

THE GOSPEL AND CHANGE IN CULTURAL LIFE

THE CHRISTIANS IN VIETNAM

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1. Introduction

According to the work of *Vietnam family culture and development*, the author indicates that: "*people become human beings because they are spiritual.*"

⁽¹⁾ The author recognizes that everyone has a spirit. This is so because it is entirely consistent with The Truth of the Word of God in the Bible that the *Lord created humankind from dust, blowing air into the nostrils and the human became a living soul* (Genesis 2: 7; BDM). The author also affirms that: "*Spiritual value of family culture permanently exists as humankind exists*"⁽²⁾. According to another work, *the spiritual Culture*, the author states that: "*Spirit is the highest sacred in daily life, is the belief in religious life.*"⁽³⁾ Besides, considering the ideological cultural throughout Vietnam history (about four thousand years), the Vietnamese have a rich spiritual life, including many exogenous religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Catholicism, etc., as well as indigenous religions such as Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, etc. In addition, the diversity in Vietnamese religions includes the Mother Goddess, the Patron God of the village (Thanh hoang), and especially the ancestry worship. Therefore, the Vietnamese highly value spiritual life.

Among the exogenous religions, Protestantism was introduced to Vietnam later (The Evangelical Church in north and south Vietnam celebrated the 100th anniversary of Protestantism in June 2011). Although Protestantism came later, St. Paul said: *Indeed, I am not ashamed of the Gospel because it is the power of God to save everyone who believes, first the Jews and then the Greeks* (Romans 1: 16; BDM). This means that Christians always believe that they are worshipping

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¹ Lê Minh, *Vietnam cultural family and development*, Lao dong Publishing House, 1994, p. 36.

² Lê Minh, *Vietnam cultural family and development*, ibid, p. 36.

³ Nguyễn Đăng Duy, *The Spiritual Culture*, The Information Culture Publishing House, 2009, p. 11

a Supreme Being who is the Em-ma-nu-en (God is with them). Therefore, they have both grace and power from God. So deep in their souls, they always express good ethics that Christ taught them in every aspect of social life; not only "the Jews" but also "the Greek" are saved. Although today the Vietnamese Christian population is small compared to adherents of other religions, Protestant practices strongly influence Vietnam society such as love, patience, tolerance, humility, etc. However, in the period of propagating and developing Gospel, there was misunderstanding. In contrast, the impact of God on every Christian's life, as a result, there has been good impact on the social life in the past, present and future. The purpose of this essay is to point out the changes in the lives of Christians in Vietnam.

2. General Concepts

A. The Gospel

1. What is the Gospel?

According to the essay entitled *Evangelization - Neo Evangelization*, Priest Joseph Phan Tan wrote: "Evangelization" (Phuc am hoa) was translated into evangelization (in English); vangelizatio (in French); evangelizatio (in Latin) "and it means the term derives from the Greek word euangelion (noun) meaning good news, the Gospel. Besides, euangelizo, euangelizomai (verb), euangelistes means a *person who reports good news*⁽⁴⁾.

The term Gospel in Vietnamese was borrowed from kanji (Sino character). Specifically, it is written (fu yin) which means *good news or Gospel bringing many benefits to society*⁽⁵⁾. Thus, it is possible to basically understand that *Gospel means good news or happy news*.

After all, where does the Gospel (or Good News) come from? What is the nature of the Gospel which has greatly influenced inter-cultures of humanity?

To Answer these questions, first, we point out the fact that Christians have always believed that God is eternally self existing and that he is the only one and is real. He reveals himself to humanity. If he was not "self-expressed", humanity would not have known anything about him.

In the context of sin and lack of glory of the Creator (Romans 3: 23; 3: 10-12), it means "human beings" are corrupt and must be "separated" from their

⁴ Joseph Phan Tan Thanh, *The Evangelization - The New Evangelization*. <http://simonhoadalat.com>.

⁵ Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, *Chinese - Vietnamese dictionary*, Social Science Publishing House, 1997, p. 336.

Creator (Isaiah 59: 2); and they were not able to “restore” the relationship with the Creator; it also means there is a place waiting for them in the “chapters” later in their lives as “in hell”. However, with love for humanity, Christ was incarnated himself for the salvation of mankind. Therefore, while Christ Jesus was reborn, Gospel or Good news of God reached humanity (Mark 1: 14; I Tee-sa-no-ni-ca 2 : 8-9).

Thus, is there any difference in the statement that Gospel derives from God and from his love for humanity? If the Gospel derives from God, What is the nature of the Gospel?

Let us listen to the Jesus’s statement: *Because of God’s love for humanity, he gave up his only son for those who believes in him so that they would not vanish and lived an eternal life forever.* (John 3: 16; BDM). Hence, the essence of the Gospel is the Creator’s love for humanity based on the foregoing verses and combig with commands that the Lord Jesus had commanded his judgment (cf. Matthew 28: 19-20; Acts 1: 8) and can be confirmed that the Gospel of God is universal for all human beings, not just for any nation or any country. Because Gospel of God’s for humankind has high value, it’s across cultures as well as the intercultural value of the Bible. Evidently, “the place” in the kingdom of God has more than 2 billion followers worldwide as the cultural basis of the Gospel. Another question posed here Is that for Gospel as stated in this work, if the nature of the Gospel is Love, then what else is the nature of the Gospel?

St. Paul taught that there were three elements: Faith, Hopelessness and Love. However, the greatest is love (cf. I Cor 13: 13; BDM). Based on this statement, Faith, Hopelessness and Love are the bases of the Gospel.

Therefore, Gospel from God includes the nature that is not only love but is also universal. Thus, it exists in Vietnam, a country that has thousands of years of civilization with many human traditions, good customs; and if it has not eliminated some bad practices, what can Gospels meet ? Furthermore, how will people’s lives in the traditions change in all aspects of social life in general?

To answer this question, we need to point out another concept of the culture and the formation of the core values of Vietnamese culture.

B. Culture

1. What is culture?

Culture is a concept of the large internal function that includes numerous different ways of understanding, and it should not be too confusing since this concept is related to both material and spiritual lives of people in every aspect.

Because the cultural concept is related to both material and spiritual life, finding a clear definition of culture is almost impossible. Thus, it relates to many areas such as ethnic studies, anthropology, folklore, sociology, and so each definition reflects only a certain aspect of this larger concept. Therefore, there can be many definitions of culture. According to a culture researcher of statistics, *there are more than 300 definitions of culture* ⁽⁶⁾. However, we are discussing the relationship between Gospel and Vietnamese culture, so in our opinion, the definition of Vietnamese Culture should be used. According to one English Dictionary, *Culture is generally both physical and spiritual values that humans have created throughout history* ⁽⁷⁾. The above definition shows that the Culture for Spiritual or Intangible Cultural and Culture for tangible or the Intangible Cultural.

Thus, it is based on the above definition to point form for the core values of formation in Vietnamese culture.

2. A profile of "shaping" Vietnamese culture.

In the first chapter, Auto reviews the book: the essential Vietnamese Culture and History of Dao Duy Anh scholars wrote: *"Due to the natural geographical conditions, ethnic groups living with different economic status have different ways of life. Therefore, If we want to study their culture, first, we must consider the nation's growth within the condition of geography"* ⁽⁸⁾.

As analyzed above, in terms of the natural geographical conditions, Vietnam is located in Southeast Asia and lives mainly on agriculture (rice cultivation). According to Professor Tran Ngoc Them's research, *there are two main types of cultures, including cultural forms from agricultural origin and cultural forms from nomadic origin and Vietnam Cultural kind from agricultural origin culture* ⁽⁹⁾. According to the author, the original cultural forms of agriculture include some of the following characteristics: 1) behaviour toward natural environment is living settlements, having respect and living in harmony with nature; 2) aspect of awareness is the formation of the mindset

⁶ Nguyễn Đăng Duy, *The Spiritual Culture*, Information Culture Publishing House, 2009, p. 11.

⁷The Institute of Language, *The Vietnamese Dictionary*, Danang Publishing House, 2004, p. 1100.

⁸ Đào Duy Anh, *The Essential of Vietnam History Culture*, the Information Culture Publishing House, 2003, p. 11.

⁹ Trần Ngọc Thêm, *The Basic Culture of Vietnam*, the Education Publishing House, 2009, p. 11.

synthesis that is accompanied by dialectic and the mindset synthesis covering all the elements, though, the dialectic pays attention to the dialectical relationship between them; 3) in community-based organizations, charity, morality, literature and women are always respected; 4) *aspect of the behaviour with the social environment, people employed in agriculture to always has positive attitude towards fusion of receiving, flexible blanket and peace and hospitality in communication*⁽¹⁰⁾.

Because of the cultural characteristics in agricultures stated above, Vietnam society, as a result, has some believers. First, the reverence for form of rice production to maintain life as well as the reverence for the growth of human population. Thus, it arises from the fertility belief (worshiping male and female sexual organs). Secondly, due to the cultivation of rice with water, people have to completely depend on nature; thus, they worship natural belief and they look for spirits everywhere and so they worship many spirits. In addition, in antiquity, the Vietnamese community knew to the differences there exists the man with physical and spiritual. The spirit is so difficult to understand that it becomes the divine of the soul. Therefore, they believe that the corpse would return to the soil, but the soul still exists. As a result, *people have a cult belief in humanity*⁽¹¹⁾. Based on the above belief, the Vietnamese have done thorough on the scale of worship. They worship at their home ancestors. Failure to worship their grandparents or ancestors means not only infidelity but also being inhumane and unappreciative. Furthermore, the village community level and national level of worship are larger than that of family's, as the village community worships the village tutelary and the nation worships the National Death Anniversary on 10th March of the lunar calendar every year (these phenomena exist only in Vietnam). Thus, In reference to the above cultural background, what has happened to Gospel in Vietnam and how Christians' lives and their surrounding communities have been affected?

3. Influence of the gospel on the cultural lives of Christians

1. Gospel and culture in Vietnam.

In June 2011 General Federation of Protestant Churches of Vietnam (South) and the General Assembly of the Protestant Church of Vietnam (North Vietnam) solemnly celebrated the 100th anniversary of Protestantism's in Vietnam. This means that the period of Gospel in Vietnam also has a significant "thickness".

¹⁰ Trần Ngọc Thêm, *The Basic Culture of Vietnam*, The Education Publishing House, 2009, p. 22.

¹¹ Trần Ngọc Thêm, *The Basic Culture of Vietnam*, *ibid*, p. 137.

Remarkably, it is the only God's "chosen" and "inspired" "preacher" to write what he said in communication. However, he still respected the individual, customs and traditions of the "preacher" completely; he did not impose and have them write or read, spell, copy. Therefore, in the Bible, a series of customs is completely different from the culture of agricultural origin in Vietnam because the preachers of the Bible all lived in areas inhabited by their nomads cultural background belonging to the type of original nomadic culture. The type of culture has characteristics different from the type of agricultural original culture of the Vietnamese. For example, *1) the behavioral way toward nature without respect for nature and liking to conquer nature, they like moving and do not like static; 2) in the field of natural perception, it is analytical thinking; 3) in community organizations, they respect strength, male-domination and individuals inclining to fierce competition; 4) in the field of social behavior, it is arbitrary in receiving and aggressive communication and*⁽¹²⁾.

As a result, all the cultural aspects of nomadic origin were given by preachers in the Bible (especially customs).

From the opposition of culture above, the Gospel was proclaimed in Vietnam without inevitable "collision". This means that when it came to Vietnam, though Gospel of the God having universal salvation meaning, it does not have only advantages but also disadvantages. Thus, what were the advantages and the disadvantages?

The advantages: There can be many advantages in spreading the Gospel in Vietnam. However, to present some points:

First, Vietnamese are the cult of activities for spiritual life and always aspire for the spiritual world. Secondly, they had the cultural background of agricultural origin so they revered the Creator whom the Vietnamese have called Mr. God. They believe that God made all things, delivered all things. Therefore, God intervened in all aspects of human life. Thus, it is close to the fear of the Creator in the Bible. Thirdly, they are naturally friendly, hospitable so it is easy for them to tolerate and accept the foreign cultures.

The disadvantages: Due to the difference between the background of the two cultures, when the Gospel came to Vietnam, it is easy to understand that there were lots of "collisions" without some witty reasons that are not easy to mention in the article. We would just mention some main disadvantages.

¹² Trần Ngọc Thêm, *The Basic Culture of Vietnam*, The Education Publishing House, 2009, p. 25.

First of all, the religious worship of ancestors. The Protestants always obey the Lord because he said not to worship other gods and not to kneel down to sculptures. Therefore, they do not perform acts of worship to other idols, kneel down to the body of the dead including relatives. They asserted that when people die their spiritual part returning to God if they are his kids. If they are not his kids, they must go somewhere, and so the spiritual part would not be enough time to keep "the most essence" of people that still living around in the world. Therefore, so all the incense and prayers are not only useless but also violates the commandments of God. Thus, the Christians don't pray in front of their altar as well as attend worship places such as temples, pagodas, temples, royal that worship The Mother Goddess, the God of the village, Buddha because they are places for major spiritual activity of the Vietnamese community. Therefore, a person who is Protestant is not only opposed against in the family but also protested against in the community, and the opposition sometimes could be strong.

Secondly, there were stereotypes about Christianity that created lots of misunderstandings because of the history of spreading God by the Catholic clergy from the last century. As a result, there were no good consequences for the Vietnamese people for nearly 100 years. Therefore, in Vietnamese minds, there were no good impression of the direction of the God that is a pity because this impression still exists today. Most people think that persons who worship God or believe in Jesus are submissive to religious imperialism. Although they do not understand that during the period of French colonialism, Vietnamese Christianity was banned by the French. After that, many American missionaries went to spread the Gospel, and many people still believed that the Gospel is the religion of the American. In fact, the newly formed United States in the 18th century (1776 S.C) and the Gospel had been around since the first century. According to historian Luke wrote (Luke 2:10). In the context of Vietnamese were affected by religious traditions as well as the prejudice too deeply, therefore, How the Christians lives changed to make good impacts on the community?

2. The influence of the Gospel on the Christians' lives

a) The natural world and human from "vision" of the Protestants

The Protestants believe that Protestantism is a religion derived from God without the idea of man. Therefore, what the Bible teaches are the truth and

standards that each believer must obey including both vision and behavior with the natural world as well as human society.

In the natural world, the Protestants believe that the whole universe, including the earth and people living on it were created by God. At the same time, God gave them the rights to administer "on the ground" (Genesis 1: 26-27). Therefore, the Protestant policy must have "good relations with the environment". They are allowed to exploit nature in a reasonable manner and responsible to take care of it. It doesn't mean that people destroy and eradicate the environment as the humankind way is doing today because they have to have good relations with the environment that the true definition of "administrator" by the God had given. Therefore, if human destroys the natural environment that the God created they would not have disasters that is ridiculous.

For humankind, the Protestants always obey that the God taught in every relationship of social relationships such as in their family, the wife must obey her husband and the husband has to love his wives, parents are responsible for raising children, children have an honor of their parents; people with the social environment means that the employer has to be fair to employees, employees are responsible for all assigned work (Colossians 3: 18-22); in terms of social organization, the Lord taught that all citizens must obey the government (Romans 13: 1-3). And the most important thing is that the love for all people, not only fall in love with the one you love or love someone loving you. Thus, if we use the terms of ethics to standards, it is no ethics of philosophy religion teaching detail as well as comprehensive and inclusive by the Christian Ethics.

b) The religious life of Christians in Vietnam.

In this article we do not intend to present the *Christian Theology* of the living religion, we just give some aspects in the real life of the living religion.

Jesus Christ embraced "many rules" to "Great Commandments" that is *Dear God, love people* (cf. Matthew 22: 37-40) as well as requited the Christians to practice *golden rules: Whatever you want someone to do for you, please do it for them* (cf. Matthew 7: 12; BDM). Thus, in real life, How the Christians have been "deployed" the statements of Jesus?

First of all, the Dear Lord is the duty of all Christians in general and the first requirement. Beside the requirements above, loving people are practiced in all other scales. From the family that is cell of society to villages, countries and global perspective. Specifically, their parents must practice filial piety. The

Protestants say that they must care for their parents and grandparents carefully as soon as their parents and grandparents are still living, they do not do anything to make grandparents or parents devastated. It means that they have to be signaling grandparents or parents who are living. Moreover, For brothers and sisters in their house, they must compromise, sacrifice and cares for them because if they don't practice these things, all the statements of God would just become empty statements.

In social relationship, they must humble and suffice as well as selfless heart including people who make to hurt them. The reasons of the Christians practice the rules in order to express the good moral characteristics of the Christ for others. Whenever, they practice the living as well as practice good deeds, they are really the *salt of the earth, the light of the world*.

It is the above spirit, the Christians in Vietnam in general always do usefully not only the individual, family but also the whole community.

In a specific example, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam did many meaningful things such as they helped the Highlanders to build houses, took care of free medical, provided scholarships for the children of poor students to study well, visited and gave gifts for people who living in the flood-stricken areas in the central region. Futhermore, the office is not only involved in helping the material but also help the children who had the social evils such as drug users, sex workers, etc. Therefore, there are many children abandon those vices and become good citizens. It shows that some cases. A businessman in Hanoi (we don't give his name) before he didn't believe in God, he was superstitious in the beginning of the new year, he loaned from Ba Chua Kho Bac Ninh and he paid it on the end of the year. He used to burn both clothing and money to send cost tens of millions for his grandparents in order to worship his ancestors. However, After he believed in God he gave up his habits before. He often went to charity without advertise his name or the name of his company because he is making the right statements of Jesus. In today's context, most of people go to a charity such as the construction of houses of gratitude to donate for the heroic Vietnamese mothers, some companies also asked to have their give names of their business on the houses because they think that charity work has both "potential" and "name". What makes the Christian entrepreneurs doing good freely without both "name" and "interests"? If he was not changed by the Gospel?

In the capital city, there is a younger son of a professor who is a doctoral institution respectable (we do not give specific name). He had been addicted to drugs for nearly seven years, the family took him to detoxification the center of the city about six times but failed; until he completely believed in God, he has definitely become not only a good citizen but also a opposed to testify of the Gospel and he helps many people addictions, HIV infection. What makes a drug addict smoking who has family or society give up them after having believed in God they become a good citizen and take care of the others. The answer is Gospel coming from God? However, if we research the influence of the Gospel in the culture in Vietnam, we don't mention the changing lifestyle of ethnic minorities is a major shortage. Because of its reasons, it is only seen that the number of people who took part in The Evangelical Church of North we would have a clear vision. In detail, on August 2012, all The Evangelical Church of North has 911 chapters with 141 thousand faithfuls including chapters of the Vietnamese people (or Kinh) that only has 39 chapters with about 10 thousand faithfuls. And there are 130 thousand members of ethnic minorities including the Hmong believers are over 100 thousand faithfuls. Thus, how the beliefs of the Hmong as well as After they believe in God who made their believe becoming change?

In terms of beliefs: Most of Hmong believe in the existence of the soul and the body depend on the soul⁽⁴³⁾. They believe in the existence of the ghost and that the ghost has supernatural power, govern all aspects of human life⁽⁴⁴⁾. Therefore, in their spiritual life the ghost systems are rich and clear. 1) *Ancestral ghosts (the ghosts were born from decease people)*; 2) *the main door ghost*; 3) *the house ghosts*; 4) *the kitchen ghosts*; 5) *the chamber ghosts*; 6) *the physician ghosts*; 7) *the shaman code ghosts*; 8) *the forest ghosts*⁽⁴⁵⁾. Beside the things above, they believe that their life has happiness or suffering as well as healthy or sick depending on their behavior with the ghosts above. From both material and spiritual life depends on so much the variety of the ghosts leading to the worship and other bad practices that occur frequently; besides the cost for the worship is also very expensive. As a result, it becomes a burden for many families. For example, a man has a wife if his parents die he has to pay for the funeral including 1) *1 cow (or buffalo) has a long horn about two*

¹³ Nguyễn Văn Thắng, *Shoud we maintain the old opinions or change the new opinions?* Social Science Publishing House, 2009, p. 61.

¹⁴ Nguyễn Văn Thắng, *Shoud we maintain the old opinions or...*, ibid, p. 62.

¹⁵ Nguyễn Văn Thắng, *Shoud we maintain the old opinions or...*, ibid, p. 63.

spans (it is time to cow or buffalo can plow about 3 or 4 years); 2) 20 pork kilograms; 3) 20 liter wine; 4) 20 rice kilogram⁽¹⁶⁾, etc. and many the other costs.

On the evils: it is based on for the real survey of The Evangelical Church of Vietnam before believing the God, the majority of the male is alcoholics, drug addicts and drug users, there were many villages to farm opium in order to use and trading for themselves.

Therefore, it can said that before the Hmong did not believe in the God, they were not only fetter in the grip of religion but also under the social evil's control. However, after they believed in the God, all things have been changed. All their families who believe in the God to remove all the ghost types above, if they are sick they go to the doctor instead of going to the shaman such as women are respected and lived happy, dressed beautifully in meetings instead of serving the drunken husband as before. The Protestant families sent their children to school, abandoned the cultivation of opium as well as alcoholism, they loved their wives instead of beating their wife as before. Because of The great change of the positive trend, a village has a person to believe in the God leading to most of the people of the village believes in God.

It is not only a subjective assessment of the Protestant but also a review of the Protestant scholars who are not the Christians. For instance for comments of an author *"the progress of the Protestantism is notable and therefore it helps Hmong easily to give up the backward ones and absorb the progress. In fact, The Hmong give to the traditional beliefs to follow the Protestantism that has a certain positive impact on the socio-economic development of the Hmong. Illustrative of this is giving up of Hmong Protestants with the backward practices and encouraging their children to school as well as studying to higher levels, using medications, using control self-birth, etc⁽¹⁷⁾.*

However, there are many other wonderful changes that people who are not the Christians of the Gospel thinking that *fairy tale*. Due to the change of both the individual and the community, especially, the insights of the scholar who are not the Protestant above. In our opinion, it is difficult to explain everything because of the great influence of the Gospel for the cultural life of normal people who truly receive and practice in the Gospel.

4. Conclusion

Through the presentation above, it is seen that the Gospel of the God has universal characteristics and not just spend on a nation. The Gospel has cross-

¹⁶Nguyễn Văn Thắng, *Shoud we maintain the old opinions or...*, ibid, p. 113.

¹⁷ Nguyễn Văn Thắng, *Shoud we maintain the old opinions or...*, ibid, p. 166.

cultural characteristics is not only the authority of the Creator but also his infinite love with humankind because the Christians always feel that they have to have responsibility for their glorious Redeemer as well as express his good moral characteristics in their life of the change. Thus, whoever look into their life they can understand that they are the kids of the Christ so it is attractive to others. It really is a wonderful change of the Gospel in all cultural colors of the earth. For the Christians in Vietnam, in our opinion, the government wants the Christians to *Living the Gospel, serving God and serving the Nation*. The opinion is also consistent with the lifestyle that the Christ called and helped us changing.

The above are some overview of the Gospel and the change of the cultural life for the Christians in Vietnam. Comments and further ideas are welcomed so that we can get a more comprehensive picture of this issue. May the God abundantly bless you!