

THE IDENTIFICATION OF TRANSFORMATION TENDENCY IN CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS OF VIETNAM

Abstract: *Over the past decades, the Central Highlands has been experienced a tremendous transformation in many aspects such as ecological environment and mode of livelihood; ethnic composition and social structural organization, cultural style, religious life in particular. In the past, the Polytheistic and Animistic mentality was universal. Currently, there has been a colorful religious picture with harmony and contradiction or conflict at the same time. This text identifies five tendencies in contemporary religious life in the Central Highlands such as a decline of Polytheistic and Animistic mentality, a simplicity of traditional rites; restoration the practices of traditional culture/religions with selection; orientation and stagization; cultural/religious acculturation among ethnics with advantage of the Kinh (majority); a strong shift from Polytheism to Monotheism - expansion of Protestantism-; secularization of the main religions and schism or scramble for believers.*

Keywords: *Acculturation, Central Highlands, conflict, conservation, conversion, religion, secularization, transformation.*

The work “*Les Jungles Moi*” (“Rừng người Thượng - vùng rừng núi cao nguyên miền Trung Việt Nam”) by Henri Maitre indicated one of the fundamental dynamics that urged Western researchers to the Central Highlands as the intense transformation of this land in the whirlwind of “civilization”. “It need to urgently study the wild tribes, to study them as an object of research that will be disappeared... in the interests of science”¹.

* Institute for Culture Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

This forecast, even though it was viewed from the theory of evolution, is likely to be true. The Central Highlands today is not only very different from the notes and research of ethnologists as J. Dournes, Condominas, Boulbet... in the first half of the 20th century, but it is also different from research for a few decades ago. A tremendous transformation in many aspects such as ecological environment and mode of livelihood; ethnic composition and social structural organization, cultural style, religious life. The Polytheistic and Animistic mentality was universal in the past. Currently, there has been a colorful religious picture with harmony as well as contradiction or conflict.

This article mentions some basic trends which are taking place in the religious life of the ethnic groups in the Central Highlands, and initially explains the causes of those trends. It is divided into subsections in order to easily generalize, however, these trends blend, mix, dominant and interact each other in reality.

Overall, it can be generalized into five basic trends of change in the religious life of the Montagnard minorities as follows:

1. The fading trend of Polytheistic and Animistic mentality, a simplicity of traditional rites

The traditional religious mentality of Montagnard minorities is a feature of ethnic psychology, as well as the objective results of the specific living conditions. The psychological characteristics - such as innocence, rich imagination, and belief in the magic- are fairly stable, although their living conditions have fundamentally changed in the past half-century. Farming superficies were narrowed with modification of cultivation practices: using fertilizer instead of the forests' ashes, watering instead of waiting for the rain... In particular, the ecological environment (forests, water resources, flora, and fauna) has been severely devastated. Previously, people lived along with the forest in harmony, now there have had a few forests and they are very far from villages. Being separated from the forest, the folk knowledge to deal with the forests, with the water resources in order to balance the ecological environment which was covered by legends- has been forgotten. People cut trees for timber, burn forests, encroach on the forests' land, scoured forests for gold, even the sacred forests in

the watershed where deities dwell. For instance, the Sêrêpok and Ba Rivers are governed by the god of water which was encroached by hydropower projects. Irrigating farmland combined with industrial crops fundamentally replaced the livelihood by upland rice. With new farming methods, the role of natural phenomena diminished, since the sacred spaces, space of religious practices, have been significantly narrowed. In *The “forest mentality” once concentrated* (“*Tâm thức rừng*” *đậm đặc một thời*, 2008) Nguyễn Ngọc wrote that it is blurring now; it just appeared in the words of village patriarch. Previously, forests covered a large area where there were many wild animals, clearing forest for agriculture was common, people conducted many rituals. Since the 1980s forests have dramatically narrowed; the relevant rituals also have disappeared. The divine mentality has been blurred as a result of shifting from upland cultivation to water fields. In the past, all human activities were always dominated and resolved by spiritual manner through customary laws because of belief in the existence of gods and souls everywhere. Moreover, the belief in the existence of gods made people voluntarily adjust their behavior to the traditional morality. Currently, the “spiritual test” has not been yet “effective” as a result of the belief in the existence and influence of deities has declined, for instance, cutting trees indiscriminately without fear of gods’ punishment, theft without fear of customary laws...

The fading of polytheistic mentality originated from many factors such as the development of *rational consciousness* (instead of sensuousness) by “improving people’s knowledge”, dissemination of scientific and technical knowledge, and wide coverage of the mass media. Currently, people have not yet measured the distance by “a throw of the knife” (“*một quãng dao*”) but by the roadside milestones. They have not yet measured time by the location of the Sun, the Moon or planets but by a clock, a calendar or musical signals of radio, television. *The loose structure of village self-governance system*: the traditional rules with vague institutions of gods have been replaced by the law. The sacred power of the village elders declined by a new management system. *The allure of foreign religions with newness*,

modernity, and globalization.... They are considered as the basic factors that weakened traditional religious mentality, led to the disappearance or modification of ritual practices.

The agricultural rituals related to plants and animals have been likely absent. There were not any rites of worshipping for finding fields, clearing forests for fields, repairing smithy before the crop (which were rituals of the whole community) where the allocation and forests policy was implemented. There was not a new green rice ritual when upland rice was replaced by cabbage. Rural modernization with thousands of wells replaced natural water system that certainly abandoned the sacred role of water dock. *Time* of ritual has been shortened, no strict rule (even grave-leaving ceremony has also been organized during a day); *Worship space* has been changed for convenience; *Worship words* has not been lyric tone in order to call divines and to awaken the soul of all things, but it has been short, aimed to meet the actual demand; *Decoration* of the rituals has been simplified such as pillars (cột gung) for tie a buffalo in sacrifices have not carved traditional patterns, tomb statues haven't had folk sculpture because they were not made by the dead's family members with memories, they were made of concrete or wood and purchased from craft workshop; *Offerings* also have been arbitrary, the "stem wine" or "tube wine" (rượu ghè) favored by gods has been replaced with white wine of Kinh people, etc.. It can be said that secular air rushed into all stages of the ritual², and in the current festivals, the festival part seemed to overpower the worship part.

Besides the areas which were completely alien the traditional customs, there have been the communities (normally the original inhabitants who was a little disturbance on a population by ethnic migrants and less influenced by the Catholicism or Protestantism) who still practice many traditional religious ceremonies. Perhaps sacrifices (worship for health in the life cycle rituals) were the most durable, but they also have been simplified.

2. Trends of recovery the practices of traditional culture/ with selection, orientation, and stage

Despite the traditional ceremonies were considered as “backwardness” in the past period, but many practices of traditional culture/religions of inhabitants in the Central Highland still preserved, recovered because of the “internal” factor as the spiritual concept which was formed and continuously transmitted throughout the history of each ethnic group - is not easily removed, beside the new perspective and policies of the State after the “opening period” - “building a modern culture with national identity”. The attention to the traditional culture has helped a number of cultural heritage/ethnic spirituality revived after a period of denying. However, the revival of the religious practices based on a fundamental point of view “optional conservation” (bảo tồn có lựa chọn). What is considered good, associated with the ethnic identity is reserved, and what is considered “superstitious”, “bad practices”, “waste” is removed. The view of “selective conservation” (bảo tồn có chọn lọc) is not only in the religious affair but it also is in cultural issues in general in Vietnam³. For instance, many decrees issued by the Ministry of Culture and Information (Directive 214/ CT-TW dated 15 Jan 1975, Instruction Circular issued dated 11 Jul 1998, Directive No.14/CT-TTg of the Prime Minister dated 28 Mar 1998, Regulation Circular on the implementation of a civilized lifestyle in wedding, funerals, and festivals of the Ministry of Culture issued on 21 Jan 2011, etc.) were means to concretize this point of view.

As many types of research have indicated that the view of “selective conservation” revealed many shortcomings (Evans, 2001; Salemin, 2001, Lê Hồng Lý and et al, 2012). This policy did not regard to the holistic nature of ethnic culture and consequently has led to the loss of many traditional practices. In the Central Highlands, the policy of removing some cultural practices and traditional religions considered “obsolete”, “superstitious” have negatively impacted on community cohesion, lifestyle, a way of thinking and behavior of inhabitants in general, the young generation in particular.

In our country, the process of conservation and restoration was accompanied by the trend of “stagization” (sân khấu hóa) and “heritagization” (di sản hóa) - the label heritage (tangible heritage)

and cultural practices (intangible heritage). The stage of rituals such as gongs (cồng chiêng Tây Nguyên), a feast of buffalo, water station, etc. has lost the sacred sense of inhabitants' spiritual life. On the other hand, the recent phenomenon of "heritagization of culture" has led to benefits (after licensing heritage, gongs seemed to be more interested), then the fact "once their cultural practice is canonized as heritage, local people are no longer in exclusive control of that cultural practice which they largely organized and managed on their own in the past" (Salemink, 2012). Recently, it can be seen in cultural management practices in Vietnam in general, as well as, in the cultural/religious context in the Central Highlands in particular.

3. Trends of interference in the cultural/religious practices among ethnic groups with the mainstream of the ethnic majority culture

The interference in the cultural/religious practices in the Central Highlands primarily derived from coexisted circumstances with migration waves occurred for many decades. In the middle of the 19th century, the Central Highlands was the land of local/indigenous people, the arrival of Kinh Catholics in the end of this century. With the migration policy of the South government after 1954, there were approximately 20 ethnic groups, including ethnic minorities from the northern mountains such as Tày, Nùng, Thái, Mường and the Trường Sơn mountains such as H're (Hrê), Bru (Bru-Vân Kiều). After 1975 and since the 1980s massive migration waves have caused a sharp increase in the ethnic component from 19 ethnic groups in 1954 to 40 ethnic groups in 1989, to 49 ethnic groups in 2009 in the Central Highlands⁴.

The co-existed process of ethnic groups, among the indigenous peoples and migrants, ethnic majority and ethnic minorities on the land which "Land is no longer wide and inhabitants are not scattered at present" has necessarily led to the cultural integration in general and religious practices in particular. The number of villages or families with an ethnic group has decreased. There are families that each member such as father, mother, son or daughter-in-law belongs to different ethnic groups, and obviously, their mentalities marked by religious rites of their ethnic groups. Religious practices of the family

are often decided by householder whether the other members have consciousness of conservation, but it is difficult to enforce.

There has been a tradition of harmony, religious tolerance in the Central Highlands, it is easy to witness the participation of this group to the other group's rituals. For example, there has been the presence of Kinh, Rade (Ê Đê), Jarai (Gia Rai) people in the Lồng Tồng festival of the Tày, Nùng people; there have been also people of other communities in the sacrifices of the Bahnar (Ba Na). In the new house celebration of Rade people, they have hired gong team (chiêng) of the Bahnar come to play. Jarai's gong has been used in the funeral of Rade. The Soang dance of ethnic groups in the North Central Highlands has appeared in the festival of Rade, M'Nong (Mnông) in Đắk Nông, Đắk Lắk. The number of Đức Thánh Trần and Mother goddesses temples has been increased in the Kinh's residential areas. Local peoples sometimes participate in these places of worship...; However, this participation expresses interference, integration, respect but it is not the integration of faith.

There has been the trend of receiving the Kinh's religious practices - mainly in the wedding ceremonies and funeral rites in this interference. Traditionally, indigenous people did not worship the dead in their house; they just did the rituals in the sacred forest, in the village's cemetery - where was regarded as the meeting place between the living and the dead. Currently, many families of Rade, Bahnar, and Jarai people have built an altar at home, hung a photograph of the dead, placed an incense bowl and a gravestone carved the name of the dead in the tomb.

Previously, the inhabitants in the Central Highlands were not attached to the dead's tombs for a long time, only two generations (parents) in general. The grave-leaving ceremony marked the separation between the world of ghosts (mường ma) and the world of human being (mường người). The dead returned to the forest, although they were barely near the living, but the two worlds did not have an exchange. The link between the living and the dead-completely cut off after the grave-leaving ceremony. Currently, along with the ethnic cultural exchanges, the local ethnic groups tend to take care of ancestors' graves

like the Kinh people usually do on the Qingming occasion (Thanh Minh). There is the appearance of offerings as an envelope (with money inside) in the funeral rite. The marriage ceremony also changed following the tendency of the Kinh because of thinking that what Kinh people do “more modern, more civilized”.

4. The trend of shifting from Polytheism to Monotheism, conversion to Catholicism and Protestantism.

According to data from the Census in 2009, nearly one-third of the Central Highland's population were believers of the exotic religions such as Catholics 16%, Buddhists 8% and Protestants nearly 8% of the total population.

Buddhism has been introduced into the Central Highlands since the early of the 20th century, however, Buddhism was propagated in ethnic minorities areas in the period 1954 -1975. According to Nguyễn Thị Kim Vân and Đoàn Thị Thuần (2014), about in 1964, Venerable Thiện Châu was from Saigon to Kon Tum and organized a Sarana (conversion to Buddhism) for about 200 Jrai people in the village of Weh, Ya Chim commune, Kon Tum province, but missionary work in ethnic minorities was slow and difficult. Especially, since the 2000s the propagation of Buddhism has been promoted. The largest Sarana ceremony in the Central Highlands for nearly 4,000 Buddhists mostly ethnic minorities of Kon Tum took place on 19 April 2009 with the presence of the Executive Board of Buddhism in Kon Tum province, the Central Board of Buddhists Instructions (Ban Hướng dẫn Phật tử Trung ương).

Overall, Buddhism has had more influence on Kinh community, while Catholicism and Protestantism have affected the ethnic minorities, for example, 90% of Protestants have been indigenous people. The transition from polytheism to monotheism is not easy for local ethnic groups in the Central Highlands. Catholicism and Protestantism have faced this spiritual resistance. However, most of the missionaries came to the Central Highlands as ethnographers; they have rooted in the community according to the method “participant observation”, learning ethnic languages to have a deep understanding the psychology of indigenous

people. In other words, they are “Anthropologist barefoot” as Andrew Hardy (2013) called the missionary - ethnographer Jacques Dournes (Dam Bo). To penetrate into the aborigines’ life, they set up new villages, separated a part of inhabitants from the traditional villages, and in particular, persisted localization Catholicism. The work “Dieu aime les païens” of J. Dournes that expressed an open attitude to the indigenous beliefs. In terms of evangelization, missionaries also created close points such as churches were built in simulating the communal house’s architecture (nhà rông); priests brought the image of *Pojâu* (Wizard), replaced the common amulet on the neck by a cross, brought folk music to serve the Mass, encouraged the use of gongs, etc.. On the other hand, in order to attract believers, the church expanded the charity such as take care of orphans and treatment for the poor, especially, the creation of a character for the ethnic minorities, and so forth. It can be said that “the conversion to Catholicism of the Central Highlands’ inhabitants is a success of the gradual process of assimilation Jesus Christ with indigenous Spirits”⁵.

Although arriving this area quite early, since the Renovation in 1986, with the statement “Living the gospel in the heart of the nation”, along with greater openness of the State in the field of religion, Catholicism has had a chance to develop. Besides the evangelical mission, the Church has carried out many activities in order to preserve and develop the traditional ethnic culture such as compilation of the dictionary, translation the book of rites and the sacraments into ethnic minorities’ languages, as well as conservation projects of civilization relics: “collecting books, farming tools and traditional activities’ devices, saving image of each ethnic group” (Lê Minh Quang, 2011). Priests were knowledgeable about customs and celebrated the Mass ceremonies in ethnic languages. In particular, they focused on training of ethnic minorities’ priests, and the first one was ordained priest in 2001. In addition, the Church also implemented projects to support believers in economic development, stable life. Thus, a quarter of a century (from 1975 to 1999), the number of believers increased 6.3 times⁶.

Catholicism, as well as Protestantism, localized the mode of evangelization (preaching and translation the Bible into ethnic languages), it also linked the legends in the Bible for familiar with the ethnic culture. People still used their languages in religious activities, most of the dignitaries were ethnic minorities so they felt their own ethnic-cultural space. In comparing with Catholicism, Protestant pastors have found an efficient method in order to overcome these barriers as the direct propagation method “personal securities act” (chứng đạo cá nhân). Starting from reaching individual’s emotion to evangelize, then who has been evangelized to become a “witness” to others with a strategy of “oil slick”⁷. Moreover, there has been a team of ethnic minorities ministers who were trained to evangelize including many village elders, landowners. Thus, the number of Protestants has grown quickly.

Many types of research have shown the reasons why the local ethnic minorities abandoned their traditional religions and converted to “new” religions. Actually, it’s as a whole of interlocking causes both psychology and socio-economic intense fluctuations of the region in recent years. According to the researchers of the Institute for Religious Studies, the cause is the old form of their religion that is no longer meet the needs of the young generation’s perceptions in a modern society, village elders are no longer prestigious role in leading production and community organization, while “new” religious forms bring new religious beliefs which are plausible (Đặng Nghiêm Vạn, 2002). According to the other researchers, “the anthropological characteristics of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands”, including their “psychological characteristics, personality and cultural traditions” have led them to Protestantism: Montagnard minorities are simple, like festival activities. Protestantism does not have strict regulations as Catholicism; it also has many interesting activities as singing than other religions. Protestantism allows believers to change from this denomination to another, and it is consistent with the innocent lifestyle, loving freedom of ethnic minorities (Chu Văn Tuấn, 2014). On the other hand, in terms of religion, deprivation of traditional belief because of being regarded as primitive, backward,

they have to look for other belief, and Protestantism is considered a suitable replacement. Besides the simplicity in practice, Protestantism is a major religion, its trend of modern reform, and it is a religion of a part of the population considered as the most developed in the world. The Protestantism's values, ethics and lifestyle which are attached to the market economy and the spirit of dedication, selfless devotion to labor, as well as, the habit of saving, emphasizing personal responsibility, seem to be consistent with modern lifestyles and changes in social life rather than community's lifestyle with agricultural rituals that are likely much complex and "obsolete". The trend towards simplicity, modernity becomes the agent that impacts on religious life (Nguyễn Văn Minh, 2006). According to Salemink (2002) - an anthropologist, feelings of inferiority, local ethnic people believe that if they follow a new religion, their community will grow faster, overcome local barriers, become members of transnational religious communities and a part of modern society, satisfy the psychology that they consider themselves to be more "developed" and "modern" than a part of the population who purported to be more developed than they are. A deeper cause, the conversion, on the one hand, can help them get rid of the heaviness of traditional practices, on the other hand, this is "a reaction to the government, to the Kinh about cultural imposition, land ownership rights have been violated, and forests-their habitat severely devastated (Thu Nhung Mlo 2002). In other words, the successful expansion of Protestantism showed that it has met the needs of faith and spiritual support in the context of a social crisis (loss of a traditional spiritual prop, assimilation caused by the impact of migration and land policies, agricultural changes, etc.) meanwhile the traditional practices have been too costly in the context of inhabitants have been no longer rich in resources as in the past.

In terms of gender, both Protestantism and Catholicism meet the needs of a part of women and the poor who are in the marginal position, and religion has become the salvage of their souls (Nguyễn Văn Minh, 2006). From this perspective, "new" religions (especially the religions are associate with the Western world) can be considered

as a weapon of the weak, manifestation of resistance, in particular, the resistance to external groups, powerful people.

The imported religions, especially Catholicism and Protestantism, have a forcible impact on the Central Highlands' identity. In the Protestant areas, people believe that playing the gongs were considered as a form of calling devils, so many people have decided to sell gongs, jars for other villagers as an ordinary commodity when they converted. In the case of converted people also used gongs in life, it mainly brings cultural meaning rather than spiritual one.

5. Incarnation trend of major religions and conflicts in the religious field

Since the last decades of the 20th century, the world religions like Buddhism, Catholicism, and Protestantism in the Central Highlands have increased the process of reform and innovation in order to adapt to modern society, the incarnation (*nhập thế* - entering the world) is regarded as an effective method to expand its influence. It seems that the religious practices have been no longer being confined to Buddhist temples and churches, which could be taken place in all areas where believers exist, including the use of information technology to modernize the missionary work. The missionaries have done "three things together" as living, eating, and working; they have accompanied believers to the forests, to the fields, or to weddings, funerals. They have played an important role in the field of health care, education, vocational training, even produced instructions for ethnic minorities people. The charitable work, social security have been particularly interested. In the field of medical activities, many religious organizations have opened clinics, nursing homes, orphanages, centers for social protection. Some large centers for social protection in Kon Tum adopted 300 young ethnic minorities children. In addition, they have had many other small facilities. Catholicism has two leprosariums in Di Linh and Kon Tum. Protestantism established a leprosarium in Đắk Lắk. On the field of education, Catholicism and Protestantism have created their own writing for many ethnic groups by the demand for propagation, but thanks to the writing people have more knowledge and affirm their identity. They opened many

kindergartens and they have the potentiality for opening higher levels of educational establishments if they will be licensed. It can not help to mention the material role that led to a fast growing number of Protestants. The charitable activities of Protestantism have had a great significance where the living conditions of people were very difficult (the poorest in the country).

Buddhism, most Buddhists are Kinh, is seeking to penetrate into the ethnic minorities by building more temples and promoting humanitarian aid activities. “The Buddhist Association annually should have some money and contributions in kind which is sent to the provinces for a charitable purpose and preaching to the ethnic minorities and people who live in the disadvantaged and remote areas” (Venerable Thích Thanh Điện, 2009). The charity to attract people to religion is also commonly seen in all religions. In the text “Some meditations after the Sarana (conversion to Buddhism) ceremony for ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands”, (Venerable Thích Thanh Điện, 2009) recounted that during the ceremony, the author sought to approach some Buddhists who were ethnic minorities to attend, but most of them could not speak Vietnamese. The Venerable had to ask the help of interpreters to interview them that “Buddha is so poor, you come here today. He gives rice, salt, money. Tomorrow, if he does not have anything to give you, will you follow him or will not”. The author also emphasized that “the worry about the livelihood - because most of the people in the Central Highlands are still facing many difficulties in the economy - will affect to the reception of religion”.

In the incarnation trend of religion in general, Buddhism in the Central Highlands has also founded some associations such as *Buddhist family* (*Gia đình Phật tử*), *young Buddhists club* (*Câu lạc bộ thanh thiếu niên Phật giáo*), *Ban Hộ niệm tự phát*, etc. They have aimed at young believers. Missionary work was joined onto cultural activities, for example, *The gongs Buddhist delegation of Kon Tum province* (*Đoàn công chiêng Phật tử ở tỉnh Kon Tum*) was established and it has had exchanges in many Buddhist festivals across the country.

In the daily life, many missionaries are not only regarded as a father who teaches lifestyle but they also participate actively in the production instructions. Because of missionaries' sociable lifestyle, the indigenous believers in the Central Highlands respect them. If there was any difficulty when propagating in ethnic minority areas, a priest at Lâm Đồng said that "There is any difficulty, as the spirit of a shepherd (a priest) arrives with love, because the ethnic minorities are sensitive". It also comes from the policy that the priests who are in the ethnic minority areas have to speak ethnic languages, so local believers are often interested in the priesthood "speaking their languages".

Thus, the use of the indigenous languages, putting traditional culture on the religions, cohesion with local people in specific jobs, religions have actually been status in the daily life of believers. Awareness of Buddhism's retarded development than other religions in ethnic minority communities, the Executive Boards of the Buddhism (Ban Trị sự Phật giáo) in the Central Highlands have tried to train more ethnic minorities missionaries, to enhance the level of the language and understanding of customs and traditions in order to facilitate the widespread, deep penetration into the local ethnic communities.

Beside the incarnation trend, religions are facing with opposite and conflicts. Buddhism in the Central Highlands consists of The Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam (BSV- Giáo hội Phật giáo Việt Nam) was established in 1981 and The Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam (UBCV- Giáo hội Phật giáo Việt Nam Thống nhất) was founded before 1975. The association of Buddhist family (Gia đình Phật tử) has many sects. Catholicism is also facing the challenge that a part of Catholics have converted to Protestantism, especially the emergence of new denominations such as Hà Môn was found by Y Gyin - a Bahnar woman- in 1999, The Charismatic Renewal Movement (Canh Tân Đặc Sủng) was found by Vũ Quốc Khánh in 2004. These denominations did not only desire to separate from the Church's control but they also had activities against the Church's power as "They did not go to the Mass, attend church, receive the sacrament, send their children to learn religious education even to go to school which caused troubles in the family, in the parish. They often gather

together to pray called “praying for healing” (speaking in tongues), they believe that praying heals all illnesses even serious diseases without going to the doctor or taking medicine” (Announcement of the bishopric No.09/06, 24 June 2006).

Currently, Protestantism in the Central Highlands has included many denominations. Beside the Protestant Church of Vietnam (South) - CMA “has a long missionary history, is well organized, has a wide scope of influence throughout the region”, there is the Christian Missionary Church (Cơ Đốc Truyền giáo) of the Giê Triêng people in Đắk Lắk - Kon Tum “They have not involved or participated in the complex political issues”⁸, The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Lâm Đồng, Đắk Lắk, and several other groups. The internal separation of Protestantism is derived from conflicts between Kinh believers and local ethnic followers [established Protestant Degar with the objective of restoring “the land of the Montagnards” (đất người Thượng), of building “The independent State of Degar”], conflicts between local ethnic believers and migrant minorities followers (Protestant Vàng Chử of thousands Hmong from Lai Châu, Sơn La, Hà Giang, Protestant Thìn Hùng Jesus of Dao from Tuyên Quang...). It caused separation of the Protestant organizations, deepened the conflict between the believers. Consequently, conflicts under the aspect of religion/culture became the ethnic/political conflicts.

Conclusion

In recent context, the religious life in the Central Highlands has become much more diverse, as well as, the amalgam of traditional religious consciousness with new religions’ values. The variation in religious life in the Central Highlands comprises contradiction and conflict. However, it can be said that religions in the Central Highlands contain contradiction and compromise, conflict and reconciliation. At the daily level, it is the conflict between believers and nonreligious people which take place within a family, a village, and a region. At a higher level, there is a conflict among religions or sects of a religion in order to entice believers.

However, at the contrary dimension, religions are also bridges to cohere multi-ethnic community. They are not only the cohesion of community, the new religions have been introduced into the Central Highlands as Protestantism which also makes a transnational link (for example, Hmong Protestants in the country have a connection with Hmong people all over the world). Religions play a role in bringing new villages/communities (religious-ethnic communities). In other words, religions are a foundation for the formation of *sub-culture* (the culture of non-believers vs believers, culture of the indigenous people vs of migrant people, culture of young generation vs of the old generation...) in a whole of the Central Highlands. The “sub-culture” is extremely varied and it makes new colors for the Central Highlands’ culture./.

Notes:

- 1 Maitre, Henri (2008), *Rừng người Thượng - vùng rừng núi cao nguyên miền Trung Việt Nam*, Nxb. Tri thức, Hà Nội: 156. (*Les Jungles Moi - The Upper Mount Forest Forest Highlands Region Central Vietnam*, Hanoi: Knowledge Pub.)
- 2 Phạm Thị Trung (2006), “Quan niệm về linh hồn và các nghi lễ liên quan tới linh hồn của người Xơ-teng ở Tu Mơ Rông”, trong *Nghi lễ và phong tục các tộc người ở Tây Nguyên*, Nxb. Khoa học xã hội, Hà Nội: 98. (The Conception of the Soul and the Rituals Related to the Souls of the Xơ-teng People in Tu Mơ Rông, in “*Rituals and Customs of Ethnic Groups in the Central Highlands*”, Hanoi: Social Sciences Pub.)
- 3 Phạm Quỳnh Phương (2014), “Sự biến đổi tâm thức tôn giáo truyền thống ở Tây Nguyên”, *Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo*, số 4: 3-18. (The Transformation of Traditional Religious Mentality in the Central Highlands, *Religious Studies Review*, No. 4).
- 4 Bùi Minh Đạo (2011), *Thực trạng phát triển Tây Nguyên và một số vấn đề phát triển bền vững*, Nxb. Khoa học xã hội, Hà Nội: 69. (*Development and Some Issues of the Sustainable Development in the Central Highlands*, Hanoi: Social Sciences Pub.)
- 5 Bùi Minh Đạo (2011), *Thực trạng phát triển Tây Nguyên và một số vấn đề phát triển bền vững*,... *ibid*: 218.
- 6 Nguyễn Hồng Dương (2002), “Đạo Công giáo với vấn đề dân tộc thiểu số ở Tây Nguyên - thực trạng và giải pháp”, trong *Những vấn đề cấp bách về tôn giáo ở các vùng dân tộc thiểu số của nước ta hiện nay*, Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo, Hà Nội: 17 - 18. (“Catholicism and Ethnic Minority Issues in the Central Highlands - Situation and Solution, in *The Urgent Issues of Religion in Ethnic Minority Areas in Vietnam at present*”, Hanoi: Institute for Religious Studies.)
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