Tam Tĩnh, *Cross and Sword*), so they were subject to foreign missionaries.

- Missionaries only kept their religion, consolidated their faith according to the Canon without regard to religious practice and diversity of Vietnamese believers. Furthermore, they were afraid of Vietnamese believers lost “Catholic characters”.

The Second Vatican Council has brought new vitality “new heaven and new earth” to Vietnamese Catholic Church and helped the Vietnamese Catholic Council to achieve good results.

After Vietnam was unified (1975), the Churches of the North and of the South are merged into one Church. The Vietnamese Catholic Church has many conditions to implement the spirits of the Second Vatican Council on renovation and integration including cultural integration. The integration was started by the Catholic researchers with their articles on national culture, Vietnamese traditional beliefs and other religions in Vietnam. Some articles criticized old and rigid regulations of the Catholic Church and they proposed many views to overcome them. At first, all documents of the Second Vatican Council were translated into Vietnamese by religious priests or seminaries.

After the Vietnamese Episcopal Conference was established (April, 1980) the process of integration has actually developed vigorously. The Pastoral Letter of the Vietnamese Episcopal Conference 1980 decided “*Building in Church a way of life and expression of faith in accordance with national tradition*”. The Pastoral Letter of the Vietnamese Episcopal Conference 1983 decided its orientation: *Catholic Church will march along with our people and integrate with national culture*. The Pastoral Letter of the Vietnamese Episcopal Conference 1989 and Pastoral Epistle 1991 continued the orientation of the Vietnamese Catholic Church “*Living Gospel within the nation*”. The Pastoral Letter in 1992 pointed out that the Church should integrate with national culture more and more. The Pastoral Letter 1992 wrote that “From the beginning, our forefathers had applied the best of national culture to express their belief and their interrelation to God such as music, art, architecture, rite and the organization of family, of village and parish. Now, the exchange of nations has made cultures more and more closer and helped cultures to integrate with each other. Seeking cultural nuance of the nation not only looks for the old but also manifests national characters in prayer, in services, in daily life as well as in theological language. This work should be carried out in the ethnic minorities so that all peoples preserve their national identities in Church. This is an important work. It needs contributions of many specialized agencies and the general leadership to avoid random actions”⁽⁵⁾. With the spirit of Conference of Synod of Asian Bishop held in 1998, the Pastoral Letter of Vietnamese Episcopal Conference 1998 stated that “In Conference, Vietnamese bishops state their experience in levels of dogmas and service in accordance with cultural integration and meeting social need with three main subjects: 1) How can we say about Father and Church in the Vietnamese cultural background basing on family? 2) How can we find the influence of Holy Spirit in place where everyone are sincere and goodwill, especially towards other religions? 3) How can the respect of grandparents and ancestors help people to realize Father and to understand the piety of Vietnamese Catholics clearly?”⁽⁶⁾.

After making a break with national culture, Vietnamese Catholics had to overcome many difficulties to return their origin, now their Catholic life is in accordance with Vietnamese life style.

⁵ Trần Anh Dũng (editor), *Hàng giáo phẩm Công giáo Việt Nam* (Catholic Hierarchy in Vietnam) (1960 - 1995), Paris, 1996, p. 292.

⁶ The Pastoral Letter of Vietnamese Episcopal Conference on 17th October, 1998.

2. The cultural conflict and integration of Protestantism in Vietnam

Protestantism has been brought to Vietnam since 1911. Before 1975 Protestantism had its believers in the North and in the South, but its believers developed vigorously in the South. In the South there were about 200,000 Protestants. After 1975, Protestantism had no advantageous conditions to develop. At the end of 1980s Protestantism “developed unusually” in the Northern ethnic minorities and in the Central Highlands with many different organizations and sects.

Until March 2011, in our country there are more than 1 million Protestant believers. They make up 1, 14% population. Among them there are 436 pastors, 306 licensed pastors, 458 preachers, 455 associations, 4,409 groups and 351 churches. Protestantism in Vietnam has more than 90 different organizations; 10 organizations are recognized legal person status by the State. Other Protestant organizations are a newly imported organization. The orientation of recognized Protestant organizations is “worshipping God and serving the Homeland and Nation”. The Protestant organizations obey the law and march along with the nation⁷.

When Protestantism was preached and developed in Vietnam, it also conflicted with Vietnamese national culture. The conflict of Protestantism with Vietnamese national culture was not really strong as a conflict of Catholicism with Vietnamese national culture because of following reasons.

Until 1975 Protestant community in Vietnam was small. Almost believers were townsmen. Vietnamese cities had not established their cultural features yet. The majority of the townsmen were villagers who left village's culture but had not established urban culture yet. Protestantism was brought to Vietnam in the beginning of the 20th century. At that time, the traditional culture of Vietnam was in crisis, so urban culture was damaged. In this condition, townsmen sought a new religion - Protestantism, although this religion ignored their culture, traditional religions and beliefs. Before 1975 Protestantism developed in villages. Because its believers were few, Protestant villages or Protestant regions were not established. That was why the conflict of Protestantism with Vietnamese culture was not as severe and violent as the conflict of Catholicism.

⁷ Documents of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs.

In order to preserve their religion, Protestant dignitaries required their believers not to worship ancestors. Protestantism propagandized the piety of Christian so that people felt secure to convert to Protestantism. Because Protestant believers ignored to worship ancestor, they were protected by their family, villagers. Many Protestant believers had to leave their families, villages.

At the end of 1980s Protestantism developed in the ethnic minority areas in the North and in the Central Highlands. The conflict of Protestantism with the traditional culture of these regions was relatively strong because Protestantism rejected the traditional culture, beliefs and religions of these regions.

In the Central Highlands, Protestant believers do not carry out festival of gongs, Buffalo-stabbing festival, etc. Where Protestantism enters, the traditional customs are not preserved.

In the Northern mountainous regions, Protestantism primarily develops in Hmong and Dao people. Two peoples attach much importance to preserve a culture of family and the worship of ancestors. Protestantism rejects culture of family and the worship of ancestor so that Protestant believers unintentionally or intentionally live aloof from their families, their community's identity. That is the reason why Protestant believers often contradict with people who want to maintain the national culture.

Protestantism develops in Hmong and Dao communities; it rejects cultural activities of these two communities. People are forbidden to play the Khèn (pan-pipe) and to take part in traditional festivals.

During 100 years, Protestantism has integrated with Vietnamese national culture

Protestantism in the Northern ethnic minority areas and in the Central Highlands influenced inhabitants' life. Almost Protestant believers avoid drinking. The drink is bad and dangerous custom. Because Protestant believers do not worship ancestors, they are free from costly custom. The sick people do not worship ghost, they go to hospital. In the Central Highlands, Protestant believers live in hygienic condition.

3. Some remarks

When Catholicism and Protestantism were brought to Vietnam, they have conflicted and integrated with national culture with different degrees.

Catholicism conflicted with many levels of national culture including the worship of ancestors. So did Protestantism. However, in the Central Highlands the conflict of Protestantism with traditional culture is stronger than other conflicts.

The conflict happened severely and comprehensively. The integration was in the same situation. The integration happened in many aspects including unofficial and official aspects. One of official aspects is Roma orientation; the Vietnamese Catholic Church applied this orientation to each stage, to Pastoral Letters of Vietnamese Episcopal Conference

After a long time, Catholicism establishes its cultural values and has position in traditional culture and contemporary culture of Vietnam. At present, the cultural conflict is dismissed. But the role of Protestant culture is not clear in Vietnamese traditional culture as well as in Vietnamese contemporary culture. The cultural conflict of Protestantism with national culture is continued. In the cultural conflict there is the worship of ancestors. Why does conflict exist? There are many reasons, but the main reason is that no Protestant organization would like to overcome this problem. We think that it is very important for Protestant organizations to resolve this problem in the future. Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) with the most believers should pay attention to this problem.

As we know, Vietnamese culture is an open - culture. It always accepts cultures of other regions including religion. In Vietnam there is no religious discrimination or religious war. Vietnamese belief is also an open belief. It accepts foreign religions that respect and integrate with the Vietnamese traditional culture as well as Vietnamese modern culture. Any religion that conflicts, destroys national unity and divides believers has not position in Vietnamese culture. /.