

# **THE THINKING AND LIFESTYLE OF VIETNAMESES CATHOLICS**

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Studying lifestyle and thinking of Vietnamese people in general and of Vietnamese Catholics in special is an interesting theme but it is entirely new. Now we have not yet studied concretely this theme both inside and outside our country<sup>2</sup>. Human thinking and lifestyle not only depend on culture and religion but also depend on job, educational condition, social group, region etc. If we would like to know clearly the characteristics of thinking and lifestyle of Vietnamese Catholics we should investigate many different objects and dignitaries in Catholic community.

This article fearlessly outlines the characteristics of thinking and lifestyle of Vietnamese Catholics. This is the

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first estimation; we should study concrete objects to know completely thinking and lifestyle of Vietnamese Catholics.

The thinking characteristic of a nation, of a community has often been established in the process of nation, of community. Human community could summarize his experience in the historical process and in concrete cultural space. Hegel stressed that it was production of the process of historical development of nation and of community.<sup>3</sup> Not that Vietnamese Catholics took shape their own thinking since Catholicism was newly introduced into Vietnam. The missionary history underwent the rise and fall in the social environment that was bringing the Oriental cultural identity, Vietnamese Catholics gradually took shape their thinking. Vietnamese Catholics' thinking

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<sup>2</sup> In March, 2009 the Club of Paul Nguyễn Văn Bình and Institute of Philosophy held seminar on this problem. Perhaps it is first time this problem is dealt with in seminar

has been similar to their fellow country men' thinking and their thinking has special characteristics.

Catholicism was introduced into Vietnam from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The introduction of new religion that was originated from the West contributed to commercial development of Vietnam and Europe, at the same time, it began the process of cultural and ideology exchange of the Orient and the West in Vietnam. Catholicism helped Vietnamese people know how to use Vietnamese Roman alphabet and enriched Vietnamese culture in many aspects as literature, painting, music, architecture etc. The contributions of Vietnamese Catholics have become a component part of Vietnamese culture. Catholicism has been the second largest religion after Buddhism. It has 6 million believers. The Catholic influence has gone beyond its religious scope. Catholic Church has affected directly or

indirectly the historical process of Vietnam for over last two centuries.

When speaking of the reason why Catholicism could root in Vietnamese society, we should note that Catholicism entered Vietnam when Vietnamese society fell into crisis both on social politics and on spiritual culture. At that time our country was divided, war lasted long time and traditional religions were declined. The social morality was depraved by the power of money. Nguyễn Bình Khiêm described that society as follows “while there is money there is disciple. While there are not dishes there are not brothers”. On the one hand Trịnh and Nguyễn Lords did not like Catholicism because the Catholics rites and social values were different from traditional rites and culture of Vietnam. On the other hand, Trịnh and Nguyễn lords wanted commercial exchange with the West in order to

buy weapon serving war. They regarded Western ministers in Vietnam as “security” for the continuation of commercial exchange<sup>4</sup>.

When speaking of the reason why Catholicism could root in Vietnamese society we need to speak “spiritual space” of Vietnamese people at that time. As the remark of Harry Benda “ it was interesting that after many centuries Vietnam displayed “ religious space”. That was why many beliefs and religions came into the world and the amount of religious believers was increased more and more.”<sup>5</sup>. The “spiritual space” meant that Vietnamese people were not enthusiasm of any religions so they accepted new religion easily. The “spiritual space” was established because of following reasons: first the foreign origins of

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<sup>3</sup> See G.W.W. F. *Hegel Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* in G.W.F Hegel *Hauptwerke in sechs Bänden*

<sup>4</sup> See Nguyễn Quang Hưng *Vietnamese Catholicism in the Nguyễn dynasty (1802- 1883)* Religion Publishing House, Hanoi, 2007

Confucianism, of Buddhism and of Taoism; second the nature of these religions were tolerant so they could not exist separately but they combined each other. As Trần Trọng Kim said: Vietnamese people like to worship but they are not enthusiasm of any religions. As social premise and culture were said above, the existence of “spiritual space” helped Catholicism to root deeply in Vietnamese society.

Vietnamese Catholics’ thinking is similar to common Vietnamese people’s thinking. Vietnamese Catholics do not lose their cultural identity. They always have still maintained thinking’s style of Vietnamese people.

Comparing to German people, the thinking’s style of Vietnamese people is different. In some cases, the thinking’s style of Vietnamese people is opposite to the thinking’s style of German people. The thinking’s style of

German people is rational. They have applied their thinking's style to daily life. Vietnamese people have applied daily life style to their work . They have harmonized reason and sentiment. German people have inclined toward logical thinking. They have looked everything in generalization but Vietnamese people have inclined toward partial thinking. They have paid attention to details of everything. German people have attached much importance to principle but Vietnamese people have attached much importance to exception. Vietnamese people have words “ to adapt yourself to the circumstances”. German people have favored the industrial thinking, they often have long strategic plan. Vietnamese people have favored the thinking of small –scale production. This thinking has brought tactical characteristic. The plans of Vietnamese people are often short –term. Vietnamese

people think that the thinking of German people is dry and dogmatic. German people do not understand flexible thinking of Vietnamese people. German people often have clear philosophy in their action but Vietnamese people follow motto “ experience is better than cleverness” and make light of theoretical matter.

According to Hà Văn Tấn, Vietnamese people ‘s thinking had historical origin. Our people underwent historical years in struggle for founding and defending country so division of labour was not thorough. Our forefathers had not condition to develop science. “The Vietnamese historical characteristics defined the characteristics of Vietnamese thinking and ideology. In history, all national vitality concentrated on defending national survival (...). Vietnamese ideology is not only patriotic ideology(..) But patriotism is an important



crystallization of Vietnamese history and ideology (...). Most of Vietnamese ideological values have been related to patriotism or in other words, all values have been examined through attitude and conception toward national existence”<sup>6</sup>. This condition proved reality that “our ancestors were not interested in theory”. In the past there were two scientific levels which were more or less summarized in theory. They were military affairs and medicine. Because military affairs was related to national survival and medicine was related to human survival. Studying philosophy with abstract thought was rare in our country. In the past we only had “amateur philosopher”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Harry Benda: *The Structure of Southeast Asian History: Some Preliminary Observations in Continuity and Change in Southeast Asia*. Collected Journal Articles of Harry Benda. Yale University Southeast Asia Studies Monograph Series No 18. New Heaven , 1972 p. 132. When analyzing the condition for entering of Christianity in Korea, many scholars dealt with “spiritual space”. Catholicism was brought into Korea at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. At that time the Choson dynasty was weak. The crisis on social politics and culture took place in this country

<sup>6</sup> Hà Văn Tấn *Some thoughts on Vietnamese history, on Vietnamese ideology in Some theoretical problems on Vietnamese ideological history*, Hanoi, 1984 p. 29

Because of living in the same condition, Vietnamese Catholics have had common thinking as other Vietnamese people. The partial and local thinking which was ruled by village customs influenced Catholics and non-Catholics. Although Church organization was close, Vietnamese Catholics were more or less influenced democratic thinking “the will of the King yields to the people’s customs”. The change of parish priest has been normal activity of Church but some places parish people had objected Superior when he appointed a parish priest who did not correspond to them. Catholics, however, have had their own thinking. *In general Vietnamese Catholics’ thinking is more rational than non Vietnamese Catholics’ thinking.* Because of two following reasons

*First reason:* the system of theology and doctrine of Catholicism is different other religions’ doctrines and

Vietnamese traditional beliefs. Unlike non Catholics, Catholics are devout. They were taught Catholic doctrine when they were little. While non-Catholics are influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism so they are not interested in why the universe exists in space and time, Catholics have clear views on the creation of the world. Bible teaches them that the world was created by God in 6 days. Adam and Eva were human ancestors, they were created on the sixth day by God. While non Catholics favor polytheism, they do not ardor any religions but Catholics only worship the Trinity. The first Command regulates that “ I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (Xh 20: 2-3). In Testament Christ also repeated that sentence “ You must love the Lord you God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

That is the most important commandment and the first Commandment” (Mt 22: 37-38). This commandment defines that Christianity is monotheism. But many Oriental countries have inclined to polytheism. Catholics distinguish worship from respect. They worship only Christ and respect parents, ancestor and martyrs. The roles of Mary, ancestor and martyrs are not equal to Christ<sup>8</sup>

Conception of Catholics on the relation of deity and person is different from the conception of non Catholics. While Vietnamese traditional men accept that supernatural world can interfere in their daily life (man proposes, God disposes), but their conception of the nature of supernatural world is still vague. Catholics have clear conception on earth, supernatural world and the life in the next world. For non Catholics, the soul of the dead can

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<sup>8</sup> Perhaps Vietnamese Catholics are influenced worship of Mother God so they revere Lady Mary very much

protect or punish the living and the boundary of spirit and man is comparative. For Catholics, the death means bodily death but soul is in purgatory and the boundary of spirit and man is clear. You can be in Heaven early or late depending on your morality. On the Last Judgment, God decides who is in Heaven, who die.

Because of the difference on theology and doctrine Catholics' conception on world view and out look on life is clearer than non Catholics 's one

*Second:* Catholicism that entered Vietnam was “European Catholicism”. It was influenced by European culture having development of rational thinking and technological science. The difference in thinking of European people and Oriental people was established in ancient time. In Europe, Aristoteles could say “ Plato is my teacher but the truth is more precious”. Aristoteles showed

his clear conception that although he respected heritage of his teacher he still affirmed his independent role in creation. In Asia, anyone who said that was considered “disrespectful”. If we consider the tradition “respect of teacher” as criterion, we can not accept Aristotele’s words. René Descartes said “the result of school time make me more ignorant”. From traditional angle we can not accept criticism of K.Marx towards GWF. Hegel, L. Feuerbach.

The positive thinking of Western people is different from the wise thinking of Oriental people. While Western people distinguish clearly experience, sentiment from rational thinking, Vietnamese people often stress on relative boundary of experience and theoretical thinking. The boundary of thinking’s types are vague in so far as thinking’s types can not be distinguished each other. With motto “to do with consideration to others reason and

feeling”. Vietnamese people can not arrange this thinking type higher than others.

Catholicism was brought to Vietnam by European missionaries. Undergoing many centuries Vietnamese Catholics have inherited rational thinking of technological science of Europe. Although Vietnamese hierarchy was established to manage church affairs, the process of establishment of rational thinking was continued because many dignitaries and followers have chance to receive Western education.

Catholics’ thinking relates to Catholics’ life style. It is easy for us note that *Vietnamese Catholics are very devout; they give prominence to organizational and disciplinal characters; their life is relatively isolated.*

The Catholics are pious because Catholicism is Monotheism. Non Catholics favor Polytheism, they can go

to pagoda to worship Buddha and go to temple to worship deity. Catholics worship only Christ. Non Catholics go to pagoda to pray for good things for their daily life. Most of Catholics venerate Catholicism and its belief honestly. This is a special character of Catholics so we should know it so that we do not do Catholics an injury.

Catholics have high organizational and disciplinal characteristics because special characteristics of Catholic Church's organization. Firstly, Catholicism has universal Church, Vatican Holy See. Church's organization is very close from center to localities, its head is Pope. Catholicism has developed theological system. Any believer who violates canon law will be punished. The most serious punishment is excommunication. Vatican is the state, it has foreign relation with hundreds of states. The organization



of Catholic Church corresponds to administrative organization of other states

The world	Vatican Holy See
State	Episcopal Conference
Province, state	diocese
District	Forane*
Village/ street	Parish
Hamlet*	Parish*

\*unofficial administrative division

According to canon law, Pope is the head of Church and the head of Vatican State. He is also Roman diocesan archbishop. On the behalf of church organization in every State is Episcopal Conference. The president of Episcopal Conference is elected for a term. Every region has bishop who manages all religious affairs of diocese. Every parish has priest to manage religious affairs of parish. Parish is

basic unit of Catholic Church. Catholic Church has its communicative system. This system is independent of the control's State. Catholic Church has the private framework of organization so its activities are independent of administrative organization of State. This is result of historical motion of many European States. At first many European States considered Christianity as national religion. After that they built the secular states and carried out division between State and Church, divine rights and human rights.

Secondly, because of objective and subjective reasons , the relation between State and Church is still a problem in Vietnam. Vietnamese Catholics live more separately than Catholics of other countries. *On social culture aspect:* from beginning the culture of European Christianity was different from oriental cultural. In some case Vietnamese

Catholics were kept away by their fellow countrymen, even their relatives. *On the social –politics aspect:* When Catholicism entered our country, the relation between State and Church was asked to change because Catholicism was different from other religions, traditional beliefs on faith, culture and organization. One of many reasons why the Nguyen dynasty forbade Catholicism because Nguyen dynasty considered Confucianism as National religion and this dynasty did not accept that objective reality.

Vietnamese Catholics *have clear conception on the significance of life as well as the values of social morality.*

Christian doctrine have spoken of this matter. As many great religions, Christianity has inclined to the good.

Among 10 commandments there are the 4<sup>th</sup> commandments speaking of respect for parents. Other commandments regulate that “ You shall not kill/murder”, “You shall not

commit adultery”, “You shall not steel”, “ You shall no bear false witness against your neighbor”, “You shall not covet neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor” (Xh20: 12-17). These commandments influence Catholics’ thinking and behave.

It is easy for us to find that Catholic believers mainly marry Catholic believers. Recently some Catholics marry non Catholics. Catholics are faithful in marriage. In Gospel there is sentence “ Something that God did mount people are not allowed to divide” (Mc, 10, 5-9).

We have just dealt with characters of Vietnamese Catholics’ thinking and lifestyle. But we should note that the characters of thinking and lifestyle of a community in general and of Catholics in special are not immutable category but they can change in accordance with historical

process. This article only brings out some preliminary remarks. Vietnamese Catholics live in many cities. We hope that we have study on concrete subjects as dignitaries and believers in different regions so that we shall have more objective and complete remarks on Vietnamese Catholics .,