

DIVERSITY OF RELIGION IN VIETNAM

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Introduction:

Vietnam is multi-religion nation in history as well as at present. In Vietnam there is not State religion. Vietnamese religion is polytheism. Vietnamese culture is an open culture. It always receives the currents of cultures and religions from foreign countries. In Vietnam there is no discrimination based on belief or religion. Vietnamese people are ready to receive new religions and religions. Religious followers and religions have lived harmoniously in the national community of Vietnam for thousands of years.

Because of geography, Vietnam is a bridge between two ancient civilizations- China and India. These civilizations generated the great religions of the region as Brahmanism, Hinduism, (Indian civilization) Confucianism, Taoism (Chinese civilization). From the beginning Christ BC Vietnam received many new religions in turn. In the historical process some religions could exist but others could not. Confucianism was withered with along the Nguyễn feudal regime (1802-1945) but its quintessence still remains in Vietnamese culture, in particular, the worship of ancestor. Taoism gradually went into folk belief then it turned into the Worship of Mother God. Islam develops in Chăm people and it is influenced by Chăm culture then it turn into *Ba ni giáo* (Chăm Bà ni)¹. Brahmanism was also Chămised and it is called *Bà Chăm*. Buddhism still remains. It has the largest number of followers.

Islam entered Vietnam in the 14th century

Catholicism started to stop in Vietnam in the 17th century

1911 is considered as the landmark for the beginning of Protestantism in Vietnam

¹ Chăm Bà ni is called as the Old Islamic group by the Chăm Muslims in Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận province. At present in Chăm people there are two main groups, one group follows Orthodox Islam . They are known as the New Islamic group.

In the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries there were some religions as Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa (Four Debts of Gratitude) Caodaism, and Hòa Hảo Buddhism in the South of Vietnam.

At present (2011), Vietnam has 12 religions and 32 religious organizations to be recognized by State. Some religious organizations are waiting for recognition of State and their believers have religious activities at home. In Vietnam there are many kinds of belief existing as: The worship of ancestor, the worship of tutelary god, the worship of *tổ nghề* (Father of profession)...

From the beginning of Christ BC Vietnamese religions were multiform. It is evident truth. However, diversity of religions in Vietnam has its own character in each historical period. The problem of religious diversity has negative lessons

These are issues we would like to deal with in this article.

The religious diversity in Vietnam in feudal period

Vietnam achieved national independence from Chinese feudalism in the 10th century. Vietnamese feudalism stepped into political stage to lead Vietnamese nation. In this period there were three religions in Vietnam: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. These religions were developing. The Đinh, Lê, Lý Trần dynasties (from the beginning the 10th century to the 14th century) respected Buddhism. Many Buddhist thoughts were applied to run State affairs; the role of monks was respected. Especially, King Trần Nhân Tông (1258- 1308) became King's father (1293- 1299) after he left the throne and became a buddhist in Yên Tử mountain, Quảng Ninh province. He founded Trúc Lâm Buddhist sect. He was called *Vua Phật* by people. But other religions were not discriminated in this period. From the beginning of the 10th century, Vietnamese feudal State carried out the principle that three religions were respected (same respect); three religions existed and developed together (going together); three religions were considered as the same origin (same origin)

On the one hand, this thought was defined by the specific character of Vietnamese culture. On the other hand, Vietnam was not large country. Vietnamese people not only confronted hard nature but also had to constantly fight against Northern invaders so Vietnamese people had to unite to have force. Religious solidarity was an important problem

In the Lý dynasty, State respected Buddhism but Temple of Literature (*Văn miếu quốc tử giám*) was built in this dynasty. Temple of Literature trained many Confucian scholars.

In the Lý- Trần dynasties, State organized examination on three religions (Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism) anyone who passed an exam would become mandarins. In the Lý dynasty there were some scholars but in the Trần dynasty there were so many scholars. The Trần dynasty organized 16 examinations. In The Trần dynasty tens of scholars became providers of State as Lê Văn Hưu, Trần Thị Kiêm, Đoàn Nhữ Hài, Đỗ Thiên Hựu, Mạc Đĩnh Chi, Nguyễn Dụ, Phạm Mai, Phạm Ngộ, Nguyễn Trung Ngạn, Lê Quát, Phạm Sư Mạnh, Trương Hán Siêu, Lê Cửu Nhân² In Lê- Nguyễn period (from 15th century to 1945) Confucianism became main ideology but Buddhism and Taoism were not discriminated. They developed normally.

When developing Đàng trong (South of the Gianh River in modern-day Quảng Bình province) Nguyễn Lords based on Confucianism to build monarchy but they still used Buddhism to turn people hearts towards, stabilize villages and expand Southern region

The diversity of religion, two contrary events

The first event

In the beginning of the 17th century, some Western missionaries started Catholic missionary work in Vietnam

At the beginning of Catholic missionary and developing process there were many problems as

Missionaries considered Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and traditional beliefs, especially the worship of ancestor as false religions. They refused Vietnamese traditional culture. This action never happened in the former missionary and developing process of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism.

The Catholic missionary process of Western missionaries, concretely missionaries of Paris Foreign Missions Society associated with French invasion in Vietnam

Because of two above main reasons, the Lê dynasty then the Nguyễn dynasty, especially kings Minh Mệnh, Thiệu Trị, Tự Đức promulgated

² See Nguyễn Hồng Dương “ *Religion in the cultural relation and development in Vietnam*. Social Science Publishing House, 2004, p. 138-139

Catholic forbidden policy and carried out many strong measures to forbid Catholicism. The Nguyễn dynasty carried out the Catholic forbidden policy because some reasons. Firstly the Nguyễn wanted to preserve national culture and kings realized that the development of Catholicism would damage the customs of Vietnamese. The worships of God, of spirits and of ancestor were respected by feudal Sate and people. If Catholicism developed in Vietnam, these worships were abolished. Secondly, when the Nguyễn found that some missionaries and believers helped French invader, he determined to forbid Catholicism and carried out the Catholic forbidden policy violently for defence of national independence.

In fact, the Catholic forbidden policy of the Nguyễn did not discriminate religion. Although this policy brought about some problems in diversity of religion in Vietnam. Subjectively, this policy brought about misunderstanding in non- Catholics so they were not in sympathy with Catholicism, they even hated Catholicism. Objectively, in order to carry out aggressive scheme French colonialists used policy of division and conquest and propagated in Catholic community that the Nguyễn dynasty discriminated and annihilated religion. If Catholics wanted to exist they had to follow French colonialist to fight against Vietnamese nation. Outwardly, the French colonialists raised the label of “religious defence”, but they only wanted Catholic community to serve their interests.

The second event:

Two year after the Geneva Agreement , the North and the South ought to have had the general election and our country reunified but American imperialists destroyed the Agreement. A pro-America government was established. The head of this government was Ngô Đình Diệm, he was a Catholic. At the beginning, Ngô Đình Diệm based on Catholics who emigrated from the North to strengthen his government. “Diệm based on Catholic emigrants who were obeyers. They were ready to obey parish priest’ order to take to the street”³ or “each time Nation is in danger” thousands of Catholics from resettlement camps around city (Saigon-NHD) lined after parish priests to demonstrate in favour of Diệm government”⁴. The Diệm government was “Catholic

³ Priest Trần Tam Tinh : Cross and Sword, Youth Publishing House, 1988 p. 120-121

⁴ Ibid. p 121-122

government”⁵. Ngô Đình Diệm only considered Cần Lao party as the core of “National revolutionary movement”. This party was founded by his younger brother Ngô Đình Nhu. National revolutionary movement was organized in accordance with structure of national regime “anyone who wants to be province chief, district chief, village chief, parish priest or officer had to be member of Cần Lao party. The ideology of party and of movement was “personalism”. There was only training school which is “training center of human person” to be founded by Diệm’s old brother- Ngô Đình Thục. He was bishop of Vĩnh Long diocese. All Catholics or officers had to learn at least a month in this center. All teachers of this center were priests, they stuffed pupils’ heads with the concept that man was created by God. They explained the mistakes of Buddhism and Confucianism”⁶

Buddhism has existed for long time. It is very closely connected with Vietnamese nation and culture. It has had the most believers. According to Instruction no 10 of the French colonial regime, Buddhism was the association of culture and sports but this Instruction did not apply to Catholicism.

In Marian Congress in February, 1959, Cardinal Agagianina formally offered Vietnamese country to Our Lady Immaculate. On 16th August, 1961 Ngô Đình Diệm himself entrusted the future of our country to Our Lady of La Vang.

Ngô Đình Diệm government considered Buddhism as association and wanted to Christianize all Southern regions. So Ngô Đình Diệm government discriminated religions. Their action opposed the policy of religious diversity of Vietnamese nation. On the occasion of Buddha’s birthday in 1963 Buddhist followers in Huế hung Buddhist flags. Ngô Đình Diệm government forbade people to hang Buddhist flags. Two days before Buddha’s birthdays, government explained rule which was promulgated in 1957 that religious flags were not allowed to hang in public area. But before the installation ceremony of two bishops “Holy See flags fluttered everywhere”⁷. So thousands of Buddhist believers took to the street. Obeying to Ngô Đình Diệm government, army suppressed people, 9 children were killed⁸. On this event, priest Trần

⁵ Ibid p. 126

⁶ Ibid p. 122-123

⁷ Ibid p. 134

⁸ Ibid p. 133

Tam Tinh, writer of the book *Cross and Sword* gave some estimation. According to him, the world opinion thought that the suppress of Ngô Đình Diệm government was “sign that Catholic government oppresses and suppresses religion”

Two above contrary events were negative lessons on toleration, solidarity and religious diversity in Vietnam.

The view, guideline of Vietnamese Communist party and State on diversity of religion

Under the leadership of Vietnamese Communist Party, Vietnamese people carried out national revolution, the struggle for independence. We have achieved national reunification and built socialism. From coming into the world, Vietnamese Communist Party has been interested in national solidarity, especially religious solidarity. Religious solidarity means our state has a policy of religious tolerance. We have adopted religions existing in Vietnam it means we have adopted religious thoughts, philosophy like Party's thoughts. Vietnamese Communist Party not only inherits national traditions but also promotes the goods of religions and applies them into policy of State. President Hồ Chí Minh who founded our Party. He was the first president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. He not only leant and applied the Marxist-Leninist thoughts but also inherited the thoughts of religious founders as Sayamuni, Confucius, Jesus Christ⁹. So that our Party did not fall into atheism in the process of leading our revolution. Sometimes religious problems rose to harm the struggle for independence as well as the task of building socialism but our Party only uses convincing and mobilized methods. Our Party does not discriminate or suppress religions.

When the August Revolution won victory The Democratic Republic of Vietnam was born. It is Workers' and Peasants' State under the leadership of Vietnamese Communist Party. Under the new system all religions either old religions with many believers or new religions with few believers have lived harmoniously. The State of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam does not choose any religion as State religion. All religions are equal before the law. No religion is discriminated. People have right to freedom of religion, to follow or not follow any religion.

⁹ The story of Hồ Chí Minh. Thanh Liêm Publishing House, June, 1946

While the French colonialists based on Catholicism to resist Vietnamese revolution and applied the policy on division of non Catholics and Catholics to weaken Vietnamese nation, Hồ Chí Minh gave prominence to line of uniting non –Catholics and Catholics. This line was historical inheritance, It based on real condition at that time . This line was drawn from the negative lesson of Catholic forbidden policy of the Nguyễn. Under the leadership of our Party, Viet Minh front gathered many dignitaries, monks, believers in the war of resistance against the French colonialists

Because of many reasons the war of resistance against the French colonialists won victory,. One of many reasons was that our Party and State united and tolerated religions.

In 1954, The North was liberated completely and moved on Socialism. By realizing the importance of religion and the activities of reactionaries who enticed and compelled more ten thousands of Catholics to emigrate to the South, National Assembly compiled decree on religion. This ordinance showed the view of Vietnamese State on religion, at the same time it determined the articles regarding religious affairs in revolutionary condition. After preparing President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam promulgated Decree on *Religion Problem* (Decree on short). The view of Vietnamese State to religions were presented in articles 1,13, 14, 15

Article 1: The Government guarantees the right to freedom of belief and freedom of worship of its citizens. No one is permitted to violate this right. Each Vietnamese has right to follow or not to follow any religion.

Article 13. The administration does not interfere internal affairs of religion. As for Catholicism, the relation between Vietnamese church with Roma Holy See is internal problem of Catholicism.

Article 14- Religion organizations must abide by the Constitutions of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam like other organizations of people.

Article 15 Freedom of religion and worship is right of people. The democratic republic government always respects this right and helps people to carry out this right.

These above articles of Decree show that Vietnam is secular state although our state does not declare that Vietnamese State follows the model of secular state. Firstly, State does not interfere internal affairs of religion. Religious affairs are resolved by religion. Secondly, State

respects and guarantees the right to freedom of belief and religion of people.

When studying deeply Decree we admire it, in particular articles 1, 13, 14 and 15. Decree used phrase *nhân dân* (people) instead of the phrase *công dân* (citizen) to promulgate the right to freedom of religion. It was the first time Decree gave *tổ chức tôn giáo* (religious organization) concept with *tôn giáo* (religion) concept.

In 1986 Vietnamese Communist Party through the 6th Congress of Communist Party began to implement policy of Reform and Renewal (Đổi mới) and integrate into the world. Basing on this spirit, the Politburo that had been elected from the 6th Congress of Communist Party promulgated Resolution no 24 - NQ/TW on “*Strengthening Religious Affairs in the New Situation*” on 16 October, 1990. Beside three new recognizable views of religion¹⁰, Resolution opened new direction to allow and recognize religious activities.

This direction made Vietnamese religion varied and met the need of believers who only carried out religious activities at home because of many different reasons. This direction met the need of religions and religious organizations which were not recognized by the laws.

On 14 November, 1992 the Central Party Secretariat promulgated Announcement no 34/TB-TW on *Affairs Regarding Caodaism in New Situation*. From July, 1995 Vietnamese State recognized 10 Caodai sects. The Ante-Creation church was recognized firstly (July 1995).Caodaism is a religion. But Caodaism has many sects (churches), it means that this religion has many independent sects. When we recognize this religion we should recognize its organizations. Like that Protestantism in Vietnam has many sects (churches). When speaking of Protestantism we have to speak of Protestant churches. Vietnamese State examines and recognizes Protestant churches step by step. Firstly Vietnamese State recognized the Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region) on 8th January, 2001 and the Vietnam Protestant Church (Northern region). The 32nd Congress the Vietnamese General Confederation of Evangelical Churches holds on 1st December, 2004

The recognition of religion was concretized and detailed in *Ordinance on Belief and Religion* (Ordinance –in short) (18th June, 2004). It is the

¹⁰ Three views are: Religion is the problem existing long time. Belief and Religion are spiritual needs of a part of people. Religious ethnic is in accordance with the cause of building new society

first time, the concept of *religious organization* is presented clearly and concretely in article 3 section 3 of Ordinance. “ *Religious organization means a grouping of people who believes in one and the same system of religious dogmas, canon laws and religious rites which is organized according to a give structure recognized by the State.* It is noted that before Ordinance, in the documents on religion there was not concept of *religious organization*. Resolution no 40/NQ-TW deals with religious sects. It is new feature in the religious policy of Vietnamese State. Before, documents dealt with *religion and sects afterward*. In Ordinance there is a chapter on *religious organizations and religious activities*

Chapter III ***Religious organizations and religious activities***

Article 16 of this chapter defines the conditions for religious organizations to be recognized; the competence on recognition of religious organizations

On 1st march, 2005 Government Decree no 22/2005/NĐ-CP: *on guidance for implementation of a number of Articles of the Ordinance on Belief and Religion* (Decree- in short) was signed by Prime Minister Phan Văn Khải. The article 8 of Decree: Recognition of religious organizations defines clearly a religious organization which wants to be recognized has to submit necessary texts to the competent State Body. Decree defines concretely what duration of stable religious operation is. Decree written that “*The duration of stable religious operation shall be counted from the date of the organization’s registration for activity and shall be stipulated as follows:*

- *20 years for organization established in Vietnam after the effective date of the Ordinance on Belief and Religion.*
- *One year for organizations established in Vietnam 20 or more years before the effective date of the Ordinance on Belief and Religion.*
- *For organizations established in Vietnam less than 20 years by the effective date of the Ordinance on Belief and Religion , the duration of stable religious activity shall be composed of the time from the organization’s establishment to the effective date of the ordinance on Belief and Religion, plus the time from the organization’s registration to the achievement of 20 years.”*

The above regulations initiate Vietnamese State to recognize religions and religious organizations step by step. Before Ordinance in Vietnam

there were 15 religious organizations to be recognized. At present in Vietnamese State there are 12 religions and 32 religious organizations to be recognized. The other organizations are being examined to recognize.

The diversity of religion in Vietnam- some features

The religious space in Vietnam becomes diversiform

Before Vietnam carried out policy of Reform and Renewal (*đổi mới*), even before the effective date of the Ordinance, when speaking of the religious space we often think that: Northern delta, the cradle of Vietnamese culture is area of traditional religions and Buddhism is main religion. There are some Catholic regions in coastal areas as Hải Phòng city, Thái Bình, Nam Định, Ninh Bình province. One of many Buddhist centers is in Huế and its surroundings. Chăm Muslims live in Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận provinces who are known as the Old Islamic Group and Brahmanism. In Hồ Chí Minh city and Biên Hòa there are many people who follow different religions as Buddhism, Catholicism and worship of ancestor. The Khmers in Southern delta follow Khmer Theravada Buddhism. Western region of the South is space of Hòa Hảo Buddhism. Tây Ninh province is space of Caodaism. In central Highlands, some ethnic groups as Banar, Koho, Ede peoples follow Catholicism, some groups follow Protestantism, others follow polytheistic belief. In Northern mountainous provinces, a small group of the Daos in Lạng Sơn follows Protestantism; a small group of the Mongs in Yên Bái, Lào Cai follows Catholicism; most of other ethnic groups follow polytheistic belief.

At present, religious space changes much. Protestantism develops in ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands. It also develops in Mong and Dao groups in the Northern mountainous region. From before *đổi mới* to 1980, ethnic people who followed Protestantism made up 1/5 total Protestant believers in the whole country. At present (according to uncompleted statistic) ethnic people who followed Protestantism make up 2/3 total Protestant believers in the whole country. The development of Protestant space in ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands and the Northern mountainous region is the salient character

The religious space of Chăms people in Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận has changed little when a group of the Chăms follows Catholicism and a group of Ba ni people follows new Islam (It is called orthodox Islam. It is connected with present Islam).

Some Khmer people follow Protestantism so the religious space of the Khmers has little change

When State recognized religions as Four Debts for Gratitude, Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, The Pure Land Buddhist Home Practice Association, Baha'i, Phật đường Nam tông Minh Sư đạo, Minh lý đạo Tam tông miền, the religious space in the South was separated clearly with two parts: inhabitants- believers of the above religions. We use the word “clearly” because believers of these above religions only practiced their religious activities at home before their religions were recognized.

The space of Caodaism is divided by its churches (organizations), 10 sects were recognized. Beside these sects there are other sects. Fundamentally, each sect has its own space but spaces can be connected with each other. Although Caodaism develops in the Central part and the North but space of Caodaism is in the South delta

Vietnamese Religions are in harmony

From a long time Vietnamese religions have lived harmoniously except two above contrary events. Vietnamese religions either traditional religions or new religions have lived harmoniously. In Vietnam there is no discrimination based on belief or religion. The conflicts between religions have not occurred in Vietnam. In particular , in Vietnam there is not religious war.

In the regions there are many different religions, believers of religions often attend at celebrations of each other.

After investigating in Ninh Bình, Nam Định, Thái Bình provinces we find that people who follow Buddhism in the same village of Catholics help Catholics to build their church. Catholics help Buddhist followers to build or repair pagodas, communal house.

Before the Second Vatican Council (1962- 1965) Church only allowed Catholics got married to Catholics. At present the number of Catholics who get married to non-Catholics is increasing more and more. Because many Catholics leave their villages to do their job in distant areas so

they get married no Catholics. At present this problem becomes commonly.

Nowadays, Catholics take part in traditional festivals in their villages. They also present a stick of incense to the dead.

In a religion there are many religious organizations, these organizations are living in harmony. Because these organizations have the same subject for worshipping so they exchange relations and sympathize with each other. Islamic countries have not this harmony.

Vietnamese religions have national cultural integration

Buddhism was brought to Vietnam about two thousand years ago. It integrated into Vietnamese culture. Many works deal with its integration. Ba ni, Brahmanism not only integrated into the culture of Chẵm people, their cultures are also changed by the Chẵms' culture. It is difficult for the Khmers to distinguish the culture of Khmer people from the culture of Theravada Buddhism.

Caodaism is special religion in the South. It not only integrates into traditional culture but also selects quintessence of other religions to found its dogma.

Religions in the South as Caodaism, Hòa Hảo Buddhism, the Four Debts of Gratitude, Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, the Pure land Buddhist Home – Practice Association have features of Southern culture as well as Vietnamese traditional culture.

Catholicism is integrating into national culture. Before the Second Vatican Council , the integration based on the way that believers received and adopted. After the Second Vatican Council, and the Common letter 1980 of Episcopal Conference of Vietnam, Catholic Church in Vietnam actively integrated Christian culture into Vietnamese traditional culture. This problem was determined again when Vietnamese Catholic Church celebrated Holy Year 2010, the Congress of Lord people 2010 and Common Letter 2010.

Protestantism has not come in contact with Vietnamese traditional culture yet. When Protestantism develops in ethnic minorities, it abolishes almost traditional culture of these ethnic minorities.

When integrating into national culture religions in Vietnam except Protestantism have the same feature- to respect *đạo hiếu* (filial piety). They direct to the worship of Hùng king, the worship of persons who deserved well of village and country and the worship of ancestor. These

worships are called generally *Worship of Ancestor*. The Worship of Ancestor is a part of dogma of religions. After the Second Vatican Council, Catholics are allowed to worship ancestor. According to social investigation we find that 100% Vietnamese Catholics carry out to worship ancestor. The worship of ancestor belongs to both spiritual life and cultural life of nation. The worship of ancestor was founded and preserved thousands of years ago. So the worship of ancestor is common standard for Vietnamese religions meeting each other. Naturally each religion carries out the worship of ancestor differently from each other on dogma and ritual practice.

Vietnamese religions realize motto “Living a good life and enjoying a lofty religion”

Living a good life and enjoying a lofty religion is not slogan or outside pressure but an orientation of each religion. Because religions in Vietnam recognize that any religion which would like to exist strongly and develops not only carries out the regulations of custom and law but also lives in normal life. It means that the spiritual and the temporal have to help each other in building nation. The history proved that Vietnamese people only accept any religion which is useful for life. Vietnamese people only accept any religion which goes with nation and builds nation.

For religious believers in Vietnam *living a good life and enjoying a lofty religion* is their duty.

Religions in Vietnam in particular Buddhism, Catholicism, Caodaism, Hòa Hảo Buddhism, the Pure land Buddhist Home –Practice Association take part in social charitable works such as poverty –alleviation movement, protection of environment, free medical treatment, caring for the elderly and the homeless, orphan children; classroom of compassion. Believers of monotheistic religion, typically Catholics not only care for “Kingdom of God” but also the world.

With the motto *Living a good life and enjoying a lofty religion*, the leaders of religions have guideline and believers contribute to society according to their role and position. At present, believers in Vietnam try their best to carry out well the aim of the 9th Congress of Vietnamese

Communist Party: building Vietnam with wealthy people, powerful country, a democratic, just and advanced society.

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Diversity of religion and religious organizations were established long ago. Because of objective and subjective conditions Vietnamese culture is open culture. In Vietnam is multi religion and mulit-religious organization. Under the leadership of Vietnamese Communist Party and Vietnamese policy, the diversity of religions and religious organizations are continuing. This character is different from the Western states which follow monotheistic religion.

Although religions and religious organizations are diversiform in Vietnam but they have lived harmoniously. They have integrated into Vietnamese culture and carried out well orientation *living a good life and enjoying a lofty religion*