

PROTESTANT MISSION WITH TRADITIONAL CULTURE AND VIETNAMESE RELIGIOUS BELIEF

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Introduction

In 2011 Protestant community in Vietnam ceremonially celebrated 100 years of Protestantism in Vietnam.

After being introduced, Protestantism in Vietnam has developed quickly since 1975 up to now with above 1 million believers.

The development of this religious community has been a special feature in a common picture of diversified religious life in Vietnam in opened period.

Objectively, there are many different views on the success as well as the failure of Protestantism in 100 years of mission.

In this article we will discuss subject: Protestant mission in the relation with traditional culture and religious faiths in Vietnam.

This is the large and complex subject, so this article can deal with incompletely all aspects of this matter.

1. The first missionary stage and Protestant conflict with Vietnamese family, social customs and ancestral worship

In the beginning of the 20th century, missionaries of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) entered Vietnam to learn the Vietnamese language and translated the Bible into Vietnamese in order to prepare missionary work in Vietnam. They had faced traditional culture of a nation, the ancestral worship and the system of family and social customs.

Vietnamese dignify the worship of ancestors, of tutelary gods and of people who had done great services to the village and nation. This worship becomes the leading norm in moral aspect of each member in family, village. Moreover,

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the worship of ancestors is considered as a main religious form of the Vietnamese nation ⁽¹⁾.

Because of this matter, missionaries proposed clear regulations and Protestant believers had to obey those regulations:

“The formal believers have to show repentance for their sins, believe in Christ Jesus and be baptized□

Believers must not do worship, and superstitious activities. Believers must not use or deal with what are not in accordance with Protestant guideline such as opium, wine, tobacco and objects of worship□.” ⁽²⁾

Any believer who commits ten sins will be excommunicated. The worship of idol is the first sin.

In order to argue Protestant regulations, missionaries had edited the book *Tịch tà quy chính* in Chinese for use in Vietnam. So the book *Chân, Giả Luận* was born. This book is documented to argue Protestantism against family, social customs and Vietnamese traditional beliefs.

On “not to worship and pray to ancestor”, the article 20th of this book written:

“How many generations do you worship? Can you worship two or three generations in your house? Can you worship some generations in your line? We worship only God. He was the ancestor of our ancestor□.” ⁽³⁾

The criticism of tutelary god was similar.

“Nobody knows why you believe superstition but you refuse to worship God who blesses you, what a pity!” ⁽⁴⁾

According to Protestant regulations, Protestant believers do not kowtow the death and weep when their relative died. In burial ceremony, Protestant believers only pray, commemorate and sing hymns. Because these regulations are different from traditional rites, Vietnamese hardly accept this religion.

¹ Đặng Nghiêm Vạn, *Điểm qua tình hình tôn giáo hiện nay* (Reviewing Religious Situation at Present) in *Những vấn đề tôn giáo hiện nay* (The Religious Problems at Present), Social Sciences Press, 1994, p. 42.

² *Regulations of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam* (1936 - Amendment and Publishing in 1952-1957, 1958), Sài Gòn Press, 1958, p. 42.

³ *Chân, Giả Luận* (Truthful and Deceitful Discussion), Protestant Press, Đà Lạt, 1942, p. 16.

⁴ *Chân, Giả Luận* (Truthful and Deceitful Discussion), *ibid*, p. 17.

Because of the above reasons, when missionaries of CMA carried out their missionary work, people often called Protestantism as “Đạo bỏ Ông, bỏ Bà” (it means that believers of this religion must leave their ancestors) or “Đạo Huê Kỳ” (it means American religion)⁽⁵⁾

The conflict between Protestant mission and family, social customs, and the worship of ancestors creates heavy consequence to new believers. Many Protestant believers do not worship their ancestors. Many believers break down the altars and burn votive tablets, etc.

Besides, many families of Protestant believers oppose violently believers' actions such as any believers are sent home, taken away the power of inheritance or abused as well as beaten.

Today, traditional society has changed including the lifestyle in cities as well as in the village because of influence society and communities of the Western culture and civilization but new Protestant believers are under the pressures of their families, line and communities. Therefore, in my opinion these pressures influence the result of Protestant mission in Vietnam.

2. The Protestant mission in the relation with popular beliefs and other religions in Vietnam

When missionaries established “places of mission” and the network of churches of the first believers, they met not only the worship of ancestor but also the popular belief and other religions in Vietnam.

The system of Vietnamese popular beliefs is very plentiful and complex. Almost Vietnamese have accepted and followed these beliefs. It is the greatest obstacle for Protestant missionaries to attract believers. Thus, they study clearly pantheistic elements to reject popular beliefs. *Chân, Giả Luận* is documented for missionaries to criticize and reduce traditional beliefs such as physiognomy, fortune telling, Goddess Liễu Hạnh, Goddess Ngọc, God of the Soil, Pluto, etc. *Chân, Giả Luận* writes about Goddess Liễu Hạnh and Goddess Ngọc as follows “*legend of these two women is unreal. They were flighty women living in villages; nevertheless women in the North believe that Liễu Hạnh is a Goddess who can help them. Women in the South accept Goddess Ngọc as a mother. It is really wrong. Why do not they worship God who can assume life and death? They should pray Him to help them*”⁽⁶⁾

⁵ Lê Văn Thái, *Forty six years of Function*, Protestant Press, Sài Gòn, 1971, p. 19.

⁶ *Chân, Giả Luận* (Truthful and Deceitful Discussion), *ibid*, p. 44.

Researcher Đỗ Hữu Nghiêm remarks that “Everywhere *missionaries try their best to win dealers in votive paper, sorcerers, astrologers*□ *They also change people who believe and worship Quan Cong, Goddess Ngoc as well as other traditional beliefs in Vietnamese villages*□”⁽⁷⁾

Protestant propagation must deal with not only traditional beliefs but also other religions in Vietnam.

Three religions (Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism) have existed in Vietnam for a long time. They have obstructed Protestant propagation. Therefore, missionaries have tried their best to compete with these religions.

On Buddhism, *Chân, Giả Luận* remarks that “According to Buddhist dogmas, man has three bad called □three poisons□. Anyone who wants to pass into Nirvana must escape from three poisons. Because Buddha is not a savior, Buddha is only the head of religion. He teaches dogmas and morality. He is similar to a doctor who examines patient and said □you get three serious diseases: heart attack, liver and lung diseases□ The patient is very anxious and he asks the help of Buddha. But Buddha answers that I cannot recover you. If you can leave three diseases, you will be well again□. After listening, how much patient feels deep grief and disappointed□”⁽⁸⁾

On Confucianism *Chân, Giả Luận* remarks that “Now Confucian scholars read only books of Confucian deities but do not take Confucian deities□ advices. Confucian scholars believe everything. They do not distinguish right or wrong. They pray good fortune and burn incense in front of evil spirits. It is shameful for Confucianism when these men consider themselves as Confucian scholars. We appreciate the teachings of Confucius but we worship God. We only respect Confucius□”⁽⁹⁾

When arguing, Protestant missionaries obviously reaffirm that Protestantism is a true religion”

“Christianity is the unique religion that can renovate Vietnam. The wrong faiths of Buddhism, of Confucianism, of Taoism, of Caodaism or the rites of worshipping deities of ethnic groups can not save this nation! Only Christ Jesus can help this nation. The duty of Christians is to bring Christ Jesus to people because only Christ Jesus can help them to escape from poverty and ignorance,

⁷ Đỗ Hữu Nghiêm, *Phương pháp truyền giáo của Tin Lành giáo tại Việt Nam* (Missionary Methods of Protestantism in Vietnam, a Master thesis on history, Sài Gòn University, 1968, p. 112.

⁸ *Chân, Giả Luận* (Truthful and Deceitful Discussion), ibid, p. 11.

⁹ Ibid, pp. 14-15.

superstition. To make people to know Christ Jesus is the noble duty of missionaries”⁽¹⁰⁾

After the 1970s, what Protestantism criticizes other religions have been not popular in Protestant newspapers but the Protestant standpoint hasn't changed. Protestantism thinks that all misfortunes are originated from the worship of “idol” and other religions.

“What desolateness! Vietnamese people worship idol. Because of worship of idol we have to live in miserable condition. I believe that if Vietnamese people realize their sin of worshipping idol then they worship only God. God will have pity for them and save our country from disaster”⁽¹¹⁾

3. On the cause and consequence of culture and belief conflicts

Vietnamese are tolerant of religions with idiom “all *religions are good, all religions teach people to do good things and to avoid bad things*”. In Vietnam, there is not any religious war. When entering Vietnam, all religions have actualized and fallen in line with native elements.

Why did families and communities react against Protestantism when it has been propagated in Vietnam? Studies of missionary history show that the number of people who are baptized is few, only about one - sixtieth, rarely one - tenth, even the number of baptized people still holding faithful after a few years are less.

The core of this phenomenon is the collision and the resistance to cultural traditions and customs of the Vietnamese family that ancestor worship is the key element.

The conflict between Christianity and ancestral worship is not a new problem. Catholic missionaries also met this problem in Vietnam and in China. When carrying out missionary work, many missionaries have lost prestige of deities so conflict becomes more and more violent.

Therefore, it is easy to understand why the first Protestants in Vietnam were interpreters, secretaries of Department of Train, bank employees who had abandoned the traditional village communities, subject to the influence of Western culture. They were not under the traditional tie of community any longer. This shows that there only have been Protestants in cities and in urban population as well. This reason also explains the almost complete failure of

¹⁰ G. H. Smith, *Victory in Vietnam*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1965, p. 241.

¹¹ *Rạng Đông* newspaper, N^o. 104, July, 1974, p. 35.

Protestantism in the development of the believer in the Northern delta villages (where the village's cultural tradition is very deep). Meanwhile, in the Central and the South by immigrant communities, the village nature was no longer tightly, so this religion has got more believers.

The situation of ethnic minorities is relatively different. At the end of 1920s Protestant missionaries started to carry out missionary work in the mountainous regions. From 1954 to 1975 missionary methods were carried out with various methods (such as anthropology, linguistics, indirect and direct missionary), but a traditional belief system of ethnic minorities was rather strong, so Protestant missionaries did not achieve good results.

During 20 recent years, some problems emerge in ethnic minorities because economic life is difficult; traditional culture and beliefs have been reduced. Those are favorable elements for accepting Protestantism.

The next reasons coming from organizational and operational characteristics of CMA which is the first Protestant organization and left a deep stamp up in missionary areas in Vietnam.

In newly formed period, A. B. Simpson, the founder of CMA, wrote *“(It is) not our aim to establish costly institutions, schools, churches and hospitals as much as an aggressive, evangelical movement that will sweep over the heathen world and preach the gospel as quickly as possible to every creature.*

The Alliance through the years has been called a movement. At its inception the Master breathed into its wheels the word “GO.” It was never constituted to stand still. Its equilibrium depends upon forward movement.

It wobbles only when speed is slackened. It will topple over into the ecclesiastical scrap pile if it stops. Therefore, it must not stop” ⁽¹²⁾

Because CMA was a newly formed organization, its missionaries who were sent to propagate evangel were young. Some of them were normal believers. They had not a thorough knowledge of the culture of the regions where they carried out missionary work. The teaching methods of catechism of the missionaries were not consistent. The degree of theology of some missionaries was limited. Because of those reasons, Protestantism often conflicted native culture. A historian of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam remarks “Missionaries of CMA played an important role in the national Church

¹² D. R. Wetzel, *The Context of CMA*, Learning materials for training pastors and missionaries (translated), published by Vietnam's Theological Institution, New York, 1992. p. 121.

established in 1927. They were tireless to pursue missionary work and develop churches in remote regions. They devoted their lives to the churches. Their examples encouraged pastors and missionaries in difficult periods. They were advisers; some of them shared joys and sorrows with the Vietnamese. The successes of missionary work in tribes in and after the war were the results of their sacrifices for the church. Unfortunately, some of them had not a thorough knowledge of culture of regions, so they fail in missionary work. A few seem to not understand the subject of Christianity; this made them to believe that the peripheral elements of the cultural context and of the sect to them is more important than a new life in Jesus Christ and the Holy work. The failure was due to the dissimilarity between the teaching and their way of life.”⁽¹³⁾.

This matter was finally manifested in “Compromise between the Evangelical Church of Vietnam and CMA” signed on 27th June, 1972 in Sai Gon; the Personnel Section, the Article 2 stated clearly requirements: “*Missionaries not only have to speak a fluent native language but also have to understand thoroughly customs and psychology of indigenous people, and the Charter of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam*”⁽¹⁴⁾

Because the Christian and Missionary Alliance was a small organization, it does not aim to establish hospitals, universities and social and cultural institutions to support missionary work. It was the difference between CMA with other Protestant churches (for example, in China some Protestant churches build universities, publishing houses, printing houses, cultural foundations).

It was complained about training policy of CMA. CMA only paid attention to train people being in middle ranking. CMA limited highly to train people having high knowledge, including the leaders of native church, so Protestantism was short of prestigious intellectuals. As a consequence, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam is a Europe - America stereotype in worship words, rituals and lifestyle, and methods and ways of missionary. Therefore, the target of building “its own theology” becomes very far for them.

4. Towards future

In 1972 historian Le Hoang Phu wrote “*In a certain sense, a church would become a native church only if it reaches so self-support and self-development*”

¹³ Lê Hoàng Phu, *The History of Evangelical Church of Vietnam, 1911 - 1965*, Center for Gospel Studies, Sài Gòn, 1974, p. 171.

¹⁴ Compromise between the Evangelical Church of Vietnam and CMA was published in Bible Monthly journal, N°. 398, 399, Sept. and Oct., 1972.

that it can report its philosophy basing not only on the Bible and the Christianity but also on a cultural form which making it become a part of national heritage and contribute to the common cause of Christianity” ⁽¹⁵⁾

This is also a concern of many Christians in Vietnam today.

When celebrating 100 years of Protestantism in Vietnam, almost Christians are moved. As a leader of a Church said: “We *should draw a lesson from history that God would like to teach the Church in tears and smiles*” ⁽¹⁶⁾

Nowadays, the Church has been in favorable conditions. That is as follows:

- A friendly, peace loving, and non-religious discriminating nation.
- A Vietnamese state with the aim to unite every person and every religion in order to build a society with “the wealthy people - strong nation - equitable, democratic and civilized society” and respect the freedom right of religion and beliefs of people.

In this condition, except few individuals, groups, and sects have not drawn any history lessons yet when they still face or criticize other religions extremely; then, the Evangelical Churches’ standpoint in Vietnam showed clearly as a leader of a Church stated simply as follow:

“Gospel has intercultural characteristics not only by the authority of the Creator but also his unlimited love for human beings. Therefore, Christians always have a responsibility to honor Redeemer and express his good qualities in their life. Also, all those who look into their life can find that they are children of Christ since then they can attract others. It is a wonderful change of Gospel with many cultural colors of the earth. For Vietnamese Christians, we think that the Vietnamese State desires that Protestants are “*living the Gospel, worshipping God and serving the Homeland and the nation*” in accordance with the lifestyle that Christ has called and changed us” ⁽¹⁷⁾. /.

¹⁵ Lê Hoàng Phú, *ibid*, p. 174.

¹⁶ Pastor Thái Phước Trường, *The Evangelical Church of Vietnam in 100 years of Establishment and Development*, 2011, p. 208.

¹⁷ Pastor Nguyễn Hữu Mạc, quote from his paper: “Gospel and the change of cultural life of Protestant believers in Vietnam”.