

**SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGION IN THE CONTEMPORARY  
SOCIAL CONTEXT OF SOUTH VIETNAM: A CASE STUDY  
IN THE CULT OF BÀ CHÚA XỨ<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** *Currently, Vietnam is in its development process to be an industrial country. The industrialization and modernization have been boosted so that it will basically become such a country in 2020. The reality shows that this development process is accompanied by the resurgence of the religious activities, and one of them is the cult of Bà Chúa Xứ (Lady of the Realm/ Mother Goddess). Worship for Bà Chúa Xứ is now one popular religious belief in South Vietnam.*

*In the development context of contemporary Vietnam, the paper is to explore the significance of religion through the worship practices of Bà Chúa Xứ. The findings indicate that people are in search of religious beliefs so as to ensure their spiritual security due to the instability in the market economy and the health problems in Vietnam's society. Once they realize that science is not a solution to problems rising in their contemporary life, they turn to religious practices that would provide them an outlet, i.e. faith in certain solutions. This fact is the very reason for the existence and development of religious practices in social contexts.*

**Keywords:** *Bà Chúa Xứ, Religion, significance, contemporary, South Vietnam.*

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### 1. Introduction

Since the promulgation of “Đổi Mới” policy, Vietnam has gone through an economic reformation from a centralized command economy into a socialist-oriented market economy. Then, it has opened and integrated with the world as part of globalization. Vietnamese’s life has been more and more improved thanks to the liberalization of trade, the recognition of the private sector as a driving force of economic development, Vietnam’s being an important agricultural export country in the world, the privatization of social services, the good and stable growth rate of economy for years, the industrialization and urbanization, the construction of new rural regions, and the development of information and communications technology,...

As Vietnam becomes part of the world’s globalization, the ICT turns to be an essential factor affecting its people’s life and thinking, and should have made them to have a look with more positivism and science at all the aspects of life. However, several researches point out that along with the shift in economic system, there comes “the resurgence” or “the upsurge” of religious rituals as well as the followers’ great piety (Taylor 2004, Lương Văn Hy 1991). During the past decades, with the achievement of nearly 20 years of innovation and development, the active operation of religious phenomena, especially beliefs that used to be under restraint such as practices of Holy Ladies and Mother Goddesses in the embodiment of Bà Chúa Xứ (Lady of the Realm), Linh Sơn Thánh Mẫu (Holy Mother of Sacred Mountain), Bà Chúa Liễu Hạnh (Princess Liễu Hạnh), etc. They all can be explained in two ways: in political-economic term, the developed economic life brings people some “surplus” so that they can participate in and hold religious ceremonies; and the Vietnamese government “has lessen its control of religious activities” (Lương Văn Hy, 1991: 481); and in psychologically functional term, the development context of contemporary Vietnam facilitates its people to more actively participate in the risky commercial activities, and thus they need some certain guarantee of “spiritual security” so as to deal with possible risks (Lương Văn Hy 1991, Taylor 2004, Saleminck 2010).

Not denying the viewpoint that economy is a critical factor for the development of religion and faith, based on our currently available data,

this paper is an attempt to further illustrate the psychological functions of religion and faith in the people's life in Vietnam's modern society. Our perspective is that the social context of Vietnam today is a source of demand for religion and faith. Accordingly, the people's active participation in the highly risky economic activities and their health status in a populous and developing country are factors leading them to find a solution to their spiritual security when those of science and positivism come to be helpless.

The data was collected from our survey in 2012 and 2013 at Bà Chúa Xứ Temple in Hòa Quới commune, Tân Chánh town, Cần Đước district, Long An province and Bà Chúa Xứ Temple in District 7, Ho Chi Minh City, which was considered the 2<sup>nd</sup> Office of the Headquarter of Bà Chúa Xứ Temple in Châu Đốc province. We conducted in-depth interviews to those who attended the worship practices in these two temples. Besides, we carried out some observations on the attendants' behavior of the ritual practices there.

## **2. Vietnam: a developing nation with many challenges**

Vietnam's Đổi Mới economic policy with the recognition of multi-sector economy, the transfer of land ownership to producers, and the policy of trade liberalization, especially after the US - Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement took effect in 2001, helped Vietnam's economy achieve significant improvements. Vietnam took its advantages in agricultural export, fishery, crude oil and labor-intensive production such as textile and footwear. Enterprises, especially those in the private sector, have actively done their business and manufacture to create wealth and provide social services.

As a result, Vietnam's economy has maintained its stable growth rate since the implementation of the Đổi Mới policy and international integration. In its strategic socio-economic development in the period 2001 - 2010, despite the impact of the regional currency and finance crisis in 1997 and the global finance crisis and recession from 2008 to present, Vietnam annually achieved a considerate economic growth averaging 7%<sup>1</sup>. From 1990 to present, Vietnam's per capita income has increased dramatically. Vietnam became a middle income country in 2010. In 2012, Vietnam's GDP per capita reached USD 1,749, its per capita income USD 1,150, and its GNI per capita USD 2,805<sup>2</sup>.

In addition to the economic achievements, Vietnam was highly evaluated in its important social advancements in education, healthcare and poverty reduction.

Education was one of the millennium development goals in which Vietnam made some certain achievements. According to the UN report in 2009, Vietnam's primary school enrollment rate was 95.5%, and 88.2% of the children completed their five years of primary education. More than 90% of them continued to enter junior high schools, and no significant gap between urban and rural areas was found. The gender ratios were fairly equal - nearly half of the students were girls at both the elementary and junior levels. The literate people aged from 15 to 24 accounted for 97.1%<sup>3</sup>.

In term of their longevity, Vietnamese people today were much healthier and lived longer than in the 1990s. The Vietnamese's expectation of life has constantly risen. According to the UN's report, the average age of the Vietnamese was 40.4 in the period 1950 - 1955, then went up to 75.2<sup>4</sup> in 2011, and the infant mortality rate (deaths per 1,000 live births) fell to 14 in 2010.

Vietnam is a bright spot in the world in respect of implementation of the millennium development goal of poverty reduction. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations granted Vietnam to be one of the 38 poorest countries that had made remarkable achievements in fighting poverty. Since 1986, Vietnam has risen from one of the world's poorest countries with a per capita income below \$ 100 to one low-income country. The national poverty rate declined positively. Vietnam's poverty rate declined 75%, i.e. from 58.1% in 1993 to 14.5% in 2008. The hunger rate declined over two thirds, i.e. from 24.9% in 1993 to 6.9% in 2008. The poverty rate decreased in all the demographic groups, in the urban and rural areas, and all the geographic regions in Vietnam as well. The achievement in curbing the malnutrition rate was also great, from 41% to 11.7% in 2011<sup>5</sup>. The World Bank reported that there was a sharp decline in the indicators of the population below Vietnam's poverty line, the population below the international poverty line, and the depth and severity of poverty strongly; and that nearly half of Vietnam's population escaped from poverty within the two past decades. During 20 years (1990 - 2010), Vietnam's poverty rate fell from 60% to 20.7%, with more than 30 million people lifted from poverty<sup>6</sup>.

According to the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, as of 2012, there were 500 thousand poor households assisted with accommodation, 542 million people with social insurance. The poor's living conditions were improved. The rates of poor households and poor districts declined rapidly, exceeding the targets set by the National Assembly: from 14.2% (2010) to 9.6% (2012). Through the implementation of Program 135-Phase II, the rate of poor households in communes and villages under extremely hard conditions declined from 47% (2006) to 28.8% (2010), and the per capita income persons was 4.2 million VND/ person / year. The percentage of communes building roads for the traffic of motor vehicles from the town center to villages and communes increased up to 80.7%; 2,2 million households were aided with plant seeds and animal breeds; 6,834 models of agricultural development, forestry and fishing were built... After nearly 4 years, the rate of poor households in 62 poor districts under Resolution 30a was reduced from 58.33% (2010) to 43. 89% (2012), i.e. an average decrease of 7% per year. The local authorities supported 1,340 laborers in poor districts in labor export, increasing the total number of labor exports to nearly 8,500 people after about 4 years. Also, they organized vocational training courses for more than 10,000 poor laborers to get jobs in their localities as well as in other regions, or join labor export. 225,000 households could get bank loans - the total amount of 1,122 billion VND - with preferential interest rates for poultry, livestock, and professional development...<sup>7</sup>

Besides the spectacular economic and social achievements as mentioned above, Vietnam's development has still be judged to be in need of more "emphasis on sustainability".

In the economic sphere, Vietnam's transformation from a centrally planned economy to a market one, coupled with the regional and global economic recessions, has impacted the economic life of its people.

After the economic reformation, Vietnam was on the path of development and integration. However, it was affected by the currency - finance crisis in 1997, which caused great reduction in its growth rate, increase in inflation, and cut back in direct - foreign investment. As long as Vietnam just recovered and participated in the WTO, it suffered an impact of the world economic crisis and depression out breaking in 2008.

It led to regression in its growth rate, increase in inflation, decline in social investment and industrial production, increase in inventory, weak purchasing power and consumption, and decrease in the number of newly registered enterprises<sup>8</sup>. Vietnam's economy was most affected, particularly in the real estate sector; the unemployment rate went up, more and more companies went bankrupt; the banking system suffered a lot of negative impact...

Along with the economic growth and population growth, the problems of pollution, environmental degradation, and healthcare in Vietnam came as a corollary of its development process and turned to be of the number-one concerns. Also, the quality of Vietnam's environment was at an alarming rate. As reported by Center for Environmental Law and Policy of Yale University and Columbia University (USA) in 2012, the general environmental index of Vietnam ranked 79<sup>th</sup> in the 132 researched countries; however, Vietnam was among 10 countries with the most polluted environment in the world. Food contamination was also of tension for Vietnamese people's health.

Despite Vietnam's improvement in its life expectancy, the number of healthy adults was not high. The overload in hospitals now showed that the incidence of Vietnamese people tended to be higher and more severe.

In such a social context, with the Vietnamese government's measures not achieving specific results yet, its people themselves find their own solutions in a life of risk and uncertainty, and one of them is reliance on the spiritual aspect.

### **3. Significance of religion and faith**

#### ***3.1. A quest for spiritual security***

Taylor (2004: 86-87) stated that the revival and development of religion in the society of South Vietnam was due to the unpredictability and the instability of the market economy. In the 1990s, most Asian countries including Vietnam struggled with the economic downturn. It was recognized that the commoditized economy was full of risks and uncertainties: prices would fluctuate up and down; business might go bankrupt at any time, and factories might be shut down and workers unemployed. In respect of religion, Taylor (ibid.: 87) asserted that the intensification of market relations in the region since the mid-1980s had

given rise to religious subjectivities that relate to the assertion of personal agency, the quest for predictability, and the management of anxiety; exposure to the market had transformed their lives, causing dislocations, a sense of powerlessness, and a feeling of being controlled by invisible, remote, and powerful forces.

The sense of powerlessness drove people to a quest for spiritual security so as to compensate for the insecurity in the market economy. That is a reason why the veneration of Bà Chúa Xứ not only serves the agricultural fertility but also a much wider scope - economic and spiritual purpose.

Salemink (2010: 1) identified four forms of contemporary anxiety that require spiritual healing, i.e. “physical and mental problems, economic insecurity and market risk, existential uncertainties related to the dead, and running deliberate risks and their management”. What we collected from the informants, participants in ceremonies at Bà Chúa Xứ Temples also supported this identification. Coming to Mother Goddess temples, devotees made offerings, usually consisting of flowers, fruits, cakes, roast pork and incense. Their aims are various such as praying for “good business”, “lucky sale”, “health recovery”, “danger escape and safety”, “examination pass”, “good love”, etc.

“This is the first time I have come to the Temple. I make offerings to Mother Goddess for Her protection against the danger and uncertainty on my frequent sea voyages. In the old days, we had no children and were poor, so we felt no threat from vulnerability. Now we have got a daughter and things turn different. Nowadays, due to the complexity of society, i.e. thieves and robbers are present everywhere, I do hope that the Mother Goddess will protect our family, and propitiate our anxiety and stress.” (a 23 year-old male coming from Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu province, interviewed at Bà Chúa Xứ Temple, District 7, Hochiminh City)

“I am a helmsman and I usually go far away. I return home few times per year, just on the occasions of ceremony in the Temple. All the people in my neighborhood give one hand and most of the helmsmen who have higher living standards contribute more. Then, we have enough money from their donation to set up about 8 to 10 offering trays. As a member of the committee of religious service, I always pray for the peace in our neighborhood, and good business for myself. Belief will bring good

news.” (a 55 year-old male steering a boat with cargo of fertilizer, interviewed at Bà Chúa Xứ Temple, Cây Cui, Tân Chánh town, Cần Đức district, Long An province).

In addition, many of them believe that the veneration of the Mother Goddess is an age-old tradition of the Vietnamese. In their childhood, they were influenced by their family members. There has existed a bond connecting the believers and the gods and goddesses and encouraging them to do some religious practice in temples or shrines on certain dates during the year as in a man's words below:

“My wife and I work in a state-run company, so we do no trading. Coming to the Temple is our family's tradition. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> date every lunar month, we are here. We do not pray for wealth or lucky business, but for the peace of mind.” (a 42 year old male being civil servant, and a 36 year-old female)

Thus, apart from the spiritual security, another reason for people's arrival to Bà Chúa Xứ Temples is their family's tradition. However, the deep reason is search for the peace of mind.

The significance of religion and faith is also expressed through the religious practice, which is not a kind of “superstitious” activity at all.

### **3.2. Religion and “Supersition”**

In his paper “Magic, Science, and Religion”, Bronislaw Malinowski (2004) discussed the relationship between magic and religion based on the work of James Frazer. According to Malinowski (ibid.: 3), magic, based on human beings' confidence that they can dominate the nature directly if only they know the laws to govern it magically, is in this akin to science; religion, the confession of human impotence in certain matters, lifts human beings above the magical level, and later on maintains its independence side by side with science, to which magic has to succumb. In this viewpoint, magic was born in the primitive society due to the ambition to manipulate and dominate the nature, to change the weather, animals, and crops for human's sake. Human beings expressed their desire through rites and spells. Later on, realizing the limitations of magic, in fear and hope, they turned to greater spiritual, invisible beings such as demons, ancestor-spirits or gods. Sir James Frazer was a pioneer to see the distinction between direct control and indirect manipulation by employing superior power, i.e. magic and religion. As superstition is the



faith in magic, it has some limitations in power, and thus does not fulfill human beings' demand.

According to such evolutionists as Sir James Frazer, the three concepts of magic, religion, and science represent the evolutionary path of human's thinking. Magic signifies the primary stage while science embodies the highest one (Frazer, 2009: 48 - 82). For this reason, in the start of the industrialization era, the Vietnamese government attempted to prohibit both the mainstream and non-mainstream religiosity in order to develop a modern society with a strong foundation of science - the highest stage of development. Malinowski, despite following the theory of distinction between magic and religion in Sir James Frazer's research, suggested a different classification of the three concepts. In his view, magic rituals, even derided as the height of ignorance and irrationality, were highly sensible and effective. Take for an example, when Trobriand islanders went fishing in a lagoon, it was normal, but when they reached beyond the reefs, out into the deep ocean where they might face vagaries and dangers of accidental injury, fierce waves and sudden storms, as well as sharks, unpredictable hauls, and other difficulties, they then resorted to magic rituals to help relieve their fear and encourage them to get on. Malinowski (2004: 134 - 301) thought that it mattered not that these rituals had no basis in science (in fact, they would not calm waves or ensure a worthwhile catch) but that they empowered the islanders to do whatever needed in cases that some events went beyond their control; therefore, they maintained the psychological well-being of tribal members, and allowed members to better participate in the necessary social and economic functions of the community.

Malinowski's psychologically functional approach helps explain beliefs in religion and faith in the context of Vietnam's contemporary modern society. For those who participate in the ritual practices at Bà Chúa Xứ Temples, the value or the function of religion and faith is a strong focus in their lives. A female student addressed the similar issue on magic and religion, talking about the cult of Bà Chúa Xứ as follows:

"In my opinion, the worship of the Mother Goddess is not superstitious at all. I make offerings to Her so as to achieve a good mental state, not a specific return. For example, people often say 'Học tài thi phận'<sup>9</sup> (Your hard work shall be paid off with a bit of luck), and so the

very first thing I have to do before praying Her for success is that I have to try my best. She will not response to those who wish for irrational things such as passing their exams without study, or being wealthy without hard work, etc. Fortune-telling, spirits mediumship, and physiognomy can be seen forms of superstition because people usually abuse those practices with the purpose to make an excuse for their laziness and trick others for money. (a 22 year-old female student, interviewed at Bà Chúa Xứ Temple, District 7, Hochiminh City)

Besides, people see the existence of religion and faith is as a matter of course alongside science in the current social context. Therefore, their main purpose for worshipping the Mother Goddess is to get Her support in terms of emotion and spiritual security, things that science can not solve.

“Though being in a world where science and technology development is speeding up everyday, I have great trust in religion and faith because there are certain things and events that science has not been able to explain yet.” (a 42 year-old male businessman, interviewed at Bà Chúa Xứ Temple, District 7, Hochiminh City)

Hence, the significance of religion and faith shown through Vietnam's Southerners' piety in their practice of worshipping Bà Chúa Xứ reveals one of its value, i.e. its psychological function in a context of a society with rapid and strong development, and certain complicated social consequences that lead people to a tottering state of beliefs in the contemporary social context where people find a lot of insecurity and unconquered things. It is this value of religion and faith that makes the religious practice “not superstitious”. It contributes to helping human beings more powerful, transforming their faith into physical strength so as to perform different roles in life. In a modern society, with a rapid increase in living standards, information technology, the modernity rises but there exist some social issues, the religion and faith serve as a companion of human beings in their overcoming challenges of life. The practice of religion and faith should not be viewed under an evolutionary framework but considered in respect of its function and value. The conflict between the development of the country and the development of devotion shows us the limitations, and human beings should rely on religion and faith to overcome them./.

# NOTES:

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- 3 Vietnam's UN retrieved from <http://www.vn.undp.org/content/vietnam/vi/home/mdgoverview/overview/mdg2/>. Dated 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2014.
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- 6 World Bank (2012), *Good Start, Not yet Done: Vietnam's Impressive Achievements in Poverty Reduction and New Challenges*, Report on Vietnam's poverty evaluation 2012: 8 - 13.
- 7 National Office of Poverty Reduction - Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, retrieved from <http://giamngheo.molisa.gov.vn/VN/NewsDetail.aspx?ID=9&CateID=4> (Page of national information on sustainable poverty reduction)
- 8 Finance Magazine "5 Years of Aftershocks of World Finance Crisis in Vietnam", retrieved from <http://www.tapchitaichinh.vn>
- 9 A Vietnamese proverb states that you can put as much effort as possible in your learning, but when tests and exams come, whether you can pass or not depends much on your fate.

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