

Education and Role of Religions in History of Education in Vietnam

Nguyen Quang Hung¹, Nguyen Van Chinh¹

¹ University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.

Email: nguyenquanghung50@gmail.com

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Abstract: The ongoing debate over the current situation of education in Vietnam tends to argue that the present educational system with its vague goals has lost the orientation and is lack of “a guiding philosophy of education”. The authors of this paper join the discussion by indicating a historical perspective of the role of religions in the educational development in Vietnam. They deem that major religions such as Buddhism and Confucianism used to play a role as the core and foundation for the national education system. The French did impart a European-style educational system attached closely to the Christian ethics, while still respecting the traditional education. The authors, while affirming the importance of building a secular state, suggest that the re-engagement of religions will be significant in mobilising all social resources for the development of education, taking advantage of the resources and fine ethical values of religions.

Keywords: Education, religion, value, ethics, cultural resources.

Subject classification: Religious studies

1. Introduction

Looking for causes of the current crisis of education in Vietnam, Professor Hoang Tuy, who has devoted his whole life to the cause of education, gave frank comments: “Education is getting gradually disoriented; it is unclear who and what education is for”. He pointed out that the moral deterioration in Vietnamese schools was “a disaster of education”, as the schools did not help students in achieving honesty and creativity” [25]. Agreeing with his opinion, many educational experts have

argued that “there is not a correct educational philosophy that highly appreciates the sense of humanity and the [proper] citizens’ lifestyle” in Vietnam; and consequently, “it is not an education built for the sake of man and its products therefore cannot be men of virtue” [21]. Some think that education of personality for students has not been paid sufficient attention to in Vietnamese schools, which is a failure of the education because “personality, from a large perspective, is the foundation for all nations and education is

an environment for personality formation. Neither sciences nor arts will be created, if there is no personality” [8]. Minister of Education and Training Phung Xuan Nha, has recently emphasised such a view, arguing that the goal of education was not to grant certificates/diplomas, but it was a long process targeting at human development and for the sake of man” [22].

In this paper, we start with the observation that religious dogmas always contain moral contents, including values, standards and social ideals. Religions bring a set of values to life, although those values may be rejected or accepted as the spiritual and moral standards in some society. In the current social context in Vietnam, the participation of religious values in the educational system will not only improve the citizen education, but also enhance the cultural diversification by handing over religious values and ethics to the subsequent generations.

Taking the approach of a historical perspective, we deem that religions played an extremely important role in education in Vietnam for centuries in history. Promoted during the colonial period, it gradually faded afterwards. The comeback of religions to participate again in the national educational system is needed, though it is not the only measure to make the country’s national education overcome the crisis.

2. Religions in the traditional educational system in Vietnam

Looking back at the history, one can easily realise that religions did play a great role in the Vietnamese traditional educational

system. Under the Ly and Tran dynasties (from the 11th to the 15th century), Buddhism was considered the national religion. Pagodas were used as cultural and educational centres in the country. Ly Cong Uan (974-1028), the founder of the Ly dynasty, himself was raised and educated by Monk Van Hanh (938-1018) in a pagoda. Other Buddhist monks such as Khuong Viet (933-1011), Phap Loa (1284-1330) and Huyen Quang (1254-1334) were highly influential figures in the royal court, often consulted by the king regarding national important affairs. In 1076, the Imperial Academy (*Quốc Tử Giám*) was built, becoming one of the earliest universities in Southeast Asia. Later on, in 1253, the National Academy (*Quốc Học Viện*) was established. Both King Tran Thai Tong (1218-1227) and King Tran Nhan Tong (1258-1308) became well-known Buddha Emperors. Tran Nhan Tong founded the Yen Tu Ivory Bamboo Forest (*Trúc Lâm Yên Tử*), a school of Zen, creating the identity of Buddhism in Vietnam and making it different from Buddhism in other regional countries, including China. It was the very period when legends of the origin of Vietnamese people and civilisation began to emerge, containing both historical and mythological elements. Since the 15th century, the Confucian system of competition-examinations became the embodiment of the Vietnamese educational system in the pre-colonial period. In 1483, King Le Thanh Tong (1442-1497) decided to expand the Great Learning House (*Nhà Thái Học*) and built a new house for storing documents/records (*Nhà Bí thư*) which is viewed as the first archive in

Vietnam. In 1734, Lord Trinh Tac (1606-1682) gave the order to make woodblocks for book-printing and, consequently, Vietnam no longer depended on books purchased from China. In 1803, the National School (*Quốc học*) was established by the Nguyen dynasty. By the last examination held in 1919, the Confucian system of competition-examinations had produced in total hundreds of *Tiến sĩ* (進士 – successful candidates at the Court exam), including great scholars such as Nguyen Binh Khiem (1491-1585), Nguyen Trai (1380-1442), Ngo Thi Nham (1746-1583), Le Quy Don (1726-1784), Nguyen Du (1766-1820), Phan Boi Chau (1867-1940) and Phan Chu Trinh (1872-1926)... They all were products of the Confucian educational system, who contributed significantly to making Vietnam's long history of culture. Le Thanh Tong and Minh Mang (1791-1841) were kings of great learning, and also great thinkers of the nation. "In the ancient East Asia, Minh Mang was perhaps the first person who realised that the traditional system of competition-examinations could not equip the societies of China and Vietnam with the power to cope with European military powers" [17].

Obviously, throughout thousands of years in history, Vietnam's education was a traditionally religion-based education, specifically the Buddhist and Confucian education. As regards the traditional Confucian school, some particular characteristics can be enumerated as below: "The establishment and organisation of schools/classes in villages were voluntarily done by local people. They were mainly private classes held by

Confucian teachers in private houses. There were a great number of such classes. Some schools/classes became well-known, mostly owing to the reputation of the teachers or the attainments of the students rather than the quality of organisation or discipline. In the past, a so-called school merely consisted of only one classroom, in which students of various levels and different generations were taught together by one teacher. The teacher himself made decisions on the timetable, the learning content and the teaching methods. The learning content depended mainly on the requirements of examinations. The length of study was not regulated specifically and the content was not divided into different subjects" [5, pp.71-72].

Besides, the behavioural principle of "venerating teachers and morality" was set up by the Confucian education. Students did not have to pay fees in instalments after each month or each semester. Instead, on the occasion of Tet holiday, depending on the financial condition of the family, they gave something as a gift to the teacher, who they viewed as a spiritual father. After attaining success at the exams, students still kept visiting and giving gifts with gratitude to the teacher annually. Whenever parents or parents-in-law of the teacher passed away, they had to contribute some money to the "classmates' fund" to express the condolences at the funerals. When the teacher passed away, all students, both those who were studying and those who no longer studied at the school, had to go into mourning for him. "No matter how poor a student was, he had to [borrow money to] contribute to the "classmates' fund" managed by the class

monitor. Those who avoided making the contribution would not be forgiven, as stipulated by the traditional and social ethics (...). In the past, the tuition was not costly, but the relationship between teachers and students was very close, resulting also in students making such contributions. Ultimately, the relationship bore a very deep sense of affection and gratitude” [8, p.69].

From the perspective of religious studies, Confucianism is probably not completely a religion in the true sense of the word, but its nature bears all religious characteristics. The educational content and curricula were merely concerned with the classics of Confucius as well as works of his students and subsequent scholars such as *Sishu* (四書 – Four Books) and *Wujing* (五經 – Five Classics). Those works mainly focused on education of morality and the correctness of social relationships. Unlike the Western education, the Confucian education did not aim at improving the intellectual standards of the common people or enhancing scientific knowledge of learners so as to produce a social class of intellectuals with independent and creative thoughts. Its major goal was instead to train mandarins (officials) for the governmental apparatus. Learners were not, however, equipped with knowledge of law or the administrative apparatus. Prior to the colonial period, therefore, the education in both State-run and private schools in Vietnam basically remained a traditionally religious education. While the Western intellectuals pursued independent thoughts and scientific discoveries, Confucian scholars always considered the loyalty to the king the most important

virtue. In the context of a monarchic government, in which Confucianism was viewed as the national religion and the theocracy was closely attached to the state, the whole apparatus of officials was built on the basis of the Confucian political - ethical theory. Thus, it is undeniable that the Vietnamese traditional education was imbued with religious characteristics; or, it is possible to say that it was a religious education in essence.

3. Religions in Vietnamese educational system in the colonial time

Just like the medieval education in Europe, the traditional education deeply imbued with religious characteristics in Vietnam did not lay emphasis in scientific development. The Confucian society mainly depended on agricultural production and the craft industry. It was a self-sufficient economy that did not require scientific development. This explains why sciences remained undeveloped in Vietnam and many other Southeast Asian countries in the pre-colonial time. Given the great challenges in the 19th century, the religion-based education was getting increasingly inadequate for the purpose of helping the countries modernise themselves and cope with threats from the West.

Together with the colonial policy on building a secular state, separating the government from religious organisations, Vietnamese modern education was initiated in the late decades of the 19th century via the introduction of the Western ideologies, which were accompanied by Western cultures and sciences. Different

from the traditional education, in which the Confucian education played an outstanding role, the modern education in the colonial time heightened the educational role of Christianity, especially Catholicism that was introduced in Vietnam in the 16th century. The religion experienced ups and downs and was sometimes prohibited. It was not until 1862 that the missionary work was legally accepted to be carried out in Vietnam. Yet, the contribution made by the Christian community towards education and knowledge enhancement in Vietnam is worth being considered further. The country's first newspaper, issued in 1862, was Gia Dinh newspaper (Vietnamese: *Gia định báo*), the editor-in-chief of which was Paulus Huynh Tinh Cua, a well-known Catholic intellectual. It was the Catholic Church that set up the Tan Dinh printing-house in 1865, to publish the religious books. Quy Nhon printing-house was then established by the Church in 1904. The weekly "*Semaine Religieuse*" (*Nam Kỳ địa phận*), the first Catholic newspaper in Vietnam, was issued in 1908. It can be said that by early the 20th century, Vietnam had had its press industry, which included the imprint of the Catholic Church with dozens of newspapers and journals as well as the pool of many well-known Catholic intellectuals and journalists.

In regard to the school education, it is easy to realise the significant contribution made by religious schools. There were two types of schools during the colonial period. The first one consisted of the schools established by the Catholic Church or run by Catholic intellectuals. Most of the schools were private or semi-public. As

soon as the French occupied Saigon, following Bishop Paul-François Puginier's advice, in 1861 the French Admiral Léonard Charner established the High School of Adran (French: *Collège d'Adran*), which was then administered by the missionary priest Yves-Marie Croc [the Vietnamese called him "Cha Thu"]. It belonged to the Brethren of the Christian Schools (*Frères des Écoles Chrésiennes*) and had the aim to train interpreters for the French expeditionary army, and secretaries for the colonial administrative apparatus. The whole funding for the school operations and its students was provided by the Cochinchinese colonial government. That was the first school where French people were taught to speak Vietnamese. "It is a French school funded by the French government, but also an initiative of a missionary priest. Learning French there now are over 100 local students, who will hold important positions among their own compatriots. They are brought up and educated under the affectionate eye of the holy religion. We have the right to expect that those young people will work, in line with their capacities, as our aids in preaching the Gospel." (Louis Lefebvre, 1861, archives). Starting as a Franco-Vietnamese primary school, the *Collège d'Adran* was quickly developed into an interpreter training school.

In 1873, the colonial government established a school for trainees to work the government (French: *Collège des Stagiaires*) administered by Truong Vinh Ky, a well-known Catholic intellectual. All the first schools in the Franco-Vietnamese educational system, especially those opened in Cochinchina in the later decades

of the 19th century, were established and run by the Catholic Church. Unlike the traditional schools, where Chinese characters were used, French and the Vietnamese alphabet (*chữ Quốc ngữ*, lit. national language script) were used as the official language at the schools.

As regards the role of Catholicism in education, it is necessary to mention the “*Institution Taberd*”), a school named after Bishop Jean-Louis Taberd (1794-1840), who co-authored the “*Dictionarium Annamitico-Latinum*” (“Annamese - Latin Dictionary”) and the Map of the Empire of Annam (Vietnamese: *An Nam đại quốc họa đồ*; Latin: *Tabula Geographica Imperii Anamitici*), which identified the Paracels (Vietnamese: *Hoàng Sa*) as part of Vietnam. The school was established by Priest Henri de Kerlan in 1874, being the first Catholic school in Cochinchina. Its initial purpose was to provide education to French children. As from 1889, it was run by the members of the Institute of the Brethren of Christian Schools (French: *Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes*). After 1954, it was developed into a network covering many provinces in South Vietnam. Later on, the school was administered by the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris (French: *Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris*). Though being a private school, it did gain support from the colonial government, e.g. being provided with a campus of 6,300 m² next to the Notre-Dame Cathedral Basilica of Saigon. At that time, the school was supervised by Priest Joubert and the colonial government also granted scholarships to students at the school.

In 1896, Hue National School (Vietnamese: *Quốc học Huế*), the precursor of Hue University (Vietnamese: *Viện Đại học Huế*), was established in pursuant to a decision signed by Paul Armand Rousseau, Governor-General of French Indochina. The principal of the school was Ngo Dinh Kha, a well-known Catholic high-ranking mandarin of the feudal dynasty. In 1925, in Saigon, the Governor-General of French Indochina established the Cochinchina Secondary School (French: *Collège de Cochinchine*) named after Pétrus Truong Vinh Ky, a great Catholic intellectual and the author of many works on national literature and culture. Graduates of the school were awarded with baccalaureates and subsequently could take the entrance exams to Indochina University as well as other universities in France. Initially, the school was under the administration of the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris, but it was then run by the Brethren of Christian Schools (also known as the De La Salle Brethren). Its students consisted of both Catholic and non-Catholic ones. By the early 20th century, the school was comprised of both primary and secondary education. After graduating from the school, students received baccalaureates.

Of Catholic schools in Vietnam at that time, one cannot fail to mention the High School of Pellerin (*Collège d’Pellerin*) established in Hue City. (It was named after a bishop who played a significant role in persuading the French government to invade Vietnam. Thus, he was a historical figure of high controversy in Vietnam.) The school provided the baccalaureate training, managed by Catholic sects, and included primary, junior and senior

secondary levels. There was also a system of parish schools (*Écoles paroissiales*), including private schools and those registered with the state to teach catechism while also providing primary and secondary education. Most of the schools provided only elementary education, with some very few of them providing primary education. Moreover, a number of parishes could not establish such a school due to their conditions. In the context that the rate

of illiteracy was very high, however, the schools made major contributions towards the elimination of illiteracy among both Catholic and non-Catholic children, irrespectively of their gender. Teachers at the schools were seminarians who were studying major seminaries. In addition to catechism that Catholic children were taught, all the students were taught how to read and write, elementary mathematics and Chinese characters.

Table 1: Quantity of Schools and Students in the Parishes during the Colonial Period [1, p.352]

Year	Qty of parishes	Qty of schools	Qty of students
1885	37	83	4,008
1891	38	127	5,336
1897	19	117	5,346
1902	19	155	7,913
1910	19	135	6,461
1911	19	146	6,967
1914	19	129	7,551
1916	19	123	7,459
1918	19	129	7,643
1919	19	135	8,113

The schools founded by the colonial government belonged to the educational system of the secular state. They played a major role in Vietnamese modern education in the colonial and post-colonial periods. Talking about the first major schools under the administration of the colonial government, one certainly needs to mention Chasseloup-Laubat High School (*Collège Chasseloup Laubat*) established in Saigon, named after the French Minister of the Navy and of the Colonies. The school programme covered both primary and

secondary education, and its graduates were given with baccalaureates.

Governor-General Paul Bert (1833-1886) was one of those who initiated the colonial education, which, on the one hand, continued the Confucian traditional education among Vietnamese people, and was, on the other hand, gradually adding with the Western scientific knowledge. He set up the Department of Franco-Annam Education Inspection (*Inspection de l'Enseignement Franco-Indigene*) and the Tonkin Academy (*Académie Tonkinoise*),

of which he himself held the position of Chairman, for the main purpose of doing research of and collecting local cultural values to “introduce the modern and progressive scientific knowledge of the civilisation, as well as the life of European people by the translation into and publication of the book in the Annamese language” [12].

Although the subsequent governors-general of Indochina pursued their own policies on education, they all basically advocated building a secular educational system, while keeping certain cooperation with religious organisations.

“We must be very cautious so as not to break the mentality of the native [Annamese] people, which has served as the ethical standards for their existence. The principles they have inherently preserved at home, such as the respect towards the parents and the compliance with the community’s regulations, should be included in books to be used for teaching them. When they read the first words, they immediately start learning the basic principles of Confucianism. What can we use to substitute if we discard the things?” [4, p.55].

Implementing the educational policy, some leaders and teachers had the intention of imposing the Western educational pattern to replace the traditional Vietnamese education. In the 1930s, the colonial government had to assign the primary education to the Royal Court in Hue, i.e. the Protectorate of Annam. Le Breton, principal of the Hue National Pedagogical College, admitted that it was completely wrong to impose the French methods on the Annamese character. Thus, the government

of Emperor Bao Dai issued a royal decree emphasising that “national education shall be arranged, based on the sustainability of the family and the traditional morality from the old generations” [3], [4, p.191]. This demonstrates that the French and the Bao Dai government did attach major importance to the education of ethics, especially that of Confucianism, instead of replacing it completely with the European education.

For religious schools and State-run schools, both private and public, the colonial period can be seen as the beginning of the heyday of Vietnamese modern education. One of the remarkable indicators for that is that the number of students had never been so high in the history of Vietnam as during the period. The Confucian education was gradually replaced by the modern education. The quantity of schools and students increased rapidly. In 1939, the number of students enrolling in primary, secondary and vocational schools, and colleges in Vietnam amounted to 287,037; while the country’s total population was just 20 million; i.e. accounting for 1.44% of the population [13, p.23]. Students at the schools were mainly Vietnamese children, with some of them being children of French officials, who were working for the colonial government at that time.

Classified by region, 6,880 Franco-Vietnamese schools (*Trường Pháp – Việt*; or *École Franco-Indigène*), including 6,367 public ones, were found in Tonkin in 1944. They included 35, both private and public, which were reserved for French students [4, p.211]. The majority of schools were still located in big cities such as Hanoi, Saigon and some others, but the

balance in education among regions partly improved, in comparison with the situation in the pre-colonial period, when schools were mainly located in Thang Long and Hue. It is also noticeable that “unlike the Confucian schools founded in a rather free manner [in terms of curricula], the Franco-Vietnamese ones were organised with the same teaching curricula across Indochina. This helps ensure the homogeneous teaching curricula and language used across the country. Especially, they also differ from the Confucian schools in the fact that Vietnamese women were accepted to enrol and were viewed equally to men.

At the school, students were not only equipped with knowledge, but also taught about essential issues in life. In addition to the target of becoming mandarins (governmental officials), students also went to school for the purpose of getting other jobs such as those of a technician, a tradesman, an office clerk, a medical doctor or a lawyer” [4, p.245].

From the 1930s to the time before the Second World War, the quantity of schools and students were increasing incessantly.

Table 2: Quantity of Schools and Students in 1936-1937 [11]

Type of school	Qty of schools	Qty of students
Full Elementary School (École Primaire de plein exercice)	401	121,201
Primary Elementary School (École Primaire Élémentaire)	2,322	155,938
Village school	2,530	123,609
Total	5,223	400,748

During the colonial and post-colonial periods, the contributions made by religious schools towards higher education were relatively modest. They only played some role in South Vietnam, after the country was divided into two parts following the 1954 Geneva Agreement. Of the public institutions of higher education, the only Catholic one, the director of which was Priest Cao Van Luan, was Hue University founded in 1957 in line with Decree No. 45/GD promulgated by Ngo Dinh Diem. The Hue entity consisted of various undergraduate schools, including: 1) the School of Arts that offered training

for the bachelor’s degrees in the Vietnamese, English, and French languages, philosophy, history, geography, and for the master’s degrees in Viet – Han (i.e. Chinese characters) study; 2) the School of Law that offered training on law for the bachelor’s degrees; 3) the School of Sciences that offered training for the bachelor’s degrees in mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology; 4) the School of Pedagogy that offered training for future teachers of primary and secondary schools; 5) the School of Medicine that offered training of future medical doctors. In addition, the Pontifical

College St. Pius X in Da Lat, which was directly under the administration of the Church, also taught social sciences and humanities, although it mainly focused on theology. The other religious universities were mostly private ones, such as Da Lat University, which belonged to Catholicism, Van Hanh and Minh Duc universities - Buddhism. Besides, we also need to mention Cao Dai University and Hoa Hao University, though these two had fewer students and lower training quality than the public universities.

State-run public institutions played a prominent role in higher education. Among them, the first higher education institutions founded during the colonial time was Hanoi College of Medicine (*École de Médecine de Hanoi*) established in 1902 under the administration of the Governor General of Indochina. On May 16, 1906, the Governor General of Indochina Paul Beau signed Decree No. 1514a on the establishment of the Indochina University (*Université Indochinoise*), giving birth to a French model of higher education in Indochina. This university composed of 5 member colleges as follows: 1. The College of Law and Administration (*École supérieure de Droit et Administration*); 2. The College of Sciences (*École supérieure des Sciences*); 3. The College of Medicine (*École supérieure de Médecine*). 4. The College of Civil Construction; 5. The College of Literature (*École supérieure des Lettres*).

In the field of education, the relationships of the colonial government with the Catholic Church and other religious organisations were generally

complicated, depending on the corresponding relationships in France. In fact, after the French Revolution in 1789, a disposition towards the abolition of the Catholic Church's influence emerged in the national educational system. In Indochina, there was also a period when the colonial government did not allow priests to teach at the public schools run by the State. Many Catholic schools initially got the financial assistance from the government, but the support was sometimes cut off and the Church had to handle the financial issues by itself. The law on the Separation of the Churches and the State (French: *Loi du 9 décembre 1905 concernant la séparation des Églises et de l'État*) was promulgated in 1905 in France. After many debates between the colonial government and the Catholic Church, however, it was decided not to implement the law in Indochina. In the context, on the one hand, the government and the church were just separated, and the former respected the latter's role of self-determination. On the other hand, the two sides did maintain certain cooperation in education. This was demonstrated clearly in the case of religious schools in both school and higher education, which enrolled both Catholic and non-Catholic students. The school curricula comprised not only religious dogmas and theology, but also many other disciplines of natural sciences, social sciences and humanities as well.

It is a fact that, during the colonial period the education in Vietnam was under major influence by the French education in all aspects such as the school apparatus, organisational structure, teaching content

and educational methods. The Vietnamese intellectuals with nationalist spirit were not completely satisfied with being “civilised” by the French. However, the colonial government started the modern education, in which Buddhist and Catholic schools constituted part of the national educational system. During the colonial period, the religious schools contributed significantly towards the education in Vietnam in terms of not only funding mobilisation and human resources, but also the development of the educational curricula that encouraged good deeds, and, especially, included moral standards and values for citizens.

4. Re-integration of religions into the national educational system

The above-described analysis shows that apart from Catholic nurseries and kindergartens, there were thousands of Catholic institutions at all levels, from primary to high education, including also some universities/academies, in North Vietnam before 1954 and in South Vietnam before 1975. The schools provided training for multiple students in various fields such as medicine, technicality, vocational training for the hearing- and vision-impaired, and there were also free schools for the poor. Their students came from all social backgrounds, and often included both Catholic and non-Catholic ones. After 1954, Catholic schools in North Vietnam were closed and taken by the State; whereas, in the South, they continued to make considerable contributions to the

national educational system. In 1962 and 1963, in addition to 48 hospitals, 58 orphanages and other charity centres, the Catholic Church administered 93 secondary schools with 60,000 students and 1,122 primary schools with nearly 235,000 students. By 1975, around 2,000 Catholic institutions at all levels, from the early childhood to higher education, had been closed in Vietnam. Some of them were Catholic universities such as Da Lat University, Saigon University and the Pontifical College of St. Pius X.

Analysing the role of the Catholic Church in the modern education in Vietnam, we can see that prior to 1975, semi-public and private religious schools, mainly Catholic ones (Protestant and Buddhist schools were much fewer in quantity and made much less contribution towards the national education), constituted a considerable part in the school education as well as the higher educational system under the colonial and Saigon governments. They accounted for a remarkable proportion, compared to the State-run schools, while Christian people made up less than 10% of the country population.

The influence of the Catholic Church, more broadly the Catholic intellectuals, on the Vietnamese education and society was much greater, indeed. The Catholic Church in Vietnam contributed significantly towards building a new Franco-Vietnamese intellectual elite acquiring the quintessence from the European education, specifically the French education, to apply in Vietnam. It helped the education in Vietnam develop towards modernity and become comparable to the most developed

countries in the region. First, one needs to mention the contribution made by members of the Society of Jesus (French: *La Compagnie de Jésus*) and the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris (French: *Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris*) during the pre-colonial period, such as Christoforo Borri, Alexandre de Rhodes, Francesco de Pina and Jean Louis Taberd... They created the *chữ Quốc ngữ* (lit. national language script) Romanised characters, made many writings on Vietnamese history and culture, and introduced the country to the world. Furthermore, a large number of disciplines in social sciences such as philosophy, anthropology, religious and cultural studies... were also initiated in Vietnam during the colonial time, owing to important contributions of Catholic intellectuals, namely: Nguyen Truong To, who was best known for the movement for ideological reform late in the 19th century; Pétrus Truong Vinh Ky, who was greatly credited with the development of Vietnamese literature and *chữ Quốc ngữ*; and, Paulus Huynh Tinh Cua, a Catholic intellectual and a journalist, who founded the first modern newspaper in Vietnamese. As regards the contribution of Catholic scholars in the 20th century, it is necessary to name Father Leopold Cadière (1869-1955), who published the quarterly journal "*Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Hué*" (Vietnamese: *Những người bạn của cố đô Hué*) in 1914. He was a missionary in the Saint Sulpice Seminary of Hue (French: *Séminaire Saint-Sulpice de Hué*), who laid the foundation for religious studies in Vietnam. In philosophy, it is necessary to mention the contribution of Catholic scholars and priests such as Tran Thai

Dinh, Le Ton Nghiem and Luong Kim Dinh in Saigon before 1975.

In addition to the contribution towards building the modern education in Vietnam, the Catholic Church made considerable contributions towards changing the viewpoint on education. Education was no longer viewed as a task to be undertaken privately by a population group or a social stratum (the males, for example), which was previously considered obvious in the traditional education. Instead, the mass education was a demand as well as a task of all people in the society regardless of occupation, age, sex, ethnicity, religion and location etc.

The role played by the Catholic Church in Vietnam's history and society since the colonial period up to now is much greater than the proportion of Catholic people among the whole population in Vietnam. It is an undeniable fact. After 1954 in North Vietnam and 1975 in South Vietnam, however, the Catholic education was almost abolished. (...) Educational and social charity establishments were removed or no longer administered by the Catholic Church [1, p.165]. Religious education and Catholic participation in the national educational system were excluded. After the national independence was gained in 1945, the Catholic schools at all levels as well as universities administered by the Catholic Church or other religious organisations were nationalised and put under the administration of the Ministry of Higher Education and Vocational Training (now the Ministry of Education and Training).

The educational system in Vietnam has showed more and more shortcomings for

the last two decades in face of the challenges of international integration. Although the State has the guidelines on mobilising the participation of all social strata and encouraging organisations and individuals to take part in educational development and school establishment, religious organisations still encounter limitations. Vietnam has implemented more open religious policies since 1990, but the change in the viewpoint on the participation of religions in education has been with much hesitation. Religious organisations are allowed to open early childhood education schools only. The 2004 Ordinance on Beliefs and Religions has provided a legal framework, “encouraging and facilitating religious organisations that take part in forms of education, such as opening schools, nurseries and kindergartens (institutions of early childhood education); bringing up children who are under special conditions; assisting healthcare centres for the poor, the people with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDS, lepers, and mentally ill persons; and assisting the development of pre-school educational establishments and taking part in other activities for charity or humanitarian purposes in compliance with their own charters and the law” [21, Article 33.1]. However, the implementation of the ordinance is still bound by another legal document, which is the Law on Education with an article on non-preaching of religions in schools and other educational institutions, stipulating specifically: “No religions are to be preached nor religious rituals are to be conducted at schools or other educational institutions of the national educational system, of state agencies, political organisations, socio-political

organisations or the people’s armed forces” [2, Article 19].

Apart from the fact that preaching of religions in the national educational system is forbidden by the Law on Education, the teaching of fundamental knowledge directly or indirectly related to religions or beliefs had, for a long time before the law was promulgated, not been taught in Vietnamese schools. Seemingly, administrations at levels considered the teaching of basic knowledge of religions at school to be the preaching of religions. It is now unclear where Vietnam’s education is located in the “atlas of Asian education”. The problem is not only in the facts that none of Vietnamese universities is ranked among the 200 top universities in Asia, and the country has a high number of shortcomings in the educational curricula, with low quality of education and a low number of works published in internationally prestigious journals etc., but also that Vietnam encounters problems of school violence, the impasse in the policies and the degradation in the socio-cultural and ethical standards.

It is obviously not proper to blame all the causes of the current educational crisis in Vietnam entirely on the rejection of the role of religions. That would be an extreme approach. However, the rejection is one of the underlying causes making the educational system unable to attract the social resources, including highly-knowledgeable intellectuals in Vietnam and abroad, in a full manner. Among the four million Vietnamese people living overseas, around one-fourth are Catholic. Some of them are renowned scholars working in highly accredited universities

in Europe and North America. Besides, there is a large pool of Buddhist, Protestant, Cao Dai and Hoa Hao intellectuals living abroad, who will enthusiastically play an effective role in linking Vietnam's educational system with the most advanced educational ones in the world, if the government can win their hearts. What a pity, religions have had to "stand by the side of the Vietnamese society's cause of education" over the past 40 years, while private persons, even foreigners, have been allowed to establish schools, following the State's policy of mobilising social resources for education. "It is regrettable that the door of education remains closed to religious organisations in Vietnam: they are allowed to establish only private nurseries/kindergartens. Although the having made every effort to do what they are allowed so as to perform the mission to *enter into life*, e.g., opening *classes of compassion*, providing scholarships for poor children and those with disabilities, the Catholic Church, as a religious organisation, still has to stand by the side of the Vietnamese society's education. Since the Church does not have the right to participate, it has to play the role of an unwilling observer" [17].

However, some new sanguine signals have begun to emerge. Religious organisations are now allowed to undertake early childhood education, though it is just a modest improvement. By October 2014, religious organisations and individuals had founded 269 schools and 905 classes of early childhood education for 125,594 children, making up over 3% of all the children at preschool educational institutions nationwide. Most of the schools were opened by Catholic nuns, and

some others - by Buddhists (in Hue City) or Hoa Hao followers (in Long An and Kien Giang provinces). As regards the children in the institutions, a third are children of Catholicists, and the rest (two thirds) are of non-Catholic people. It is highly possible that, given the demands in the society, the government will accept gradually the role of religions in education.

In the early 2000s, the Vietnam Buddhist Academy (Vietnamese: *Học viện Phật giáo Việt Nam*) received funding from the Government for reconstruction and subsequently started to provide higher educational training with the participation of 281 students [24]. The Buddhist Academy in Ho Chi Minh City was also rebuilt to be more spacious and more beautiful. Since 2015, it has enrolled 1,117 monks and nuns on the regular courses of higher education and 1,286 on the courses of distance education [19]. In addition to the Buddhist academies that provide higher education for monks and nuns, there has been a new movement titled "going to the pagoda to study the [Buddhist] path" launched by young people that won active responses from university students in various big cities since the year 2000. At the weekend, about 300 young people often come to the well-known Phap Van pagoda in Hoang Mai district (Hanoi), to listen to the monks' preaching on Buddhism. The Buddhist spirit of engagement/integration into life (Vietnamese: *nhập thế*) is added into the sermons, aimed at attracting more attention from the youngsters and students, easing the stress and strains in life, and encouraging them to lead the life with self-reliance and ambitions for self-improvement. Every year, a specific theme

is set for the preaching. Some of the themes, such as “finding yourself” and “moments of being still to think of life”, are highly appreciated by the students, as they are helped to realise the significance of the truth, the goodness and the beauty in life. In addition to the weekend preaching, religious-life practising courses are held in pagodas for children as well. Parents seem to have realised very clearly the significant role of Buddhism in moral education and personality formation for their kids. They take the children to the pagoda to be educated by the monks [29].

In Tay Thien pagoda located in Tam Dao mountain (Vinh Phuc province), a five-day religious-life practising course is held every summer. Thousands of children can register to participate in the course so as to “find their selves” and learn about various ways to achieve happiness in life. Such summer courses are aimed at improving the awareness of the youth and helping them avoid the temptations of a life without ideals and dreams.

Most recently, in 2015, the Vietnamese Government allowed the Catholic Church to re-open the Catholic Academy (*Học viện Công giáo*) under the administration of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam (*Hội đồng Giám mục Việt Nam - CBCV*), which is directly managed by the Catholic Education Commission (*Ủy ban Giáo dục Công giáo*). The academy is located in Ho Chi Minh City, and Bishop Joseph Dinh Duc Dao, Chairman of the Catholic Education Commission, was appointed its first principal. The academy undertakes the tasks of providing Catholic priests, clergymen and believers with high-level training on theology and other

disciplines related to the activities of the Catholic Church. It runs training programmes for the bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees in theology and develops and expands local as well as international cooperation in carrying out scientific research projects to serve the training. In July 2016, the academy made the first enrolment of students for the 2016 – 2017 academic year. [23]

5. Conclusion

Since the 1990s, the Vietnamese State has implemented a more open policy on religions, but policymakers have not yet envisioned, in a clear manner, an appropriate approach towards religions in the model of a secular state, as, in their view, religions are still considered subjects of administration, but not part of the civil society.

Looking back at the history, one can see that religions used to be the pillar of the traditional educational system in Vietnam. It is the Buddhist and Catholic schools and the religious education in the colonial time that made contributions to providing the elite intellectuals for the country and building a lifestyle of elegance with elevated morality and ambitions among the young. In the modern educational system, the State seems to lay emphasis on the training of the contingent of cadres with scientific knowledge, enhancing the level of knowledge of the people, thus meeting the demand of industrialisation and modernisation. In the societies, where religious activities are “marginalised”,

however, the role played by religious values, norms and moral standards is not small at all.

For many countries in the world, the religious education is a compulsory subject at school. In the Nordic countries, for example, it is compulsory in all levels of education. In Asia, research conducted on early childhood education in Japan demonstrates that approx. 80% of children aged from 18 months to 6 years are brought up at schools closely related to Buddhism or Christianity, although the schools, funded by the religions, are not fully influenced by the faiths. Direct observations in the Buddhist and Christian nurseries show some differences between the two models in their teaching and learning methods. In the latter, the children's individual freedom is respected and their personality development is facilitated to be made in a free manner. The key activity there is having fun and teachers rarely intervene in the children's activities. As for the Buddhist-style schools, children are educated very early of difficulties in life and how to respond to the difficulties so as to overcome the situation together with others. The educational philosophy of the schools emphasises compassion and mercy, not only among human beings but also between humans and animals and plants. In addition, the schools also attach importance to physical exercises as part of their key activities, which is aimed at making pupils stay healthy and tolerant as in line with Buddhist examples [9].

We have cited some examples above in the hope of demonstrating that religious education is a popular feature in many national educational systems, since

children can be imbued very early with the philosophy of life and moral standards of the religions, which helps form their personality when they get mature. What children learn at school, such as the knowledge of ethics, views and a culture of good behaviours, will then be applied in life, exerting impacts on the society and people around them. The children's ways of thinking and behaving are formed via their participation in interactive activities. Based on the experience they have obtained, the children can give interpretations and set up norms for behaving in various situations. If we consider the most important goal of education to be human development and human-centric [27], the education of morality, norms, values and ways of behaving is especially significant. If the educational system focuses only on imparting knowledge, failing to pay attention to the above-mentioned issue, it will end in failure. Yet, it is needed to emphasise that religious education is not contradictory to the role of a secular state. Conversely, it not only brings fine values of religions to the education of future generations but also contributes to mobilising the abundant resources from the religions that take part in education.

Finally, we do not appeal for a religious educational system, on the contrary, we would like to affirm the importance of building a model of the secular state. However, the comeback of religions to the educational sector is very significant in mobilising the participation of all social strata in education, and makes use of the resources as well as fine ethical values of the religions in education. The

participation of religions in education not only diversifies the cultural resources and strengthens mutual understanding among cultures, but also helps take full advantage of the participation of the civil society in education, minimising the risks of conflicts among religions or between religions and the state.

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