

SOME SIMILAR FEATURES IN PROTESTANT ETHICS AND TRADITIONAL ETHICS

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Introduction

Protestantism has been officially brought to Vietnam for 100 years (1911-2011) by missionaries of Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA). In comparison with other religions, Vietnamese Protestant Church is the new Church with about 1 million believers, pastors and preachers. Now, Protestantism has a role in the heart of the nation and in the strong relation to society.

Protestantism entered Vietnam with its dogmas and valuable standards. These standards were different from the traditional views of Vietnamese people. The changes of awareness and lifestyle of new Protestant believers made the severe contradiction between Protestant believers with non-Protestant believers.

In Vietnam there are some differences between Western civilization and Eastern civilization as well as differences between new religions and ancient and familiar religions. But this article, the writer would like to deal with the similar features between Protestant ethics and traditional ethics. In the past, we had an extreme view on religions; we had not realized the significance of religious ethics in social life. Today, the Vietnamese Communist Party has advocated that "Promoting the good values of religious culture and ethics". The writer would like to provide dialectical theory to encourage all people who contribute to build a general moral basis of Vietnamese people. Simultaneously, the writer wants to overcome the preconception about the difference between religious believers and people who preserve traditional beliefs and between managers and Protestant believers.

Overview of Protestantism

Protestantism appeared in the West and it made society changeable then it became the boundary of two civilizations⁽¹⁾. According to a French researcher,

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Jean Bauberot, “in history, Protestantism has created an elementary factor in establishing modern characters although its other factors have been important”⁽²⁾. Protestant Church just exists in Vietnam for a short time. In the first days Protestantism only carried out religious activities, it hardly took part in social and political activities, although it has been recognized as one of the great religions in Vietnam.

The Protestant ethics originated from religious faith. May it have many different features, even it contradicts with Vietnamese ethics.

The theological view of Protestant Reformation shows three main matters: only God, only the Bible and only Grace⁽³⁾. Religious faith and moral lifestyle are manifested in the sentence of the Bible “the man who does righteousness will be living by his faith”⁽⁴⁾. These are the main characteristics of Protestantism. These characteristics describe generally premise of Vietnamese: *Ông Trời* (God) *Luật Trời* (God’s regulations) *Ơn Trời* (grace of God)

1- Ông Trời (God)

Protestantism worships God as the unique Creator⁽⁵⁾. Although in Vietnam there are Eastern religions and various deities⁽⁶⁾. Almost Vietnamese have a concept and faith in the Creator, they call him *Ông Trời*. According to a French researcher, L. Cadere, the concept of God is a special philosophical concept of Vietnamese nation; the notion of God rooted in a spirit of Vietnamese⁽⁷⁾, so they pray *Ông Trời*. This is the identity of Vietnamese belief. Although the word *Trời* has many meanings, it means the heaven, the nature □ but the words *Trời*, *Ông Trời* or *God* denote *God* who is kind hearted and fair. For Vietnamese people he is visible and invisible. Vietnamese people call him □ *Ông Trời* □.

Protestant ethics stresses the source of ethics that derives from nature of God. The nature of ethics reflects the will of Creator in creating and saving humankind. The main elements of true ethics that are created by God are shown

¹ Sabino Acquaviva, *Xã hội học tôn giáo* (Sociology of Religion), (translated into Vietnamese by Lê Diên), Social Science Publisher, Hanoi, 1998, p. 185.

² Jean Bauberot, *Histoire du Protestantisme* (History of Protestantism), World Publisher, 2006, pp. 9 - 22.

³ Jean Bauberot, *ibid*, pp. 9 - 22. Five characteristics in Latin: sola fide “only belief”; sola Scriptura “only Scripture”; sola gratia “only grace”; soli De gloria “only God”. But theological and secular researchers often focus 2 or 3 characteristics.

⁴ Bible Roman 1: 17b

⁵ Bible Tim 1: 17

⁶ Tạ Chí Đại Trưỡng, *Thần, người và đất Việt*, Information and Culture Publisher, 2006, pp. 356- 357.

⁷ Nguyễn Đăng Thục, *Lịch sử tư tưởng Việt Nam* (A History of Vietnamese Thought), the first vol., Hồ Chí Minh City Publishing House, 1992, Quotation from L. Cadere.

through the Bible, the natural world, humankind and history. All people find that we should do benefaction. All people recognize that “nobody’s perfect”.

When the bible was not born, ethics had appeared and existed with humankind and society⁽⁸⁾. Ethics was granted to human beings by *Ông Trời*. *Ethics* is shown in law of natural ethics and kept in the heart of human beings⁽⁹⁾. This law is based on the natural trend of the universe to carry out the right actions (a fierce tiger does kill her children, when a horse is ill, the whole stable refuse to eat grass). Thomas Aquinas thought that knowledge of ethics is embedded in people’s mind naturally then the moral values and the law of human kind are established. Thomas Hobbes developed the system of ethics on a natural basis. David Hume thought that ethics was perception.

According to a materialist view of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ethics was emerging from the need of social life and it was the result of social development. The word *ethics* came from the Greek word *ethos*. It means habits that are recognized by the majority of people. The word justice means the recognized standards of behavior later it becomes the fixed rule that people must be obeyed. From this angle, ethics is the phenomenon of mind, the form of social consciousness is emerging from the need of social life of human beings.

According to the Eastern views as well as traditional views, ethics is an important category; it consists of *đạo* and *đức*. *Đạo* is an absolute entity. It was born before the heave and the earth. It is the origin, the path and the life style⁽¹⁰⁾. *Đức* is an expression of *Đạo*; the moral principle that everybody should obey⁽¹¹⁾. Human beings should have a strong attachment to *Đạo* to have a happy life. *Đạo* couples with *Đức*. In the process of reflecting social consciousness, the form of religious consciousness relates to the form of social one. They infiltrate into each other⁽¹²⁾. According to William Barclay, the researcher of Bible ethics and religion has close relation because “ethics is a part in the religious catechism to teach human beings how to behave”⁽¹³⁾.

Protestant catechism advocates ethics so that each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to him, just as God has

⁸ Charles E. Curran, Richard A. Mc. Cormick (editor), *Reading in Moral Theology*, Vol. 7, Natural Law and Theology Paulist Press, New York, 1991, p. 239.

⁹ Alan F. Johnson, *Is there Biblical Warrant for Natural Law Theories?* Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, 27 June 1982, pp. 185- 199; *Bible*, ibid, pp. 181, 182, 755-757.

¹⁰ *Bible*, ibid, p. 106. John 1:1-5

¹¹ Nguyễn Ngọc Long (editor), *Textbook on Ethics*, National Politics Publisher, 2000, p. 8.

¹² Đặng Thị Lan, *The Role of Religious Ethics in Social Life*, Philosophical Review; http://chungta.com/Desktop.aspx/ChungTa-SuyNgam/TonGiao/Ve_vai_tro_cua_dao_duc_ton_giao_trong_doi_song_xa_hoi/

¹³ William Barclay, *Ethics in a Permissive Society*, Harper and Row Publisher, New York, 1971, p. 13.

called him⁽¹⁴⁾. In the past Christianity claimed that only actions of clergymen were sacred actions but Protestantism thinks that all legitimate actions of believers in daily life have good values. According to the “Beruf” view of Martin Luther⁽¹⁵⁾ our affairs have religious values and social significance.

Max Weber recognized that duties were carried out by means of job were moral activities of human beings⁽¹⁶⁾. This view manifests in the views of Protestant churches on the purpose and obligation of life. Ethics is no longer heavy obligation of each man. It is the sacred duty of each man. This problem rejects the view of Medieval Church on ethics. At that time, moral commandments were orders; the moral life was closed life in monasteries. At present, moral life that makes God satisfied is fulfillment of all obligations in the world.

In traditional society, few people think that their affairs and secular society have positive significance. Protestant catechism takes social life to a new position in religious significance. It is the important step to reject the division of class. Partly, the thought of Protestant catechism contributes to social transformation.

2- The rule of Trời (Bible)

The researcher Trương Văn Thiên Tư remarks that “Through generations, traditional Vietnamese people have built up for themselves away of living according to the love and justice of Trời or Đạo Trời (the way of Trời). Which are the standards for their conduct? This strong belief in Trời helps traditional Vietnamese people live justly and kindly under any living circumstance”⁽¹⁷⁾. Although there are not any systems of theology, the traditional Vietnamese obey “rule of Trời”. So they know what moral actions correspond with the rule of Trời. The main of rule of Trời is the love.⁽¹⁸⁾

Traditional Vietnamese people understand that Trời loves human beings and asks people love each other even if there is different:

Oh gourd, love the pumpkin

Though of different species, you share the same trellis

Vietnamese experience and understand that anyone who obeys law of Trời will be granted reward, anyone who does evil will meet unlucky

¹⁴ *Bible*, ibid, 1 Corinthians 7: 17-24

¹⁵ *Bible*, ibid, pp. 200, 2002, 260, 297.

¹⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Tri Thúc Publisher, 2008, pp. 131- 145.

¹⁷ Trương Văn Thiên Tư, *Mệnh Trời - Toward A Vietnamese Theology of Mission*, PhD. Thesis, Berkeley University, California, 2009 p. 145.

¹⁸ *Bible*, ibid, p. 182, Roman 2: 14-15

Live a good life and you will reap good things

Who have a life of virtue will be given blessing by Trời

Trời's way returns very soon

Good will return for good; evil will return for evil

The justice of Trời does not show favor to anyone. Trời rewards and punishes people fairly. Trời asks that people have to serve their parents, be faithful in marriage □ The moral lifestyle in accordance with the law of Trời makes people happy. The Protestantism ethics bases on traditional ethics:

10 commandments aim to preserve and ensure safe circumstance for human being in the social community. In 10 commandments there are 4 commandments relate to God who is Creator. 6 remaining commandments are:

People must respect their parents; do not murder; be faithful in marriage; do not steal; Do not tell lies about others; Do not want anything that belongs to someone else. Don't want anyone's house and wife⁽¹⁹⁾.

Savior gave two commandments that: "worship of God and love of people".

Protestantism advocates the important role of the Bible and it considers Bible as the rule of faith and the highest standard of ethics. Protestants of all churches think that Bible's power is higher than Church's power. Reason has also an important role to verify the system of ethics and confirm corresponding moral values. Although Bible, church and reason have not the same power, their combination is necessary⁽²⁰⁾.

3- Ôn Trời (Grace)

The life of human beings taken and shared present. It is both the love and the obligation⁽²¹⁾. Vietnam is the country with 4,000 historical years. Vietnamese are imbued with good values and long-standing cultural tradition. They have faith in God.

When becoming famous, people always memorize Trời's merit. Ông Trời is the Supreme Being but he is very close to human beings. Protestant believers are grateful to Trời. Their obligation is to advocate human values deriving from the culture of a nation.

Philosophy of the Renaissance stressed on reason and humanity. At that time the right to individual freedom was emphasized, human beings could enjoy

¹⁹ *Bible*, *ibid*, Exodus 20: 1-17

²⁰ T. C. Hammond, *In Understanding Be Men*, Inter Varsity Press, text in Vietnamese by Nguyễn Sinh, Văn phẩm nguồn sống Press, p. 22.

²¹ Lư Hồng Khanh, *Christian ethics*, Vietnamese Protestant Institute, Frankfurt, 2003, p. 73.

right needs in the world so that Martin Luther and George Calixt emphasized the subject of moral actions that human beings should change their spirit. The teaching of Jesus stressed the effect of the Holy Spirit in leading human beings into moral life. When sin infiltrates into the world human beings lose their holy nature that is why human beings need the help of Trời.

Because Protestant believers are grateful to Trời so they worship God and take part in social activities and help people who are in danger. To follow and to set an example is the educational method and real actions: To follow God⁽²²⁾; Vietnamese people always realize that Ông Trời loves people and asks people should love each other and follow the example of Christ⁽²³⁾. At the same time each Protestant believer must have a moral life style to set an example for others in society⁽²⁴⁾.

In the period of innovation, Vietnamese state has realized the religious need in people. This realization is objective and scientific realization. State finds religious ethics and its values in the cause of building our country. The values of the way of life of Protestant believers contribute to preserve the general ethics. Protestant ethics contributes to make the Western society prosperous. When reflecting social exists, religious faith and moral consciousness have closer relation, if faith is strong moral life become noble. This dialectic effect is shown in social life. The emergence of Protestantism created the Copernican Revolution in the history of Western symbol⁽²⁵⁾. Religion can not exist and develop if its nature is an illusion and unscientific, but Protestantism contributes to create the modern world and enhances the human values. This moral theory has active values for country especially at levels such as culture, education, and social order...

In order to answer the question: what is the main difference between traditional ethics and Protestant ethics? Almost theologians and ethicists think that essentially traditional ethics, social ethics or religious ethics are not different from each other. According to President Hồ Chí Minh the aim of ethics is in pursue of happiness for human beings and of welfare for society. Traditional ethics and Protestant ethics have common characters and special views. We shall mention the different features of traditional ethics and Protestant ethics in the next article. /.

²² *Bible*, *ibid*, p. 240, Ephesians 5: 1

²³ *Bible*, *ibid*, pp. 6, 209, Math 5: 48 I Corinthians 11:1

²⁴ *Bible*, *ibid*, p. 269, 270, Titus 2: 1-15; 3: 1-11

²⁵ Jean Bauberot, *ibid*, p. 182.