

Some Issues on Religion of South Vietnam in Modern times (A Study of the Southern region)

ĐỖ QUANG HƯNG*

ABSTRACT: The religious issue in South Vietnam has long attracted the attention of researchers at home and abroad because the peculiarity of religious activities in Vietnam, mainly in the Southern area. The paper wants to continue these interesting reflections by studying the following aspects: The issue of religious systems, the birth of new religions, and the analysis of a few characteristics of religious activities in South Vietnam in modern times.

In this article, the word “modern times” is used in the usual meaning given by historians regarding the period 1858 – 1945, that of French aggression and colonization. The terms “Miền Nam”, “Nam Kỳ” (Cochinchina), “Nam Bộ” have also been used for South Vietnam.

On a System of Religions

In the *Dictionnaire des religions* edited by Paupard, published in France in 1986, J. Nguyễn Huy Lai presented the system of religions in Vietnam as follows: “One may distinguish in Vietnam: traditional religions of endogenous origin, exogenous religions: Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity and mixed religions born and existing in South Vietnam: Caodaism and Hoà Hảo Buddhism”¹.

In the item of “Traditional religions in Vietnam”, Nguyễn Huy Lai concretely classified 6 kinds: Cult of Heaven, cult of ancestors, cult of profession founders, cult of tutelary Gods, cult of the state, and cult of natural spirits (like rain, thunder, tempest, the moon, the sun... especially the God of the Earth). Nguyễn Huy Lai also spoke of religious liberalism of Vietnamese².

*. Prof. Dr. Institute of Religious Studies, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences.

If the classification by Nguyễn Huy Lai can be accepted, it is strongly applies in South Vietnam. In the system of religions appearing in South Vietnam from the middle of the 19th century, we can find that most of them were born from one of these two sources:

First, “the line of Prophets in South Vietnam”

In ideological, political activities, especially in the Vietnamese anti-French resistance movement in the second half of the 19th century, some national movements *were based on the support of spirits* and were of messianic character. In the North and the Center, there were Kỳ Đồng-Mạc Đình Phúc (in Thái Bình, Bắc Giang, Quảng Yên, 1887-1897), Chày Vôi Rebels (Huế, 1886), Bạch Xi (Hà Tĩnh, 1885), especially the movement led by the Buddhist Monk Vương Quốc Chính (in Sơn Tây, Hanoi, 1898)... These movements were even more active in the South. Bảo Sơn Kỳ Hương founded by the Buddha-monk of Tây An, Đoàn Minh Huyền at Sam mountain in Châu Đốc province of the South in 1849 might be considered as “the beginning of the prophet line in the South”. Almost parallel to this event, there was the Religion of the Four Graces, of Piety and Thankfulness (*Tứ ân hiếu nghĩa*) founded by the monk Ngô Lợi at Tượng mountain, Long Xuyên province. After the Buddha-monk of Tây An, a series of adepts continued the mission of coming into the word like Xuyên, Lập, Sĩ, Thắng, Chợ doctrines up to Huỳnh patriarch of later Hoà Hảo Buddhism. Trần Văn Thành, the leader of Bẫy Thưa uprising (1873) in Long Xuyên – An Giang provinces, a very famous adept of this movement had founded Lành doctrine (doctrine of the good) with adepts in almost every province in Gia Định area.

Some researchers grouped these prophets under the common name of “the line of scattered prophets” to differentiate them from Caodaism, Hoà Hảo of “the line of great prophets.”³

When speaking of peasant movements of religious character, Trần Văn Giàu had given a deep appreciation: “Men like Vương Quốc Chính, Vũ Trư were animated with patriotism... Enemies were few but they were victorious on account of their superiority in weapons. The fear of the enemies was real. To struggle against the superiority of weapons, fighters had to make use of magic means when they had but spears and swords... Despite the feudal ideology it was patriotism. If we support the strike of horse cart coolies, there are no reasons why we do not bow before persons bearing talismans but attacking French invaders with their spears and swords.”⁴

In the ideological crisis (the Confucian system became dimmer), the wild land of Đồng Nai with a heterogeneous population was under the pressure of religious beliefs while Hậu Giang region was full of mysteries and undergoing zonal (Southeast Asian and South Chinese) spiritual influences.

These psychological and mental changes had been long “discovered” in notes by many Western missionaries and explorers. Following was the remark by M. Bouillevaux in the middle of the 19th century: “The attitude of Cambodians towards monks and nuns are quite different from that of Southern Vietnamese: Cambodians are devotees to Buddhism and show their respect toward bonzes but Southern Vietnamese make fun of the latter and never give them alms. Southern Vietnamese are more confident in sorcerers than in bonzes, they are more afraid of spirits than respectful toward Buddha.”⁵

The important aspect of Vietnamese religious feeling was then generalized by the missionary L. Cadiere by “religion des esprits” (religion of spirits): “The real religion of Vietnamese is the cult of spirits.”⁶

Tạ Chí Đại Trường, basing on the thesis by L. Cadiere of “the religion of spirits”, called animism the main religion of Vietnam, and clearly said that “Caodaism is a reform by renovation” from foreign influences and Hoà Hảo Buddhism was “a renovation” in the common tendency of grouping the system of local deities in Cochinchina in modern times.

In 1926, Caodaism set up the Holy See in Tây Ninh province. Immediately many controversies broke out on the meaning of the word “spiritism” leading to a hot debate. Many questions arose: Was the mixture of dogmas in Caodaism real? The aim of this mixture? Was the essence of Caodaism a kind of Protestantism compared with Buddhism or more simply did it only follow the tradition of a spontaneous unity of the Three doctrines of Cochinchina?

Many famous persons at that time criticized it such as Phan Chu Trinh just returning from France to Saigon, and Trần Huy Liệu, probably out of their rationalist theoretical position. A notable journalist, Đào Trinh Nhất, published *The Process of Caodaism*. He very carefully studied the concept “spiritism” of Europe which he translated by *cầu tiên* (requesting favours from immortals). But he rejected Caodaism as a religious phenomenon: “Cochinchina is the earliest land for renovation but superstition customs of asking favours from immortals have reached an extreme degree, which is very strange. It is not strange when seven hundred thousand persons ask favours from the immortals... I do not speak of Caodaism as a political

movement. The French when hearing the sound of firecrackers think that they are cannon-shots, when seeing invitation leaflets scattered along the roads for assisting theatrical performances think that they are communist tracts. They also consider Caodaism as a “political movement”, but in fact it is but a kind of heresy for deceiving the people.”⁷ Đào Trinh Nhất’s mistake was double, on the religious as well as on the socio-political aspect of the phenomenon.

At present, we have many knowledges on the study of religious, especially on the Marxist viewpoint regarding religions to understand Caodaism in particular and *mixed religions* characteristic of South Vietnam in general.

The most effective remark would be that of the *Dictionnaire des religions*, published in Paris, in 1981, in the item “Caodaisme”: Caodaism is a mixed religion of spirits tendency, combining Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Taoism, and Spiritism. But the most striking feature is *Spiritism*. This religious-political sect is strictly organized and makes use of this structure to give messages from the other world.

The development of spiritism in South Vietnam has continued in the later period: in the 1960s, in South Vietnam, there existed many members from the Spiritist Association (the International Office of this association was in Adyar, Madras, India), specialized in studying religion, science, philosophy, especially “the issue of the end of the world and the Long Hoa Association”. The fabrication of religions in the syncretist manner lead to a very original phenomenon in South Vietnam which was the opening of many Saint Associations among which was the Di Lặc – Vĩnh Long Saint Association in 1962, which attracted not only Buddhists, Caodaists but also Christians to set up altars, to make use of a wooden heart and dialogue with the Invisible beings.

Recently, the Russian researcher on religions D.V. Pivovarov in the article “*Religion: Its essence and Renovation*” divided the religion system into two kinds: *first*, religions considering nature as the center like Christianity, Buddhism, Islam... The basis of these religions is a *supernatural origin* capable of uniting all universe. *Second*, religions considering society as the center (secular religions), divinizing objects of special value like a chosen leader, a nation, a class.”

According to the author in the 20th century little by little there occurred a fairly complex interpenetrating, alternation between different religions and there appeared “the kind of syncretic religions.”⁸ The author quoted as exemples Ba Kha religion created by the prophet Ba Kha Ulla (1817 – 1892) in Central Near East. Up to now

this religion has but 5 million adepts but they are citizens of dozens of countries and of many territories.

Even at the beginning of the 20th century, South Vietnam was a good land for this tendency in the religious activity of Southeast Asia. This fact explains the long attraction of this land toward researchers. Recently, a doctorate thesis by a Russian on Caodaism was presented as a typical fact.

South Vietnam since the beginning of the 20th century has been the land of many new religions. But a progressive attitude in religious domain is still lacking.

Trần Văn Giàu in his work *History of Ideology* (2nd tome) regarding *The bourgeois Ideology in Vietnam* (Hanoi, 1976) exrolled the Marxist, materialist viewpoint on religions of Nguyễn Tử Thức, author of *On the Doctrines of Our Country* (Saigon, 1929).

Here we speak of some other people.

In 1952, Nguyễn An Ninh after being imprisoned in the Great Prison of Saigon for many years, published the book *Religions*. For one time he had been criticized by Marxist as “coming back to religions” in the setback of the revolution.

In this book the author called *spiritism: the doctrine for invoking the souls* and analyzed the history of this religion in Europe in a fairly complete manner, regarding its content and especially the opinion of Alan Kardec since 1849, then asserted that “this religion has existed since antiquity and Vietnam has been familiar to this religion.”

When appreciating Caodaism, Nguyễn An Ninh did not call it “a pride of the nation” like as a number of persons, but presented a scientific, objective remark as follows: Caodaism follows the doctrine of asking favors from souls. On theoretical aspect, Caodaism is a synthesis of many religions, a reconciliation of unreconcilable theories.”

The conclusion of the book was very interesting. After sharply criticizing persons taking advantage of religions or making use of religions as a means of subsistence, Nguyễn An Ninh wrote:

“An European sociologist had some ideas on religions. I shall translate them here as the conclusion of this book:

Criticizing religions is the first condition of any critique.

The basis of a critique of religions is as follows: Man creates religions, and not religions create man... Man means the world of man, the country, the society. This country, this society creates religions which are a wrong interpretation of the world, because this country, this society are a wrong world.

Religions are complaints of a man under oppression, they are the soul of a world under complaints, the soul of a period in ignorance. They are opium of the people⁹.”

His translation was somewhat different from our present translation. But we easily see that they are important theses of K. Marx on religion in the work *Contribution to the critique of the Philosophy of Law by Hegel*¹⁰.

We may affirm that Nguyễn An Ninh was the first Vietnamese to introduce K. Marx' conceptions on religion through a concrete work, though he reservedly called K. Marx an European sociologist.

Second, the issue of “the Association of Heaven and Earth” (Secret organizations)

The writer Son Nam, in the article *The Association of Heaven and Earth and the Renovation* published before 1975 in Saigon remarked: “A fairly original way for the development and strengthening of the anti-French movement in South Vietnam was the Association of Heaven and Earth.”¹¹

This organization had long since been a social and religious issue of China. Since the coming of Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia (under the Ming dynasty) it became a problem of the whole region.

Some persons think that the term “Secret Associations” (*hội kín*) given by G. Coulet was not exact¹². But this term of *hội kín* had been common since 1928 when French colonialists drew hundreds of persons in Secret Associations of South Vietnam to judgment before the tribunal.

Until the 1920s, secret association and especially *Heaven and Earth Associations* (Thiên Địa Hội) flourished in South Vietnam like mushroom, despite their different names. There were *Nghĩa Hoà Hội* (Mỹ Tho province), *Nhân Hoà Đường* (Bà Rịa province), *Phục Quốc Hội* (Sa Đéc province), but the most famous was Thiên Địa Hội, of Phan Xích Long and the bonze Nguyễn Hữu Trí whose basis was Thất Sơn mountain (Châu Đốc province).

There exist some works on Thiên Địa Hội, but up to now the most detailed study was the work by G. Coulet. This work published in Saigon in 1926 (*Les sociétés secretes en terre d'Annam*) attracted the reader's attention.

The first part of the book studied “The role of sorcerers in secret association”. He recognized that in general “Vietnamese mentality is essentially eclectic on beliefs and a Confucian easily follows Buddhism or Taoism. Catholic and Protestant missionaries often complain that Vietnamese easily give up a religion to follow another one on account of benefit¹³. In part 2, “The Role of Religion in Secret Associations,” he described in detail in many pages religious rites in the acception of a member. They were following steps:

- Creating a special place
- Offering wine
- Drawing blood and swearing
- Making offerings
- Confirming the oath before the altar
- Ceremony of common consent.¹⁴

After rituals of religious and magical character for entering the association organized by sorcerers, members can live normally like anybody. But after these rites, the secret association strictly controlled every member and preserved secrecy.

This logic lead to G. Coulet’s most important discovery on this phenomenon: one could not separate politics from religions, and opposition against colonial rule was not only expressed by weapons, but also by amulets and incantations of socerers. With “the assistance of spirits”, persons wearing whithe clothes bearing amulets rushed out and destroyed the Great Prison of Saigon in 1913, 1916. A leader like Phan Xích Long was not a professional political leader but a magician calling himself the son of the Sky coming into the world. G. Coulet wrote: “One might demonstrate by analyzing witchcraft, religious and profane elements in Secret Associations at An Giang province. Secret Association of Vietnamese are a social phenomenon of accurate essence and definite expression.”

All Secret Associations in Vietnam were characterized by:

- a) *Witchery* regarding symbols,
- b) *Religious* regarding rites and regulations,
- c) *Profane* regarding materials and organization.

The close relationship between these three elements made up a concrete unity and created “a man full of vitality.”¹⁵

Being conscious of this originality of Secret Associations in South Vietnam, especially of its role among peasants of South Vietnam, Nguyễn An Ninh closely studied “that religious element which is able to mobilize the national vitality” in order to make full use of its religious – political form.

The association of Heaven and Earth had an attractive force. The religious element was objectively profitable, but leaders of the Renovation Movement had ignored or criticized it. That was why The Party of Youth with High Aspiration (Thanh Niên Cao Vọng Đảng) of Nguyễn An Ninh was penetrated with vitality of the Association of Heaven and Earth. Lê Văn Thử praised the political wisdom of Nguyễn An Ninh but remarked: “Up to 1928, An Ninh had created a peasant movement. This movement was secret but lacked political instruction.”¹⁶

We may conclude that apart from socio-political elements, secret associations in South Vietnam had contributed an original feature to the variety and richness of religious activities in the religious system of this region.

Some Additional Explanations

The causes leading to new religions in South Vietnam in modern times have been a topic attracting many recent researchers. In general, they always recall the character of a virgin region, the Mekong river delta, a region of convergence of many different cultures and civilizations, with various ethnic components and religions. Authors also have paid attention to the socio-political reality of Nguyễn Dynasty, on the French invasion and on the people’s heroic resistance. Some authors have dealt on the character and mentality of the people in South Vietnam, etc. But they were far and indirect causes.

In the work *A First Step to Grasp Caodaism* recently published by the Institute for Religious Studies, in the article “Caodaism, an Objective Practice, a Behavior”, Prof. Đặng Nghiêm Vạn pointed out a few causes leading to the transformation of Caodaism into a religion as follows:

- First, the historical situation of Vietnam since the First World War up to the present.
- The appearance of new religions and new religious phenomena often come from rich, intellectual strata of the time.

- Caodaism differed from other new religions which were born then died sporadically, on the fact that it understood the psychology of South Vietnam peasants at that time.

- On religious aspect, the fact most worthy of attention is that Caodaism bears a practical character.

- What is most important is that Caodaism has created its own social communal basis as it once was insisted by E. Durkheim.”¹⁷

We want to go deeper in this direction, no doubt to a larger context, which is the whole South Vietnam area. One question arose: Why, in the first years of the 20th century, had there existed a tendency toward religious activities in the socio-political movement of South Vietnam?

In the chapter “Religious Establishment” by Nguyễn An Ninh, the author had given an explanation of this phenomenon. Apart from purely religious reasons. Love of the good, hate of the bad, effort to find the origin of everything, love of immortality, the three needs, the three thirsts of mankind, which are the bases of religions”, he gave out more urgent reasons: “The fact is not strange. The moral problem is a psychological one. The religious problem is also a psychological one. And the political problem is also a psychological one. How in general circumstances of a period does the system not appear in morals, religion, philosophy, i.e. in the thinking? That is why up to now, morals, religion and politics have been three components in everlasting relations.”¹⁸

Nguyễn An Ninh, however, was a political, social activist, a famous patriot, journalist. We cannot ask of him more precise explanations on religions.

I want to come back to the analysis by G. Coulet. In the last chapter, under the form of questions G. Coulet gave out two theses:

- *First*, he wrote in the original: “How can witchcraft, religious and profane elements be included in Secret Associations to transform them into an original and influential essence?”¹⁹

He explained that leaders of Secret Associations had cleverly combined three main motive forces: interests of the community, superstitions, and thirst for liberty of the population. Perhaps, by enlarging too much the concept “Secret Associations”. G. Coulet had included all the activities of Phan Bội Châu (from the Associations for Renovation to the Association for the Restoration of Vietnam) the attempt at

poisoning the French in Hanoi (1908), the last activities of Hoàng Hoa Thám (1908 - 1913) etc. in this concept.

In Vietnam, the exact concept of “Political Party” in its contemporary meaning was given by the French historian. G. Boudarel in the book *Phan Bội Châu et la société Vietnamiennne de son temps* when he said that Phan Bội Châu was the first Vietnamese to use this concept in our country by creating the Association for Renovation in 1904 in Quảng Nam province. Phan used the terms “*minh xã*” (official associations) and “*ám xã*” (secret organizations), but these associations were quite different from “Secret Associations” in South Vietnam as used by G. Coulet, because in the main they had no religious, witchcraft elements.

- *Second*, when analyzing the close combination between religions and politics in secret organizations in South Vietnam which he called “The system of Associations of Heaven and Earth”, G. Coulet wrote: “ From the preceding presentation we may draw out a temporary definition for Secret Associations in Vietnam though not general, but at least from which we can draw out what is necessary to be preserved. Vietnamese Secret associations are a social phenomenon of psychological essence. They are unified and independent organizations, which preserve their secrecy by witchcraft and local religions under the strict geographical and historical influence, therefore they have an immutable character and tend to be modernized... From this definition, we may draw out the conclusion that it is impossible to use military and legal forms to oppose them, because they are multiform and can deceive anybody wanting to annihilate them...”²⁰

These conclusions of G. Coulet help us not only to explain “the religious aspect” of the Association of Heaven and Earth but also to have an idea of religious activities in South Vietnam in modern times.

Max Weber’s sociology on religion shows a clearer idea on differences in religious activities. For him, a sorcerer is different from a missionary, because a sorcerer makes use especially of witchcraft, and a missionary follows rites of worship for divinities which have become rules and regulations. A missionary is “a permanent official” of God, but the activity of a sorcerer is individual and temporary. On the other side, successful religious activities often have a *mystical* attitude and individuals think that they are “a vessel of God” to such a degree that their mind is empty to receive a new transcendental truth.

The religious mentality of South Vietnamese was probably different. Regarding the newly born religions in South Vietnam in the beginning of this century and

especially with Secret Associations, we may remark that the behavior of the population was quite different. When a peasant participated in a Secret Association what did he ask? He did not ask metaphysical theoretical systems, he only “asks for protection” from religious sacred rites. Moreover, the religion supplied him with moral and “civil” ideals, pagodas, oratories, common houses, bonzes, soecers and a series of other religious symbols like flags, gonfalons, amulets, etc.

All these facts created the firm resistance of Secret Associations. In 1916, there existed 66 oppositions against the power in provinces of South Vietnam, and 1440 persons were arrested... Coulet had directly studied the files of 111 defendants, mainly from 20 to 49 years old; 70 among them were peasants, 23 were day laborers, and 7 were traders.

The remark by Paul Mus in the famous work *Vietnam, Sociologie d'une guerre* published in the beginning of the 1950s, added an explanation: “In South Vietnam, when public land remained but 2,5%, the land was more and more concentrated in the hands of landlords. Big landlords were introduced in Vietnam by the French.” Then the destruction of the cult of ancestors which created a spiritual void. The tradition of the three doctrines was weak and could not apply to the situation. At the same time Western civilization was imposed by coercive character and could not be refused, but for the majority of Vietnamese it was an “empty civilization, wanting the sacred substance for cohesion”, “Vietnamese Intellectuals while being Europeanized, even when they ranked with us, still saw that we had destroyed their spiritual structure and drawn them out of their own social environment.”²¹

The formation of new religions in Vietnam according to Paul Mus was the consequence of this frustration: “Vietnamese therefore tried to find a satisfaction of their sacred requirements: some followed Christianity, others followed *Freemasonry*, or *Spiritism* and Caodaism was representative of this group.”²² He thought that the loss of relations with the cult of ancestors was the deep reason for the birth of new religious sects.

Thus, we have to assert that the appearance of many new religions in South Vietnam in modern times, especially the existence of many patriotic movements – more numerous than in the North and the Middle – of religious color was an original feature of the Southern land of the country. Different approaches help us to more deeply grasp the very various aspects of religious phenomena. But in the main, the basis for all the explanations is the theses by K. Marx on the economic basis ever influencing the superstructure, including religion, national and historical

environment. They remain the decisive factors for the birth and the physiognomy of religions.

Political, economic, social and cultural conditions of South Vietnam have brought up a religious picture with many original features. When the colonialism collapsed in 1945 and especially in the conditions of a society in renovation, there exist changes in a different direction. But the religious issue in the South will remain attractive for researchers on religions at home and abroad.

Reference:

- ¹. Paul Paupard. *Dictionnaire des religions*, Presse universitaires de France, Paris, 1984, pp. 1768-1769.
- ². Nguyễn Huy Lai. *La tradition religieuse spirituelle et sociale au Vietnam*, Paris, 1981, p. 48.
- ³. Tạ Chí Đại Trùng. *Thần, Người và Đất Việt* (Spirits, Men and the Viet land), Văn Nghệ, USA, pp.351, 359.
- ⁴. Trần Văn Giàu. *Lịch sử tư tưởng Việt Nam (History of Ideology in Vietnam)*, Tome I, Hanoi, 1973, p. 387.
- ⁵. M. Bouillevaux. *A Journey to Indochina* (in French), Paris, 1858, p. 47.
- ⁶. L. Cadiere. *Beliefs and Religious Practice of Vietnamese* (in French), Tome I, 1992, p.6.
- ⁷. Đào Trinh Nhất. *Cái án Cao Đài* (The Case of Caodaism), Saigon, 1935, pp.80 and 154.
- ⁸. D. V. Pivovarov. *Philosophical Sciences* (in Russian) 1992. No. 2.
- ⁹. Nguyễn An Ninh. *Tôn giáo* (Religions) Saigon, 1932. Cited in Nguyễn An Ninh, Trê Publisher, Hồ Chí Minh City, 1995, pp. 275-276.
- ¹⁰. See: *Marx-Engels' Anthology*, Tome I, Sự Thật, (The Truth) Publishing House 1980, pp.13-15.
- ¹¹. Sơn Nam. *Cá tính Miền Nam* (Individuality of Southern Vietnamese), Văn Hoá (Culture) Publishing House, Hanoi, 1992, p.20.
- ¹². Recently I found in the National Bureau of Archives II, Ho Chi Minh City, a manuscript by a French missionary of XIX century *Histoire de la societe serete du Ciel et de la Terre dite societe du Hung*. I shall introduce the document to the readers.
- ¹³. G. Coulet. *Les societe secretes d'Annam*, Saigon, 1929, p.99.
- ¹⁴. G. Coulet. *Ibid.*, p.102-106.
- ¹⁵. G. Coulet. *Ibid.*, p.21.
- ¹⁶. Lê Văn Thử. *Hội kín Nguyễn An Ninh* (The secret association of Nguyen An Ninh), Saigon, 1961, p.52.

¹⁷. Institute for Researches on Religions. *Bước đầu tìm hiểu đạo Cao Đài* (A first step to grasp Caodaism), Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi. 1995, pp.49-61.

¹⁸. Nguyễn An Ninh. *Tôn giáo* (Religions), *opus cit* .p.269.

¹⁹. G. Coulet. *Opus cit*, p.371.

²⁰. G. Coulet, *Opus cit*, p.382.

²¹. Paul Mus. *Sociologie d'une guerre*, Paris, 1952, p.150.

²². Paul Mus. *Opus cit*, p.147.