

Characteristics of Belief and Religion in Southern region of Vietnam in the Ethnological-Religious Approach

MẠC ĐUỜNG*

ABSTRACT: Believers of various religions in Southern region of Vietnam take up roughly 27% of the population, while various beliefs are of a large multitude of which no concise statistics has been so far made. The author emphasizes that nowadays, it deems necessary to do research, from ethnological-religious approach, on 3 important aspects of the belief-religion issue in this area: Firstly, characteristics of the real social situation of religions; secondly, specific practices of various types of existing beliefs and religions; and thirdly, various patriotic religious movements and anti-national movements by rivals' political forces who have been and are making used of religious matters.

Belief and religion are research subjects of many social disciplines at the present. Religious philosophy studies the nature of philosophical think in teachings and great religious books. Religious history studies formation and development of religions through ages. Religious politics studies state policies on religion. Religious studies considers religion a overall social phenomenon in social life. Religious ethnology studies belief of each ethnic and religious groups as a cultural characteristic in the development of each ethnic.

At the begining of the 20th century, the trend of English-American ethnology had inherited duties of the US Bureau of Ethnology in New York (1834-1902) and developed and formed the modern anthropology. Anthropology of religion has been developed from faculties of modern anthropology in many countries in the world, especially in English speaking countries, since the 1980s until present.

Anthropology of religion is a specific brand of ethnology which studies belief and religion according to three classical directions. First, the school that viewed belief and religion as a natural cultural need that Tylor Edward Burnett (1832-1917) had presented in *Primitive culture* published in London in 1881. Second, the school that

*. Ass., Prof., Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences in the Southern region.

considers belief and religion as a symbol of social order that Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) showed in his work of *The elementary form of Religious life* published in Paris in 1912. Third, the school which looks at belief and religion as a “mirror that reflects the level of socio-economical development” led by Karl Marx in *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s philosophy of Right* and the thesis of *The Jewish Issue* which was presented in *French-German Year book 1843* in Paris.

In the Southern region, after 1975, the Institute of Social Sciences at Hồ Chí Minh City has published many works of ethnology of religion on Catholicism, Buddhism, Caodanism, Hòa Hảo Buddhism, Protestantism, Faith of Tứ Ân, Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương and other forms of belief of the Chăm, Khmer, Chinese, and indigenous ethnics in southern part of the Central Highlands and in the southeast of the South.

In published works, methodologies by K. Marx and V. I. Lenin printed in *Notes of Philosophy* have been presented by successful Ethnological Ph.D. candidates such as Trần Hồng Liên (1993), Phạm Bích Hợp (1996), Nguyễn Duy Bình (2001), Hồ Ngọc Liên (2002), Vương Hoàng Trù (2003), and many other undergraduate or postgraduate theses.

1. Regarding the Concepts of Belief, Faith and Religion

The concept of “belief” (English) used in this paper can be relevant to “croyances” in French, “veravanhie” in Russian which have been discussed in works by Tylor and Durkheim. Belief should not be consider as religion despite the fact that it is the primitive religion and it is difficult to accept the next conception when we discuss on religion of the slavery, feudal or capitalist regimes. To compare the differences between *belief* and *religion* I propose the following quantitative hypothesis:

Belief	Religion
1. Polytheism	1. Monotheism
2. No Supreme Saviour	2. Supreme Saviour
3. No tenets	3. Tenets (Veda, Old Testament, Koran)
4. No canon	4. Canon
5. No religious organization	5. Church, religious organization
6. Faith according to custom	6. Strong faith in church
7. No sects or associations	7. Sects, orders and associations

From the table, we must clearly distinguish between concepts of belief and religion both in theory and practice. Contents of such difference can bring about two important conclusions in religious-ethnological research to the resident/ethnic communities in the Southern region.

Firstly, religion must be considered as a need of a developing society which is located in the State's policy on religion and in the citizen's right stipulated in Constitution and Laws. The orientation of ethnological-religious research must aim at "great national unity to firmly build up and protect Vietnam". It should describe and analyse newest aspects in religious communities, positive social changes and significant contributions by religious individuals to the nation via the two resistant wars from 1954 to 1975 and in the building of the socialism from 1975 until present. Every religion has its own positive factors and the tradition of loving the country with deep awareness of nationalism. Scientists in the field of ethnological and religious studies must positively step by step erase preconceptions of religion in the society which are harmful to the great national unity while helpful for rival forces who always want to make use of religious matters to divide the nation, especially in the Southern region and the west-south border of the country. Scientists, however, must solemnly respect all religious faiths and help the believers to well understand the relationship between religion and the nation so as to work for the development of the socialism in Vietnam. In my opinion, for the purpose of simultaneously living a good religious life and leading a beautiful life, a religious person should consider himself or herself firstly a Vietnamese and then a faith believer.

Secondly, regarding forms of belief, an ethnologist should view these phenomena the same as customs or habits of folk culture. The research on belief also aims at erasing outdated and superstitious activities and at the same time inherite essential values (ancestor worship, communal festivals) to build a new cultural life, especially in the remote and mountainous areas.

2. Locating Religions and Forms of Belief in the Southern Region

In the history of the Southern region before 1975, because of many reasons such as epidemic, natural calamity, wild animals which threatened people's lives, and social oppression, there appeared many forms of belief or "cults" aiming at saving human life. After 1975, they became less and some "cults" even totally disappeared (i.e. Dừa, Chuối, Nấm). Religions in the Southern region which lasted longer were what were formed after the 17th century (except for Theravada of the Khmer with early

establishment). They developed continuously, and especially strongly in 1990s until present.

In 2004, in the Southern region, there were 6 religions as follow:

	Name	Faith	Residential areAs	Place of collective Rituals
1	Buddhism	Buddha	The Khmer- the Việt	Buddhist temple
2	Catholicism	Jesus Christ	The Việt	Catholic church
3	Islam	Allah	The Chăm	Masjid
4	Hòa Hảo Buddhism	Buddha master	The Việt in An Giang province	Ancestor communal house
5	Caodaism	Heavenly Eye (High God)	The Việt in Tây Ninh, Bến Tre, Bạc Liêu provinces	Oratory
6	Protestantism	Jesu Christ	The Việt (urban area)	Church

Faith in the Saviour is a powerfull spiritual source to believers. From aspects of origin and nature, the faith means “saving the human beings and the world”, a way to lead people to escape from danger, poverty, hunger, oppression towards a community which everyone takes care of each other as they are in the same family worshipping the same God. Thus, regarding the origin of religion, just religious ethics has nothing in conflict with purposes of Vietnamese revolution under the leadership of the Communist party.

Within 6 religions in the Southern region in 2004, only Hoà Hảo Buddhism is full of Southern characteristics regarding its origin and faith in the world saviour. Caodaism is also an indigenous religion in the Southern region but its faith is infact a combination of various Eastern and Western doctrines in which Japanese Shintoism is represented by a heavenly eye. Theravada is the oldest religion in the Southern

region, from the Óc Eo culture with golden epigraphy and Buddha statues aged from 6th to 7th century. Yet regarding origin, Theravada in the Khmer and Mahayana in the Việt all come from India. Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam are all foreign religions. These religions have followers from various nations in the world. At first, Caodaism and Hòa Hảo Buddhism only had Vietnamese followers. Later, these religions appeared in the United States, Canada, Australia and France thanks to Vietnamese emigrants in 1970s and 1980s.

The Southern region is the land with various forms of old belief which are still available now in daily life of ethnics. Some popular forms which are essential to the residents in this area can be listed as follow:

Popular Forms of Belief in the Southern Region in 2004:

No.	Forms of belief	Place of Worship	Ethnic/ Locality
1	Ancestor worship	Family altar	Việt/Southern region
2	Tutelary worship	Communal house	Việt/Southern region
3	Worship of ones with great contributions to the nation (Lê Văn Duyệt, Trương Tấn Bửu...)	Giant Tomb	Việt/Southern region
4	Lady of Realm, Mother saint, Lady Đen, Bodhisattva Kwan Yin	Temple, Buddhist temple	Việt/Southern region
5	Cults of Bửu Sơn, Tứ Ân, Saint Trần (Trần Văn Thành)	Ancestor communal house, temple	Việt/An Giang, Sa Đéc, Vũng Tàu,...
6	Whale worship	Temple, Shrine	Việt/ coastal
7	Niekta, Earth god, Bôn, God of the sky, (Thiên Hoàng, Địa Kì), God of the Earth (Thiên Phủ, Địa Mẫu), Yang in the Stiêng, Chơ Ro, Plao and Pacak in the Chăm, etc.	Altar, Shrine	The Khmer, the Chinese Vietnamese, the Việt, the Chăm, the Stiêng, the Chơ Ro.

3. Social Characteristics of the Issue of Religion and Belief in Southern Region

Via materials from the recent national census (2003), we can only obtain the number of religious followers in the Southern region. Although it is difficult to get the correct number of people who practise various forms of belief I can say that they would come in a great number. It is possible to state that 90% of the urban residents are now practising various forms of indigenous belief, including animism.

The number of believers of religions in the Southern region takes for 27% total population (in An Giang province, Hòa Hảo takes for over 80%). At the district level, the percentage of religious followers is impressive: Chợ Mới 95% (An Giang), Thanh Bình 62% (Đồng Tháp). In many communes, especially in the area of the Khmer, the percentage of Theravada followers is 100%. In many villages of the Stieng, the Protestant accounts for 70%.

Regarding sex relation, the material shows that the percentage of male and female believers are nearly the same (49% male and 51% female), in which the group of under 30 years old takes for 25%. The educational level of the ethnics is rather low (69% religious followers have primary qualification and 15% can only read and write). In the Southern region, the living standard is still low. Average GDP is only at 500USD/a person, except for Hồ Chí Minh city (1,400 USD), Bà Rịa – Vũng Tàu, Đồng Nai and Bình Dương (1,000 USD). 28% households of the religious are poor, 54% have an average living conditions and only 18% are rich.

Until present, we need research in details of these three important aspects of the issue of religion and belief in the Southern region. Firstly, it is necessary to deeply study the current social characteristics of the religious people. Secondly, activities of belief and religions that exist in this region must be studied thoroughly. Thirdly, it is essential to systematically research on movements of loving the nation including religious movements as well as anti-national movements by rivals' political forces who have been making use of religious matters.

In my opinion, such scientific works will help analyse the current situation of the Southern region on the way to an industrialized and modern society of the 21st century/.