

Protestantism and its Influence on some Social aspects in Central Highlands

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ABSTRACT: The article deals with influences of Protestantism on social domains of Central Highlands of Vietnam and analyzes the reality of the implementation of policies of the Vietnamese Communist Party and the Government on religion in relation with the nation. In the conclusion, the paper, bases directive viewpoints, proposes integrated solutions for the religious and ethnical issues in the region.

Protestantism and its influence on social life in Central Highlands has ever been a fairly complex and sensitive issue. Since many years, the Vietnamese Communist Party and the Government have had many policies, solutions to settle the issue of Protestantism in Central Highlands so as to ensure freedom of religious belief and at the same time have been firmly against any forces wanting to destroy the national unity, or the building and development of the country. Achievements attained in renovation period in provinces of the Central Highlands have showed the great efforts of the leading organs, managements and the population communities in these places. They have applied guidelines of

the Party and the Government to settle problems appearing in transform of Central Highlands into a rich, strong, developed and civilized region. One of the causes contributing to these achievements has been the leadership, management at different levels of the administration and organization that have shown great efforts to carry out the national and religious policies of the Party and the Government.

In practice, however, Protestantism in Central Highlands is neither merely a religious problem, nor a plot on taking advantage of religious freedom to carry out plans against the regime. As studying and resolving the Protestant issue in Central Highlands, we should have a through grasp of the relationships between religion and politics in the life of national ethnic communities.

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From this viewpoint and approach, the article will deal on some contents in relation to the influences of Protestantism on social domains of Central Highlands and it will analyze the aspect of carrying out the policies of the Party and the Government on religion and the nation.

1. Protestantism in Central Highlands, a Religious and Political phenomenon in the Life of Ethnic minorities

Up to now many researches have been carried out on the process of integration, development and influence of Protestantism on the social life of Vietnam in general and the Central Highlands in particular. On the basis of synthesis of these researches, following remarks may be generalized and pointed out:

First, from the religious belief aspect, the introduction and development of Protestantism in Central Highland reflected the tendency and aim of Christian Missionary Alliance (CMA) which had pointed out "Bring faith to regions that have never known the reputation of Jesus."

Over these 75 years, CMA's activities in Central Highlands had been an organized, well guided activity, and has reached its proposed aim. Results and influences of Protestantism on the spiritual and daily life have reached to a great part of local population in Central Highlands. These have not only reflected the active and effective activities of CMA but also showed that "Protestantism" has become a need – though probably a part population might be attracted by material interests or to find a spiritual refuge.

Second, though born in Europe, Protestantism after its integration into the Central Highlands had been modernized in many points and therefore indigenized in a certain measure. This fact once again proves the "open" and "flexible" character in the ideological content and in the organization, activity of Protestantism .

The Evangelical Church in Central Highlands had been set up by CMA and by the USA since its beginning. Though on formal aspect, it belongs to the General Conferederation of the Vietnam Protestant Church (Southern region), but in fact it received investment and leadership from CMA and it develop mainly along the following basic tendencies:

+ Building a content and living conditions in conformity with the conditions, characteristics of the ethnic minorities to penetrate and attract people.

+ Creating a staff of native missionaries. They have experience to propagate Protestantism to ethnic minorities.

+ Building a system of material bases combined with an organization controlled by the ethnic minorities to manage the affairs and satisfy the needs of the population on living conditions, religion and belief, culture and spirit.

Third, the introduction and development of Protestantism in the Central Highlands was at the same time the result of predication activities and the result of measures of colonialism and imperialism in the process of "converting the peoples to religionism" to change the political system of countries.

In history, the United States and CMA had untied and created conditions to Protestantism of the highlanders a "special statuette" so as to make the Protestantism organization in Central Highlands more strictly linked to the FULRO (Unified, Liberal Front of Oppressive Peoples) - an armed organization to carry out the so called "autonomy of the ethnic minorities in Central Highlands," and "Dega Protestantism".

The general considerations help us to analyze the management of leading organs of the local direction towards the organization and activity of Protestantism as well as its influence on some social fields of Central Highlands from the complete liberation of South Vietnam up to now.

2. Influences of Protestantism on a number of Social fields in Central Highlands in Recent time

Influences of Protestantism on a number of social fields in Central Highlands have been the result of complex interactions between the *characteristic features of integration and development process of Protestantism and the awareness, management of the State power towards the Protestant issue in the community of ethnic minorities*. The analysis of the development process of Protestantism in the Central Highlands in a definite period will be therefore the basis for the determination of the character and influence of Protestantism in our present studies.

In my opinion, after the liberation of South Vietnam, we have been conscious of the political character of religions in Central Highlands. The Party and the Government have always respected the principle of equality towards Protestantism. With the respect of freedom of belief, in the first stage, Protestantism as well as all other religions followed their normal activities. The basic organization system of

Protestantism Church in the Central Highlands still existed, its churches were open for activities of parishioner and dignitaries.

Later, in the struggle against FULRO, we had clear evidences on the collision with the FULRO of a member of leaders of local Evangelical Church who had become active participants in activities against the Government and the regime.

On the basis of the arguments, the State and Government decided to stop the activities of Protestantism. Since 1977 to the first years of 1980, in Central Highlands there existed Protestant activities at home among a part of believers and evidently this form of activities in the villages of ethnic minorities could not create any notable political influences.

In the middle of 1980s, however, Protestantism has been restored and fairly developed; it had a great and complex influence on the social, political life in the Central Highlands.

The grouping, restoration of Protestantism in the region of ethnic minorities had overcome the *period of coping to pass to the period of rebirth* with the following features:

- A rapid expression of the predication areas and a great increase of persons recognizing themselves as believers,
- A fairly great number of semi professional preachers who tried to push their way through the crowd to attract more believers, to follow illegal activities in villages.
- Beside preaching the religious creeds, they have propagated superstition and excited national animosity in ethnic minorities.

Socio-political riots with “hot spots” took place in the provinces of Central Highlands, especially in February, 2001 and in April, 2004 in Gia Lai, Đắc Lắk provinces showed the critical and extremely complex character of *the religious issue when it is intentionally linked with national, political issues*.

Phenomena and facts in relation to the rebirth and development, influences of religion on the social life in the Central Highlands, especially in relation to the aims of preachers under *the active help and direction from outside the congregation, from inside and outside Vietnam, with the active participation of predicative forces on the spot adapted to the psychological needs of ethnic minorities*.

It would be, however, unpractical, if we do not pay attention to the essential internal causes (the living conditions, the urgent needs of a great number ethnic minorities, insufficiencies in thought and action of leading cadres, organization in relation to the economic–social development when implementing the policies on religion and nationality....) And this analysis will help us to recognize the influences and effects of Protestantism on a number of social spheres in the Central Highlands.

If this approach is suitable, these following issues should be taken into account:

First, if a part of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands followed Protestantism, the main reason was difficulties in material life, the poverty, monotony in the spiritual life.

In the past years, especially since the renovation periods, the State and Party have notably invested capital on the building and development of the Central Highlands. In a certain measures these effort have led to basic changes in the social and traditional aspect of the "barrier region" of our country. These efforts, however, were not sufficient to satisfactorily solve the urgent needs of regions. These places still remain in a state of slow development, their natural environment has been degraded, the development of education, medicine, culture in general suffer from many limitations. Moreover social evils tend to develop and are not overcome. Traditional and present political relations have been reduced. *It is natural that people found in Protestantism a spiritual and material support.*

Second, in the traditional institutions of ethnic minorities, lineages, kinships, village relationships were under the control of village patriarchs, clan heads and these institutions have a notable role in the solution of daily life problems of communities. As entering the new period of economic and cultural exchanges with the strong process of differentiation and dissolution of institutions in the traditional society people want to get rid rites and corrupted customs.

Tightly bound by rigid traditional rites, village patriarchs are now unable to solve the new problems in the life of these social communities and their influences therefore decline. The weakening of the role traditional rules, of village patriarchs, of lineage heads as well as the appearance of young members among Protestant missionaries with their capacity of regrouping the masses are favorable conditions for the introduction, development and the great influence of Protestantism in the organizations, social relations in the daily life of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands.

Third, like all other regions in the country, the society of the Central Highlands is in a period with strong changes in many aspects. From the cultural viewpoint, one can say that society in the Central Highlands is undergoing a complex process: disbandment of traditional values (many religious activities, traditional culture are fallen into obvious) and a number of practices which are not adequate and should be thrown away led the people to find "*new-modern* values". As with a content exalting "freedom," "abroad outlook," "humanity", etc. in its dogmas and institutions, Protestantism with its forms of activity of popular and laic character can easily attract everybody, especially the youth.

Fourth, the political systems especially at the basis had many shortcomings, weaknesses which led to less effective results in the policies and orders of the Party and the Government. This was also an opportunity for Protestantism to attract the masses and the ethnic minorities. This was also an opportunity fro Protestantism to integrate, to draw the mass, and to influence greatly on all social aspects and institutions in the tradition as well as in the present time.

3. The Complex Viewpoint in the Behavior towards Protestantism in the Central Highlands

The Great Unity of the whole people is one among the salient viewpoints in the Document of the 10th Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party. This is the strength, the major mainspring and the decisive element ensuring the lasting victory in the cause of building and defending the fatherland. In this spirit, the solution of the Protestant issue in the Central Highlands is in its essence the policies of the Party and the Government on nationalities and religions to stimulate the mass to unity, to join efforts, to develop the society to answer the legitimate common needs and interests of the mass; to prevent any actions aiming at making use of religious issues to slow down the society development or to sabotage the regime. Therefore, when dealing with Protestantism in the coming period, we should thoroughly grasp the following basic ideas:

- The aim of uniting nationalities, religions and all sections of the people is based on the policies of preserving independence, uniting the fatherland for the richness, the strength of the country, the equality, democracy and civilization.
- Rejecting all the past prejudices, complexes, differentiations and class compositions.

- Promoting the tradition of charity, justice, tolerance to build the spirit of mutual confidence for the political stability and social mutual assent.

From these viewpoints, the concrete solutions shall be included:

First, on the basis of the legal recognition of General Conferederation of the Vietnam Protestant Church (Southern region) since 2001, the management of religious activities must be carried out under the regulations of law. The legal recognition of the General Conferederation of the Vietnam Protestant Church (Southern region) which had contributed to the solution difficulties and confusions of the management levels of the basis before the "animated" activities of Protestantism in the Central Highlands. However an urgent demand is set forth for a complete, precise grasp of professional and non-professional religious activities to have measures in the management and in the dealing with those who intentionally make use of religious activities to create divisions and aversions between the Kinh and the highlanders to sabotage the power and the regime.

Second, on the basis of an organized management, grasping all the forces and making use of many measures to mobilize the mass and to create faith and good cooperation, though which we can grasp the illegal activities of antagonist forces and struggle in time to destroy all attempts of making use of religion and national feeling to destroy the block of the great national unity.

Third, having measures to promote in time the active role of traditional social values in the process of building and improving the political system to be more and more adapted to the characteristics and living conditions of the ethnic minorities in their process of change and integration. Reducing the mechanical character, the imposition in the orientation of values and in the management of social values that emerge in the common life of the local ethnic groups.

Fourth, renovating, enhancing the quality in the mobilization of the mass in religious areas to create a basic transformation of belief in general and of Protestantism in particular so that people has a notable precise understanding of the policies of the Party and the Government. The key to successfully carry out this measure is to raise step by step the people's level of education.

Fifth, mobilizing all force source to rapidly achieve the socio-economic development and to create a promotion for a new development of quality. On this economic and material basis we shall effectively resolve step by step the spiritual and cultural needs of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands in line with orientation, and the humanistic aims of the Vietnamese Communist Party.