

RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS AND SECULAR THEORY IN ASIA AND VIETNAM

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Abstract: *There are many opinions around interrelation between secular theory and religious consciousness. It is argued that the secular decrease position of religion in modern society, but also the idea that religion is increasingly involved in political life. Another issue which is also referred to as secular theory appeared first in Europe or Asia, etc. Based on data from Asia Barometer Survey, ABC and World Value Survey, the writer would like to clarify this problem in some Asia countries.*

When studying the interrelation between religion and culture, we find that the problem on value of secular theory and religious consciousness of Asian nations is not only simple theory but also reality, because this problem is related to cultural identity and process of modernization as P. Berger wrote in his article “*Secularity: West and East*” (P. Berger, 1983). When reading M. Weber’s writing on the current events of religious sociology, we find that M. Weber’s view on the relation between religions, secularity and modernization has been illustrated by development of “prosperity theology” of Pentecostism, and this relation has influenced strongly South American societies at present (Nguyễn Xuân Nghĩa, 2007 p. 14). In this article we deal with some aspects of relative problem in Asian and Vietnam background.

1. Setting up problem

According to the ancient secular theory the more society has become modern the more religion has lost his position, but many conservative religious movements have risen from the end of 20th century to the beginning of 21st century. Religion has presented in political field, international political field of modern states as America, Japan. The position of religion and religious consciousness has been strong, so the ancient secular theory is re-examined (P. Berger, 2001. p. 15). Some researchers

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affirm that we can not lay the ancient secular theory to “peace rest” as R. Stark’s hope (R. Stark, 1999), but this theory has been value because it can explain why social position of religion has decreased in Europe (S. Bruce, 2001). J. Casanova thought that the secular theory has been main theoretical contribution to social science in explaining the interrelation of religion and modernity (J. Casanova, 1994 p. 212). However, we need to examine Casanova’s view.

What does religions have aspects in the process of modernization? What aspects decrease religious position, what aspects do not change religious position (Nguyễn Xuân Nghĩa 1996, 2003, 2005)? As social structures, as family, religion has some changes and reconfiguration in accordance with social changes at present.

The secular theory originated from European history; may it apply to different cultures? May different cultures; for example, Asian cultures, secularize as European cultures? Some writers think that the relation of religion and politics in Asian countries is unseparated, so the secular theory of Europe can not apply to Asian countries. On the contrary, some other writers think that the secular phenomenon happened in Asia before Europe because some religions as Confucianism only deals with the problems of the tangible world but not deal with “the next world” or deities. Some writers conclude that by basing on percentage of people who consider themselves not to be believers, it can see that countries in Western Europe and countries in East Asia are secular countries (P. Berger, 1983; S. R. Reed, 2007)⁽²⁾

According to statistic data in Vietnam the number of religious believers only occupies 25% of population at present, but the religious consciousness of Vietnamese people is deep: In all social classes, Vietnamese people express their religious consciousness strongly; this consciousness controls their life; it is manifests by the daily actions of humble persons and important persons” (L. Cadiere [1958], 1992 p. 1). The document “*Some Knowledge on Religions and Religions in Vietnam*” also remarks that “belief and religions in Vietnam have characteristic of the masses and belong to religious psychology. The religious psychology not only deepens in religious believers’ heart but also in non - believers (General Department of Politics,

². The article of S. R. Reed uses the datum of ABS. In this article we update new datum and we deal with the datum of three areas: East Asia, South East Asia, South Asia and Vietnam

1998 p. 134). Recently, the periodical report of State on carrying out human right in Vietnam shows that “In Vietnam there are about 20 million people following the different religions and 80% people have belief life (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009 [24]).

In order to answer these above questions we examine the process of secularity in Asia and in Vietnam basing on concrete figures. Asia has cultural characteristic of every zone, so we examine three concrete zones: East Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia. Because my article is comparative studying, so I use figures of Asia Barometer Survey, ABC and World Value Survey (W.V.S).

2- Some indications on religious consciousness and secularity in Asia and in Vietnam

One of many important indications which help us to understand the standard of secularity in a society is percentage of religious appurtenance (the number of people who belong to religion or no religion). Through this indication we can find severe contradiction in Asia (see table 1). People of South Asia are devout - the percentage of people who belong to no religion is zero.

Tale 1: The Percentage of People Confirm that They do not Follow any Religions

East Asia		Southeast Asia		South Asia	
Mongolia	18,6	Philippines	0,2	India	0,1
Japan	60,1	Indonesia	0,0	Bangladesh	0,0
Taiwan	43,1	Malaysia	1,1	Nepal	0,3
Hong Kong	24,1	Thailand	0,0	Bhutan	0,(0)
China	72,8	Cambodia	0,,1	Pakistan	0,0
	79,5	Laos	0,0		
		Burma	0,0		
		Singapore	12,8		
		Vietnam	31,5		

In secular East Asia; for example, China, Hongkong, and Japan the percentage of people who belong to no religion is 60%. In Southeast Asia there are many countries, Vietnam and Singapore to be influenced by Confucianism and Mahayana Buddhism, so 10-30% of people who belong to no religion,⁽³⁾ for other countries 80% of people follow the main religions. For example, Philippines people follow Catholicism. Indonesian, Malaysian people follow Islam. Thai, Cambodian, Burmese and Lao people follow Theravada Buddhism. In South Asia and Southeast Asia (except Vietnam and Singapore) religion is “innate character”, so every body has ascribed status on religion, but in East Asia, religion is selection of family or individual.

The second indication is prayer. Prayer is communication of individual with Supreme Being. Prayer is indication to measure devout of believers.

Table 2: *The Percentage of People who Carry out Daily Prayer*

<i>East Asia</i>		<i>Southeast Asia</i>		<i>South Asia</i>	
Mongolia	5,7	Philippines	76,4	India	86,8
Japan	22,0	Indonesia	86,1	Bangladesh	60,5
Korean	17,7	Malaysia	75,5	Nepal	57,1
Taiwan	7,6	Thailand	22,6	Bhutan	53,6
Hongkong	6,9	Cambodia	27	Pakistan	53,5
China	5,4	Laos	18,5		
		Burma	77,5		
		Singapore	47,7		
		Vietnam	4,5		

Seeing the second table we can find the contrary of prayer of South Asia and East Asia. In South Asia, Pakistan is country to have lowest percentage of prayer in South Asia, but this percentage is above 50%, on the contrary Japan is a country to have the highest percentage of prayer in East Asia; this percentage is only 22%. The

3. For Vietnam the statistics of people who belong to religions and no religions is not united: According to “Religion and Religious Policies” (2006) Vietnam has about 25, 26% religious believers. According to ABS Vietnam has 31, 5% non-religious people. According to WVS (2001) Vietnam has 46% people who do not follow any religions; the report of Ministry of Foreign Affairs shows that “80% Vietnamese people has belief life”. In Singapore, Buddhists are about 42,5% population, Islamic believers are about 14,9%, Christians are about 14,6%, 8,5% population follow Taoism and 4% follow Hinduism

percentage of prayer of Vietnam is about 4,5%⁽⁴⁾; the percentage of prayer of Singapore is higher than Vietnam. In Singapore has 21% Islamic believers, 16% Catholics and 30% Buddhists. The percentage of prayer in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Philippines is very high.

On of many characteristics of ancient secular theory from the M. Weber’s view demagic to the view on modern society has changed the traditional thought on the fairy world of traditional society.

ABS makes a question “Do you believe in the spiritual world? Does the spiritual world influence changes which are happening around you?” There are four levels to answer this question: completely believe, believe little, believe, not to completely believe. It is clear that the question helps us to understand the faith in “unscientific world” and table 3 gives us the results. Not to mention South Asia where people are very devout, the survey of ABC shows that East Asian and Southeast Asian countries are secular countries, but the percentage of people who believe in the spiritual world is high, it is about 50%. It is easy for Philippines to understand this problem because the great part of its population is Catholics. Indonesia and Malaysia have many Islamic believers, so the percentages of people who believe in the spiritual world are 67,4% and 56,2%. In Cambodian and Thailand there are many Theravada Buddhists, so the percentages of people who believe in the spiritual world is about 77% and 65%; Vietnam and Singapore are influenced by Confucianism so the percentages of people who believe in the spiritual world are 55% and 58%.⁽⁵⁾ When examining South Asia we find that the percentage of people who believe in the spiritual world in Taiwan is highest, 72,3%, but in China this percent is lowest, 49,3%.

Table 3: *The Percentage of People who Believe in the Spiritual World*

East Asia		Southeast Asia		South Asia	
Mongolia	*	Philippines	82	Indian	*
Japan	51,5	Indonesia	67,4	Bangladesh	*
Korea	50,6	Malaysia	56,2	Nepal	*

⁴. According to WVS (2001) the percentage of people who carry out daily prayer is 4, 6% (including 31, 6 Catholics, 14% Buddhists, 14% people who carry out ancestor- worship; 1, 1 % non religious people. The number of people who pray or sit in meditation is about 29,7%.

⁵. According to WVS 2001 Vietnam has 38,2 % people who believe in soul.

Funeral	74,7	81,7	97,1	95,2	94,9	98,4	97,8
Wedding ceremony	55,6	70,9	93,5	95,8	96,3	60,3	99,1
To be born	37,1	62,6	81,2	35,6	97,9	42	75,5
Festival	25	61,5	87,5	85,3	77,8	71,2	84,6

As you know the religious appurtenance in South Asia and in other countries which are influenced by Confucianism is low, but table 4 helps us to find people of these countries highly appreciate the role of religious rites in individual life and in society. Among three events of life, (to be born, wedding and funeral) funeral is connected more closely with the spiritual world. 62% Chinese population appreciate highly of religious element in funeral. In Vietnam: 75%, in Japan: 84%.... here we do not mention the countries which are influenced by Islamism, Christianity, and Buddhism. People of these countries appreciate highly the important of religious rites.

Four indications help us to examine the secular process of the countries in South Asia and in Southeast Asia, the first two indications: religious appurtenance and prayer - have low percentage, but the last two indications- faith in the spiritual world and the role of religious rites has high percentage. So the process of secularity is very complex, diversified. This process is not single process.

What do elements govern religious consciousness of people? After analyzing religious appurtenance we can not find a clear explanation. However, the correlation of some elements as population, economy and daily prayer can help us to make comments on the secularity of society (see table 5).

Table 5: *The Correlation of Some Elements as Population, Economy, and Daily Prayer*

East Asia	Income	Knowledge	age	Sex (fe)
Japan		Contrary	Harmony	Harmony
Korea	contrary		Harmony	Harmony
Taiwan			Harmony	Harmony

Hong Kong		Harmony		
China	Contrary	Contrary		Harmony
Mongolia	Harmony		Harmony	
South Asia				
India	Contrary		Harmony	
Bangladesh			Harmony	Harmony
Nepal			Harmony	Harmony
Bhutan			Harmony	Harmony
Pakistan			Harmony	
Southeast Asia				
Philippines		Harmony	Harmony	Harmony
Indonesia		Harmony		Harmony
Malaysia	Contrary		Harmony	
Thailand				Harmony
Cambodia		Contrary	Harmony	Harmony
Laos	Contrary	Contrary	Harmony	Harmony
Burmese			Harmony	Harmony
Singapore		Contrary	Harmony	
Vietnam		Contrary		Harmony

Basing on table 5 we can say that the religious character of women and the olds is deeper. Many researchers also have this comment. However, the correlations also have their laws. Vietnam and five other countries have not the correlation of age, prayer and sex. In some countries the educational level and living standard can have correlation, but more half of countries in Asia have not this correlation, if they have this correlation, it is in the opposite direction. For example, Mongolian people who have high incomes are very diligent in prayer. In Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia anyone who has high knowledge is very diligent in prayer.

3. Some remarks

From the above information we can have some following remarks

The tendencies of the secular process are not homogenous in societies. This matter is not only happened in Asian countries but also in European countries. In

North Europe, Denmark, Sweden, and France are the secular countries, but their people's need of religious rites relating to funeral is very high.

The great difference on culture and religion between South Asia and East Asia can be explained as. Great part of people in South Asian countries follows the orthodox religions; for example, Pakistani in Bangladesh follow Islam (80%), Nepalese in India follow Hinduism (80%), Bhutani follow Buddhism (75%). On the contrary, East Asian countries have not any orthodox religions. In South Asia there are three great religions: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Most of people in South Asia follow Mahayana. The view of Mahayana is that Bodhisattva can "enter the world"; lay persons can also attain nirvana if they strive to free themselves from worldly bondages, so the separation of sacredness from secularity is so few, this view is different Theravada's view. Many researchers think that the popular belief of South Asia seems to be more practical (P. Berger, 1983).

The social role of religious rites is more important in East Asian and Southeast Asian countries, but the individual religious practice is less important. Hence, we can explain ritualism of these countries' culture. When monotheistic religions were appeared in these countries (for example, Islam, Christianity...), they were strengthened and developed by the specific cultural characteristics of these countries so the religious practices of people develop more and more. The religious practice is the important element in consolidating religious character, although it is in the term of formality. Therefore, we can see that religious identity of people who follow monotheism in Asia is very profound.

If we discuss on religious appurtenance in East Asian countries and in Vietnam we ask why the standard of faith in the spiritual world is very high. This question is answered when we understand the characters of religions and belief in these countries. L. Cadiere remarked on Vietnamese people: "... they always believe that deities exist and rule them. Their happiness depends on intervention of deities" (Cadiere [1958], 1992 p. 33-35). We are not surprise when the views of karma, samara, rebirth, the Creator and the religion of ancestor-worship influence strongly

Vietnamese religious consciousness. Thus, people who follow religions and no religions can unite each other, particularly in Vietnam. /.