

THE RELATION BETWEEN RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND “NEW RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON- SOME THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES

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Introduction

After investigating some “new religious phenomena” in the North of Vietnam we find that in some “strange religions” which have been newly appeared in this region there are “new religious phenomena” to originate from popular belief, especially from the Mother Goddess cult. We should study the relation between popular belief and new religious phenomena to have objective base for recognizing, analyzing and treating new religious phenomena in the first half of the 21st century. After analyzing the above relation we can find the change of popular belief in the world as well as in Vietnam.

“New religious phenomenon” is one of many urgent problems of the world religion in the 21st century. Although they continually exchange and discuss to discover a definition about new religious phenomenon, the research results of *religious science* help us to know the “right” presence of new religious phenomena in the life of people.

When discussing the origin of “new religious phenomena” the European and American researchers are interested in religious sects to originate from Christianity, especially of Protestantism. The European and American researchers are interested the role of *Millenary*

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Eschatological Theory. In Asia, especially in Japan, new religious phenomena are interested in salvation of the Supreme Beings.

In recent years, many strange religions have appeared in Vietnam. When we concretely study the strange religions, we find that their theological and psychological origins are different from the theological and psychological origins of the strange religions in the world. The strange religions in Vietnam have close relations with familiar forms of belief.

This article tries to survey deeply this problem. The first our aim is to find how traditional belief changes and meets with new religious phenomena. The second our aim is to study the role of new religious phenomena in the changing of religious life in contemporary society.

In short, in order to understand this relation we will speak of two problems. The first is the life of popular belief at present; the second the silent development of new religious phenomenon in our country.

1- Some characteristics of belief and religious change in modern time

In recent years, the world religious dictionary has figures and remarks on “tribe religions”, it means that the ancient religious beliefs remain in the world at present. Although tribe religions have not great roles in the life of contemporary religions, their existence not only manifests the continuity of “religious history” but also the plenty, variety of religious life.

But we wonder about how “popular religions” change in religious life at present. When studying the evolution of religion in 1960s Robert

N. Bellah remarks that “religions in history discovered ego; religions in modern history found the foundation of dogmas including acceptance of ego, although this acceptance was vague; religions in contemporary period start to study the laws of existence of ego and help human to bear full responsibility for their fate”¹. It is noted that writer pays attention to the change of “special religion”, especially Protestant denominations which are born in modern time. His suggestion helps us to know the change of belief and religions in contemporary society. R. Bellah also speaks of the concept of “important social meaning” of religious condition in modern society. It enlarges the diversified tendency of religious life, first of all the choice of belief and faith in accordance with the general trend of contemporary citizens and democratic tendency. How does “social meaning” influence the forms of belief?

At present researchers of culture and religion begin to pay attention to social meaning, many international conferences are held in Hanoi to discuss the Mother Goddess cult. The Mother Goddess cult is typical religious form in Vietnam as well as in China, in Korea. The researchers try their best to explain why “going into a trance” phenomenon can develop strong in European – American societies at present. This phenomenon is special characteristic of the Mother Goddess cult (or Mother Goddess religion) in Vietnam. In our research works on the strange religions in North of Việt Nam have such “social meanings”.

¹ See The evolution of religion written by Robert N. Bellah

We can say that the present popular beliefs as well as religions which are influenced by the change of spiritual life in modern time have at least three following aspects: the choice of belief is multiform; the values and life are changing; Beliefs are equal and they hold communion with each other.

When studying new religious groups in the North of Vietnam, we find that some groups are influenced by Mother Goddess cult. We find that Mother Goddess cult is typical phenomenon in the process of belief change of normal Vietnamese people in the North of Vietnam. Mother Goddess religion is changing from popular belief into “strange religion”.

Basing on “theory” of researchers at home and abroad, we can generalize some remarks on the process of change as follows:

The first, although in modern environment the system of belief is still spiritual space to bring up “new religious phenomena” .

The second, although new religious phenomena have different origins (some religions have the origins of indigenous belief, some have the origins of exogenous religions, some religions are separated from great religions ...) they try their best to make the most of spiritual philosophy, ritual forms or the activities of indigenous belief for developing. In recent years Hanoi has had organization with the name “*trường ngoại cảm Tố Dương*” , its head is Trịnh Thái Bình. But this organization changes its name into *Mẫu Hội* or *Mẫu Hội Thái Bình*.

The third basing on traditional beliefs, new religions build their belief philosophy and their belief activities. They try to attract believers and perfect their religious activities.

These are first remarks, they can not help us to see entire theory of change of religious life in Việt Nam at present. But these remarks are basic ones which were drawn in our field trips

In the following contents we shall make clear these remarks.

2- “New religious phenomena” in Vietnam at present

2.1- In the last decades of the 20th century, our country implemented its policy of Reform and Renewal. At that time many strange religions appeared in Vietnam, some of them paused their activities but now they operate again. Most of strange religions are concentrated in Northern delta and in some provinces in the Northern midland . Some strange religions come from the foreign countries . At present Vietnam has about 50 strange religions . Their theories are different from each other. Their theories often connect with Buddhism, Taoism and some forms of popular beliefs.

The activities of strange religions influence greatly on economic, cultural, religious and belief life of Vietnamese people, in particular extreme and anti -cultural religions as *Lưu Văn Ty sect* in Hà Tĩnh province, *Pha Tổc* sect in Sơn La province, *Chặt ngón tay* sect (cut finger) in Hồ Chí Minh city. The activities of other strange religions seem to be belief activities such as Trúc Lâm organization, Hồ Chí Minh religion, Thiên Vô religion Some strange religions register for their activities with administration. In general the activities of strange religions are taking place by different forms in provinces, cities . They impact directly in the process of implementation of religious and belief

policy of our party and State. They influence on the policy on freedom of religion and belief.

Because of the activities of strange religions, researchers, management offices on religions have many discussions but their opinions are not unanimity so treatments for strange religions are not concentrate and united. Some provinces consider strange religions as heresy so these religions must be eliminated from the religious and belief life of people. They take strong measures that make believers of strange religion to react. Some provinces consider strange religions to be in contradiction with the policy of our State regarding belief and religion so they carefully treat these religions. They only mobilize believers of strange religions. Some localities define that in strange religions there are extreme and counter-cultural members so they use effective measures to eliminate strange religions. Researchers and management offices think that we must base on the content of activities of strange religions to classify them. Since then we have effective measures for each strange religion. If we do that we not only guarantee the right to freedom of religion and belief of people but also eliminate the extreme and counter-cultural religions. It is noted that some countries in the world consider new religions as “new religious phenomena”.

In recent years, we have not concentrated on the identification, and approach to new religions as well as treatment for new religions. Now we must establish scientific and practical arguments in treatment for new religions.

1- We must define scientific foundation and approachable method to estimate objectively new religions on theoretical and practical levels.

2- we must define the reason and influence of new religions at present. We must examine economic condition, culture, society and religion that make a part of the mass to follow new religions.

3- We must understand the key points in theory of new religions and the relative relation between theory of new religions with traditional beliefs.

4- We must define the characteristics, contents of activities of new religions, since then we can classify the kinds of new religions in our country.

5- We must put forward some orientations, solutions to strange religions. These orientations and solutions not only guarantee the right to freedom of belief and religion but also eliminate negative elements and illegal activities of new religions

2.2 There are some difficulties in study and planning of policy regarding strange religions

We have not a possible definition on “strange religion” to be accepted by the vast masses. Religious researchers have studied “strange religions” recently. We have some following worries

a/ If we consider “strange religions” as new religious phenomena”, then are these new religions different from new religions which appeared in the world from the first half of the 20th century ?

b/ *The key elements* in definition of religious researchers in 1980s have been convincing

- The first, “ strange religions” or “ new religious phenomenon” in the 20th century reflect new features *in the change of belief* as well as *the choice of belief of people* with following key elements.

Religions have individual element

Religions of parallel beliefs

Religions **of salvation**

Religions have superstitious element

-The second: At present strange religions are considered as small religious groups. They have not the framework of organization. They are half public and half secret so it is difficult to control them.

2.2.2 We have some contradictions in legal aspect. When many countries more and more develop the right to freedom of religion and belief and recognize the right to change of religion of people. The appearance of strange religions or new religions disorder society and influence politics, the standard of morals and community's health.

Some countries think that State should not try to get the right to definition of religion. Religions must define about themselves or they must choose “ an agreed definition” or an “agreed and calculated definition” because present religions in the world are small religious groups.

It is difficult for us to distinguish strange religions with sects or denominations. French people and American people conflicted each other on this problem.

It is difficult for us to identify negative elements of new religions although many activities of new religions threatened social stableness and moral standards

New religions or strange religions cause trouble for the international relation on religion and human right .

2.3 Some opinions regarding the strange religions in our country: from theory to practice and religious policy

2.3.1 We can affirm that Vietnam is one of many countries in East Asia and in South East Asia to have new religious phenomena. In fact many new religions and strange religions have appeared in Vietnam since 1980s. Because:

Many believers of traditional religions are unsatisfied about their spiritual need so they look for new spiritual need.

Vietnam has developed economy and enlarged trade relations with other countries, especially Vietnam has 3 million people who are working and living in foreign countries

2.3.2 We should strengthen to identify strange religions in Vietnam and we should have the truth files on strange religions or new religions .

- In 2001 The Institute for Religious Studies held conference on “New Religious Phenomena”. It was the first time for Vietnamese researchers to give their opinions and concepts on strange religions. They thought that there were three kinds of new religions: the religions are separated from great religions; the religions are developed from traditional religions; the religions are developed from indigenous

religions. We have not enough investments to study and to investigate new religions or strange religions. In Vietnam we do not understand fully the characteristics of strange religions or new religions so we meet many difficulties to classify them.

We do not know the international relations of strange religions or new religions and their attitudes towards society, civilian State and other religions.

If we want to investigate and set up file on strange religions or new religions we must have scientific criterion. The Institute for Religious Studies need propose scientific criteria and organize investigations.

2.3.3 The treatment and policy regarding strange religions are difficult. In the past we ignored strange religions but now we consider them and recognize some strange religions in legal aspect. This change is active and necessary.

- After Instruction 01 of Prime Minister in 2005, we begin to resolve the problem of strange religions.

- We should classify new religions

- We should pay attention to the strange religions relating to Protestantism .

- _ We should study strange religions which are similar to Buddhism or Taoism. According to the studies of the Institute for Religious Studies, many new religious phenomena have appeared in the world since 1985. People often call them as strange religions,

miscreances or sects². According to incomplete statistics, there were 50 new religious groups or sects with 60 different names in 1990s. Some of them came from other countries such as Master Supreme Ching Hai sect (Thanh Hải Vô Thượng Sư) (from Taiwan) Omoto sect, Soka Gakkai sect (from Japan) Vôvi Pháp sect (From France) Phật Mẫu địa cầu sect or Địa Mẫu sect (from China)

2.3.4 On classification

At present, all Vietnamese researchers think that there are three kinds of “new religions”. But researchers have different opinions when they discuss about new religious sects in these three kinds because their understandings of each new religious groups or new religious sect are different.

For example, Thiệu Quang Thắng (the Government Committee for Religious Affairs) “classifies 50 new religious phenomena” into 5 following kinds

1-New religious groups come from other countries:

Master Supreme Ching Hai(from Taiwan) Omoto, Soka Gakkai (from Japan) Vôvi Pháp (from France) Phật Mẫu địa cầu or Địa Mẫu (from China) , I –kuan Tao (from Taiwan); Ôn Baha (from India)

We can find that there are 8 new religious groups coming from other countries and 42 new religious groups were born in Vietnam.

2-The new religious groups are similar to Buddhism: Long Hoa Di Lặc, Ngọc Phật Hồ Chí Minh, Chân tu tâm kính, Tiên thiên Phật nhất

² The investigation on “new religious phenomena” was carried out by Institute for Religious Studies in Northern provinces and report of Đỗ Quang Hưng “ *New Religious Phenomenon – Some Theoretical and Practical Issues*” . Religious Studies Review 5/ 2001

giáo; Trung thiên vận hội; Phật Mẫu địa cầu; Chân tâm bảo vệ di tích; Vô đạo Phật tổ Như Lai; Đạo nghiệp chương; Hội Phật trời Vua cha hoàng; Tam tổ thánh hiền; Phật nhất giáo; Đạo Phật thiện.

3-The new religious groups are similar to popular belief. (They worship tutelary god, Mother Goddess and ancestor): Đoàn 18 Hùng Vương; Ngọc Phật Hồ Chí Minh; Lạc Hồng- Âu Cơ; Đạo Trần Hưng Đạo; Không Minh thánh đạo hội; Đạo Tiên; Đạo Cội nguồn

4- The new religious groups are extreme: Master Supreme Ching Hai; Vô vi pháp; Đạo Chân không.

5- The new religious groups are indefinite: Tâm linh; Đạo lẽ phải; Huynh đạo; Tiên nhiên Huỳnh Kỳ; Tổ Dương; Thần linh tiên; Đạo Vả; Đạo Thiên cơ; Tâm linh thần quyền; Đạo Hoa Vàng; Đạo Thiên nhiên; Đạo con hiền; Tam giáo tuyên dương; Đạo Thiên nga; Đạo Khổ hạnh; Đạo Khăn vàng.

Đặng Hữu classifies new religious phenomenon into two kinds in his speech in the 9th National Congress of Party: New religions come from other countries and new religions were born in Vietnam.

The first kind: religious sects are separated from a religion. According to Đặng Hữu “these sects are denied by their religion because they are far different from principle of religion”. According to Đặng Hữu this kind of religions consists of following sects: Pentecost church, Jehovah’s Witnesses , the Church of Latter –Day Saints and Vang Tru church. Vang Tru church bases on belief elements of Hmong people

The second kind: new religious sects are established by human being. The believers of these sects are groups of people. The dogmas of these sects are chaotic.

Đặng Hữu does not point out any name of these sects in Vietnam except Falun gong in China

We give above opinion because we want to return to our first opinion that is we must identify and call the names of new religious sects then we analyze them by scientific views regarding religion.

2.3.5 Some first remarks.

Thanks to the documents of field investigations and local reports we deal with some following remarks, although we have not enough condition to study carefully sect by sect.

a) *On time*: almost new religious sects appeared in 1990s up to now.

Before 1990s strange religious sects appeared in some localities such as: Lễ phải sect appeared in Đà Nẵng city in 1986; Long Hoa Di lạc sect appeared in Phú Thọ province in 1988; Tiên Thiên Huỳnh đạo sect appeared in Vũng Tàu in 1981. From 1990 up to now the number of strange religious sects is increasing.

From 1991 to 1995 many new religious sects were born. They were: Long Hoa Di lạc (1990); Uncle Hồ sect (1992); Đạo Phật Thiên (1992); Ngọc Phật Hồ Chí Minh (1993); Quần Tiên (1993); Nghiệp chương (Karma) (1993); Siêu hóa (1994); Quang Minh Tu đức (1994); Địa Mẫu (1995); Tiên Thiên (1997); Đạo Tiên (1997); Đạo Con Hiền

(1997); Chân Đất (1998); Quang Minh (1998); Hoa vàng (1999); Võ đạo Phật tổ Như lai (1998); Chân tâm bảo vệ di tích (2000).

The quantity of these sects is developing and they enlarge their sphere of influence in all country

For example: Long Hoa Di Lặc sect is present in 31 provinces/ 61 provinces

Master Supreme Ching Hai sect is present in 20 provinces/ 61 provinces.

Ngọc Phật Hồ Chí Minh sect is present in 15 provinces/ 61 provinces (from Hà Tĩnh province to the North)

b) *On the main areas*: many new religious sects have appeared in the Northern delta. It is different from the situation of the Southern religions and beliefs in the past.

In old Hà Tây province there are many new religious sects. They are Long Hoa Di Lặc; Ngọc Phật Hồ Chí Minh; Chân Tu Tâm Kính; Chân Không; Đạo Bạch; Master Surpeme Ching Hai ; Quốc tổ Lạc Hồng; Lạc Hồng Âu Cơ; Quang Minh Tu đức; Quân Tiên.

In Hải Dương province has following sects: Long Hoa Di lặc; Ngọc Phật Hồ Chí Minh; Tam Tổ thánh hiền; Thanh Hải Vô Thượng Sư; Đạo Phật Thiện; Hoa Vàng; Thiên nhiên.

In Nam Định province has Nghiệp chương Quang Minh; Địa Mẫu; Thanh hải Vô Thượng Sư; Võ Đạo Phật Tổ Như Lai...

We should pay attention to this religious- belief event. Is it true that some Northern provinces are fat lands for the birth and

development of new religious sects? Is it true that people in the North feel the miss of consciousness of religion?

“New religious sects” often change their name to adapt to present condition.

For example: Đạo Chân Không of Lưu Văn Ty (founded in 1991) changes its name into Đạo Siêu hóa; Đạo Tâm Phát; Đạo Chân đất.

Đạo Vô Vi Khoa học huyền bí Phật pháp was founded in 1958 by Lương Sĩ Bằng in Canada. It changes its name into different names as : Vô vi khoa học huyền bí; Vô Vi; Vô Vi pháp.

Đạo Ngọc Phật Hồ Chí Minh was established in 1963 in Hải Phòng by Nguyễn Thị Lương. When it was spread in other area, it changes its name into different names: Ngọc Phật Hồ Chí Minh; Quang Minh Hồ Chí Minh; Đạo Bác Hồ; Thánh Minh vì tình dân tộc. Long Hoa Di Lặc also has other names: Long Hoa Tam hội; Long Hoa Chính Pháp.

c) On the centre where new religious sect were born.

As already stated, from 1985 up to now, The Northern delta has been the centre where many new religious sects were born.. But in the past, the Southern of Vietnam was “the land of religions”

Why? Conditions of thought and society are favorable, aren't they?. May the collapse of USSR and socialist system (1991) exercise more deeply influence on the Northern people than people of other regions? May Religious figures have condition to appear? May religious and belief needs which were inhibited be revealed more obviously than other regions in our country.

d) On the religious elements

New religious sects have only teachings and the lead of worship. They have not framework of organization, clear dogma and religious rite.

1-The teachings and the lead of worship of new religious sects are written in poems. They are propagated orally (Master Surpeme Ching Hai sect propagates its teachings by recording tapes and video).

2-The framework of organization of new religious sects are not obviously. Beside the founders, they have president, vice –president, treasurer to manage believers in each point (sometimes Long Hoa Di Lặc can gather 2000 believers in one point)

3- The activities of new religious sects:

Activities of many new religion sects direct to the good and cultivate virtue and morals.

The activities of some sects seem to be superstitious

Some activities of Master Surpeme Ching Hai sect or Chân Không sect are reactionary.

6 The leaders and believers.

Many women in countryside are believers of new religious sects. The leaders of new religious sects are also women. For example: Đặng Thị Trinh is the leader of Master Surpeme Ching Hai sect; Đinh thị Hà is leader of Đoàn 18 Hùng Vương; Nguyễn Thị Lương is leader of Ngọc Phật Hồ Chí Minh; Huỳnh Thị Bảy is leader of Đạo Tiên –Phật nhất giáo; Nguyễn Thị Nối is leader of Đạo Cô Nong or Đạo Thiên cơ; Nguyễn Thị Triệu is leader of Đạo Thiên Nhiên.

Many Protestant denominations of Europe and America come into Vietnam but we have not identified them. Beside Christian Fellowship Church, Grace Alliance church, in Vietnam there are other Protestant denominations such as Baptist church, Pentecost church; Mennonite church, Presbyterian church....

In our country “strange religious groups” are developing more and more . Some of them are separated from Buddhism. They are: Long Hoa Di lặc; Hội Phật Mẫu; Chân Tu tâm Kính; Tiên Phật nhất giáo; Phật Mẫu địa cầu. Some strange religious groups were born from strange religions such as: Ngọc Phật Hồ Chí Minh; Đoàn 18 Phú Thọ; Mẫu Hội địa cầu; Thanh Minh vì Tình dân tộc; Lạc Hồng Âu Cơ; Đạo Thiên cơ; Đạo Cô Non; Đạo con Hiên; Chân Không; Cội Nguồn; Trường Ngoại cảm Tố Dương; Đoàn Cách mạng Phật Đản.

These religions are called “Strange religions” by people and management offices of State . In recent years, newspapers often use the terms as *miscreances*, *sects* or *denomination* to denote these religions. Vietnamese religious researchers often use word “new religious phenomena” to denote these religions.

It can say that the appearance of “new religious phenomenon” in Vietnam religious system is first challenge that we can see in pluralism³. After investigating some Northern provinces (Thanh Hóa, Hà Nội, Vĩnh Phúc and a part of Hải Phòng) we can draw three remarks on strange religions when Vietnam carries out integrative and open policy:

³ According to us “religious system” in Vietnam consists 4 groups. The first group is traditional indigenous religions. The second group is exogenous religions ; the third group is religions which appeared in the South of Vietnam in the beginning of the 20th century; The fourth group is new religious phenomena or strange religions. They have just appeared in the end of 1980s up to now

Firstly: in the past, strange religious sect often appeared in the South under the names as *Hội kín* (Secret organization), *Thiên địa Hội* (organization of heaven and earth) or Ông Đạo movement. At present, many strange religious sect often appear in the Northern provinces. May the Northern provinces have spiritual spaces?

Secondly: like many strange religions in the world, Vietnamese strange religions were founded and controlled by men (guru).⁴ Nowadays the most strange religions in Vietnam are founded and controlled by women⁵.

Thirdly, believers of strange religious sect in Vietnam are not students, intellectuals, citizens, the youths. Most believers of strange religious sect are retirement cadres and people who have low income. They have rare abilities to adapt themselves to the environment of informational society.

By investigating some gurus of strange religious groups we have above remarks . In recent years, newspapers also have dealt with curriculum vitae of new religious phenomena and criticized negative expressions of new religious groups regarding culture and morals.

We can say that the challenges on cultural identity are the most popular challenges in Vietnam. From the old days up to now Vietnamese people have always respected traditional religions. In the past Vietnamese did not respond immediately with the appearance of new religions. In Vietnam there is not national religion. In Vietnam there is

⁴ Guru is the head of religious community of Sik people in Penjap. Researchers use this word to denote the heads of new religious movement in present time.

⁵ See the book “Challenge –reply on strange religions in our country at present” compiled by Department of Religious Affairs. Religious Publishing House, 2007

no discrimination based on religions so its religious system is plentiful and diversified . But the problem we want to know how cultural identity respond with tendency of pluralism in Vietnam at present ?

Basing on the information of newspapers, of communication, the results of investigations of the Institute for religious Studies as well as the book “Challenge –reply on strange religions in our country at present” compiled by Department of Religious Affairs, we can give two remarks concerning the first challenge in tendency of pluralism in Vietnam.

Firstly; from 1986- 1987 up to now Vietnamese people have responded heatedly with the appearance of strange religions (new religious phenomena) because they have influenced on traditional religions, culture, health, morals and healthy life of our people. May strange religions have superstitious activities. They propagate doomsday. Some strange religious sects call themselves to be “descendant of heaven”. They advise people to say prayer and not to work . All strange religions propagate their abilities in treating disease and saving lives. In the past the strange religions also propagated that their gurus had abilities in treating disease and saving lives.

In the conference on New Religious Phenomena was held by the Institute for Religious Studied in 2001 we gave opinion that in Vietnam new religious phenomena developed quickly but they have not yet made great psychological stir and great challenges regarding morals and society as Heaven Gate sect and Solar Temple sect in Europe and America or Aum sect in Japan.

In Vietnam newspapers often criticize superstitious activities of strange religions but they do not obviously deal with extremely dangerous activities of strange religions for example the cause of Phạ tốc sect of Cà Vãn Liêng (Liêng king) in Pahé hamlet, Tranh Đầu village, Thuận Châu, Sơn La province. A collective slaughter happened in Pahe hamlet on 20th October, 1993. 53 believers of Phạ tốc sect obeyed Liêng king to kill each other.

Secondly, people respond with the religious practice of strange religious sects. The religious practices of Ông đạo movement were similar to normal life of people. For example, Dừa religion in Bến Tre province only advised his followers to bathe little, keep long hair...

In recent years many strange religions have bizarre activities in their rites such as believers cut their finger, or mortify themselves. Chan Khong religion of Lu van Ty advises believers to leave their house to live forest.

These above analyses explain the first challenges of cultural aspect to strange religions. In the other words, the appearance of new religious phenomenon seems to be unusual for Vietnamese people.

