

**PROMOTING RELIGIOUS RESOURCES IN DEVELOPING
THE COUNTRY
(In the Case of Vietnam)**

Abstract: *Religion is a multi-valued phenomenon. In addition to the historical, social and cultural values, Vietnamese religious researchers also confirm “religion is a social resource need to be promoted”. Until now, the leadership has initially agreed with the perception that “religion is a social resource”, at least from a conceptual perspective. Thus, the next issue to do is to promote religious resources in social life. However, it needs to identify what religious resources are, first. The contribution gets to religious resources in some respects as reference data, culture, economy, Geo-religion, and relationship among religious organizations.*

Keywords: *Development; Religious Resource; Vietnam.*

Introduction

Religion as a social entity always affects society in two ways: positivity and negativity. In that perspective, “living together in peace” and identifying the religious resources actively to bring into play and serve the course of building and developing the country has become the viewpoint of countries with different political institutions in dealing with the religion. The religious resource, however, is different in each different country and government. In one nation, the effect (positivity and negativity) of religion to society also is not the same in the divergent period. Thus, it needs to identify the religious resource and its reverses (if any) in Vietnam before talking about the direction of promoting religious resources in developing the country.

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Identifying a religious resource

There are many understanding ways of a religious resource. Nguyen Hong Duong thinks that after all the religious resource consists of the spiritual resource and the material one¹. The spiritual resources are as follows: 1) Confucianism and Buddhism's thought of "considering citizens first", "people's contribution easing", "the country of peace and flourishing; the people of well off and happy", "taking care of the poor", "considering punishments and extenuation" are followed in the direction and policy by the Communist Party of Vietnam; 2) Having a gentle lifestyle, improving being's spirit; 3) Lifestyle for others; 4) Traditional festivals - a resource promoting the national cultural identity; 5) Having a united strength, etc. On the material resource, the world religions in Vietnam are sealed in faith and life relationship, with the idea of the real life engagement that showed through such activities as charity, socio-culture works, and public service supply. Specially, religions give prominence to protecting the natural world and living closely to nature, etc.

Approaching the religious resource through reference data, relationships of religion, Geo-religion and analysing the function of the religion also bring to the same result. However, this approach allows to identify more clearly about the resource of each religion and religious organization in the different area and stages; at the same time, the promotion of religious resources sometimes requires some acceptance.

Approaching through reference data

If religion is acknowledged as a social entity, this entity will be quite large in Vietnam. According to 15 year statistics of implementing Resolution 25-NQ/TW by the 9th Centre Executive Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam on Religious Affairs (2003-2018), 27% of Vietnam population were religious followers, equivalent to 25.3 million people (as of June 2017)², showing Vietnam was one of the countries in the world having a large proportion of the religious population. If including the number of people who are sympathetic to Buddhism, this rate is up to 70-80%.

Religions grew rapidly in Vietnam over the past 15 years. If the number of followers in 2015 increased by 35% compared to 2003, the number of clergies and dignitaries increased by nearly 70%, the number of worshipping facilities increased by 33% at the same time. It is not easy for any social entity to achieve this growth. It predicts that religions continue developing in Vietnam.

Among 25.3 million followers, there are nearly 200 thousand of clergies and dignitaries (approximately 125 followers per clergy or dignitary). Those are the force leading followers both the spiritual life and the real life, and they are generally educated, well-trained theology, including a part with knowledge in such many fields as psychology, culture, economics, politics, communication skill, and so forth. Most clergies and dignitaries are considered as persons own deity authority which has no limit, no term, and is obeyed absolutely by followers. The adherence of believers to their leaders is often much more serious and self-discipline than the principle obeying of administrative hierarchy in other entities.

There are 50 religious training institutions in the whole country, providing the training course for doctrinal intermediate to theological master and doctor. This educational system is separate from the national education system. In other words, religious organizations in Vietnam are self-control in training and building their own theological doctrine. This self-control has been documented and allowed by law. This is very different from other social entities.

The obedience of believer and the almost absolute power of dignity gives religion the strength of an organized organization and the close association of its members that no institution has. The strength of the organized organization of some religions has been shown in fact in both positive and negative aspects, especially in the struggles against the French colonialists and the American imperialists. With Catholicism, Vietnam history recorded a role to promote the French colonialists to invade Vietnam by some Western missionaries, later there were some Vietnamese, but at the same time acknowledged the example “a good citizen, a good believer” “accompanying the nation”

of the majority of Catholics and Catholic dignitaries. With Protestantism, there is no denying the pro-American nature of Protestantism, but it cannot help to acknowledge the Vietnamese Protestantism still be patriotic and willing to condemn, even participates in the struggle against American imperialism like the Vietnamese Evangelical Church (Northern) from 1954 to 1975. With Buddhism, Buddhist contribution goes along with the history of national construction and defense, and throughout feudal dynasties to the war of resistance against the US to save the country with the peak symbol as the “immortal heart” of Thich Quang Duc Bodhisattva. In Cao Dai religion, although there was a time when Cao Dai directed the “private army” to fight against the Vietnamese communist, it was also Cao Dai that had “12 inter-religious schools to save the nation” organization, etc.

It is clear that approaching from entity aspect, religious resources are the strength of a part of the masses. This part is organized in separate religious institutions but united in solidarity and obedience. Religion in this case can be both a revolutionary force and a force that the revolution needs to overcome but not always with weapons and violence.

Approaching on cultural aspect

Discussing on the meaning of the culture, President Hồ Chí Minh wrote at the end of the book *Prison Notebook (Carnet de prison)* as “Because of survival as well as the purpose of life, human beings create and invent language, writing, ethics, law, science, religion, culture, art, tools for birth Daily activities of eating, wearing, staying and using methods. All of those creations and inventions mean culture”³. He has approached religion as a component of culture.

Back to history, Catholicism entered Vietnam in 153; Protestantism was spread in 1911. Both these religions deny ancestor worship - a beauty in the cultural tradition of Vietnamese people. From this perspective, only the negative influence of Catholicism and Protestantism can be seen. From the linguistic aspect - another element of culture, however, Catholic missionaries have been able to

create common script in Vietnam today. Although Protestantism has not allowed the followers venerating their ancestors with incense yet like Catholicism did after more than 400 years of mission in Vietnam, but they are quite clearly the intention to restore and use traditional instruments of the minorities in the religious life with the first success of the Central Highlands gongs. Protestantism has also sped up the elimination of some backward practices, and participated in creating cultural and civilized lifestyle in Mong people.

Unlike Catholicism or Protestantism, though as an imported religion Buddhism is always considered to contribute positively to the national culture. The contribution of Buddhism is so great that Buddhism is no longer a foreign religion for most Vietnamese people.

Looking at the endogenous religion, Caodaism shows the ability to integrate different cultures and beliefs of a religion. From Jesus to Shakyamuni Buddha; both saints and sages; both scientists to politicians, from the East to the West,... are worshiped by the founder of Caodaism.

Thus, not all religions go against the traditional culture of the nation, nor are any religions completely obstructing and denying national culture, on the contrary, more or less participating in enriching, refreshing, preserving and nurturing the beauty of national culture. This is the cultural source of religion. The beauty of national cultural identity will soon confirm its place in the hearts of religions whether they are imported or endogenous.

Economic approach

Central Resolution 5 by the Centre Executive Committee of Vietnam Communist Party (Term VIII) affirmed: Culture is both a spiritual foundation of society and a goal and a driving force for economic and social development. Religion as a component of culture inevitably has a certain influence on the development of the economy. The influence of economic stimulus or restraint depends on many factors, including the religious freedom. Pew Forum pointed out the religious freedom as a determinant element to economy as follows:

1) Religious freedom helps reduce corruption by promoting moral values. Corruption is one of the factors that strongly and negatively affects sustainable economic development. Both morality and religious ethic encourage and stimulate honest lifestyle, far from selfish and egoist in any form,... Therefore, religious freedom creates advantages for businessmen to incorporate religious values and moral teachings that making them more reliable and responsible partners into their business conduct and activities; economic co-operation will be more transparent.

2) Religious freedom positively contributes to the creation of peace by reducing stress, conflict related religion, and that is important for businesses. Where there is stability there will be many opportunities to invest and conduct normal and predictable business activities, especially in emerging markets and new markets.

3) Most religious activities at different levels have economic significance. Religious activities, from traveling to participating in religious activities, religious communication activities and organizing religious events to the construction of religious facilities,... arise supply-demand transactions. Therefore, if religious activities are free, it will increase economic transactions, raise demands, and create more jobs, etc. Thereby, the development of the local or national economic is promoted directly.

4) Religious freedom help to protect ecology. Environmental protection and ecological balance is a fundamental element of sustainable development. The doctrine of religions give prominence to the way of the responsible life between people and the living environment for future generations. When religious freedom is respected, religious morality will be promoted into life in general, production and business activities in particular, contributing to preventing the use of chemicals harmful to human health or environment and limiting the depletion of natural resources, as well as minimizing harmful waste for the environment.

Pew Forum's research results are one of many documents mentioning the role of economic promotion of religion. Although not

all research results are consistent with Vietnam, it is undeniable that much information in Pew Forum's research has been verified by religions in Vietnam. Spiritual tourism is a typical example of religion promoting economy, jobs and incomes (Bai Dinh Pagoda, Dai Nam tourist area, Huong Pagoda festival, etc.); Vietnam's policy of freedom of belief and religion has attracted the foreign investment (Korea, for example); products made by religious agencies are often easily trusted by the society (vegetarian food of Buddhism, Halal stamped products of Islam, Catholic wine,...). Bui Dinh Thanh⁴ discussed that the phenomena such as Phu Tay Ho, Ba Chua Kho, Tran Temple congested with people asking for fortune, borrowing,... were not simply a superstition phenomenon but also an economic connection. Also in this discussion, Bui Dinh Thanh presented the research results by J. Naisbitts and P. Aburdens on the success of socio-economic development of some countries and territories that was considered relevant to religion as follows: Hong Kong's success is a combination of Confucianism and American business practices; Thailand's success is due to know the middle way of Buddhism". L. Vandermesch, former Director of the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) in his work "Sinicization World" also highlights the factor of sinicization in the take-off of four dragons in East Asia and Southeast Asia (Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore)"⁵.

However, religion can also harm the business environment, cause economic losses, such as the violent demonstration conducted by a part of the parishioners and priests in Vinh Diocese in relation to marine environmental incidents (Formosa) recently.

Obviously, religion (a component of culture) has the ability to affect economic development directly and indirectly. Business culture reflects religious culture.

Approaching in terms of religious functions

Marxism - Leninism indicates that religion is a product of man reflecting human inability to natural phenomena and injustice in society that are impossible to explain, but religion is also how to reflect people's desire for a life without oppression. Therefore,

religion has the ability to link co-religionists, to ease the pain of those who are affectionate and to regulate human behavior with morality.

Accessing religion in this respect shows that religion is associated with human being. Men create religion and then force themselves into that very product and depend on it, under its control.

In economic development, men are the decisive factor. They are under the control of a religious doctrine, all of which are involved in the process of doing the persons' economy, rather than that of the community who believe in that religion. This was pointed out by Max Weber (1864-1920) in his work "Protestantism Ethics and Capitalism" (*Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*). Through a focus on studying the Puritan community, Max Weber pointed out that Protestant moral ideology (economical, meager, committed, working for the spirit of joy,...) is the roots of capitalism form. In other words, according to Max Weber, Protestant morality contributes to the form of capitalist production. This has not ended debate. Today, capitalism has surpassed the reproduction with Protestantism ethics and no longer needs religious fundamental roots. In fact, it has proved that the "Protestantism ethics" is not only unique role in the socio-economic development in the West. The spirit of Communism, the devoted labor education,... in the post-war Soviet Union's economic recovery is an evidence to this fact.

However, Max Weber's research results are still recognized because it is in a specific context, religion is likely to play an important role in economic development.

Once more, the reciprocal relationship between religion and economy is reinforced by the theoretical and practical basis from the functional aspect.

Geo-religious approach

Approaching on a geography, there are the following aspects:

- Endogenous religions - Foreign religions;
- Religion of ethnic minority areas;

- Religion in industrial parks and export processing zones;
- Religion in Vietnamese overseas;
- Religion of foreigners legally residing in Vietnam.

This approach shows that religion will have different strengths or resources in different regions and parts of the country. The promotion of religious resources must, therefore, be associated with the natural and social situation of each region and religion.

Approach under the perspective of relationship of religious organizations

Religion in Vietnam is largely derived from foreign countries. Catholicism came from France, currently in direct contact with the Vatican and with Catholic countries. Protestantism came from the United States, has multilateral relationship with all continents, countries and territories with Protestantism. Buddhism from China, India, is now a channel linking three Indochinese countries, then the countries of the Mekong sub-region. Vietnam Buddhism has been present in many countries around the world. Although Islam in Vietnam is small, it still is a part of Islam in the world, and it is still possible to bring Vietnamese products to the world through Halal brand, etc.

Reality of promoting religious resources in Vietnam

Regarding policies and laws

Promoting the good moral values of religions is the policy which was determined by the Communist Party and State of Vietnam quite early, starting from the Decree 234-SL (1955) by President Ho Chi Minh. This policy is followed by the Party's documents, the State's laws on religion, and recently the Directive N°. 18-CT/TW dated 10 Jan 2018 by the Politburo of Vietnam Communist Party on continuing to implement the Resolution N°. 25-NQ/TW by the Central Executive Committee of the 9th Congress on religious affairs in the new situation and the Law on Belief and Religion. However, before the Directive N°. 18-CT/TW (2018) and the Law on Belief and Religion, only the Decree 234-SL stipulated that religious organizations are allowed to open private schools and do business. Most of the other

documents mentioned this issue in general with phrases such as “encouraging”, “facilitating”, or “promoting good moral values of religions”,.. There is almost no progress in promoting religious resources from Decree N°. 26/1999/ND-CP dated April 19, 1999 on religious activities to the Ordinance on Beliefs and Religions (2004) - a detail of which follows:

Decree N°. 26/1999/ND-CP stipulated that “Religious activities for the benefit of the Fatherland and the people should be encouraged” (Article 4); “Religious dignitaries and clergies should be allowed to conduct economic, cultural and social activities like any other citizen”; “Dignitaries, clergies and religious organizations operate charities according to the State’s regulations. Charitable institutions sponsored by dignitaries, clergies, and religious organizations operate under the guidance of state authorities ” (Article 17).

The Ordinance on Beliefs, Religion also stopped in the regulation of “respect for cultural values and religious morality” (Article 5). Article 33, stipulated “# 1. The State should encourage and create conditions for religious organizations to participate in raising children with special circumstances; support health care centres for the poor, the disabled, people with HIV/AIDS, leprosy and mental diseases; support the development of preschool institutions and participate in other activities for humanitarian charitable purposes in accordance with the charter, regulations of religious organizations and the provisions of law. # 2. Dignitaries and clergies as citizens are encouraged by the State to organize the activities of education, health, and charity according to the law”.

It can be seen that before the Law on Belief and Religion, the provisions of the laws on belief, religion stop at allowing religious individuals to operate charitable activities as citizens (not with religious titles); For religious organizations, support or participation is only available.

To the Law on Religion and Religion (2018), together with affirming that a religious organization is a non-commercial legal entity (Article 30), Article 55 of the Law stipulates a religious

organization “to participate in educational and training, health, social protection, charity activities in accordance with relevant laws”. This is a progressive step from the previous regulations, but this provision is only open-ended because it depends on specialized laws.

Acting in practice

As of October 2014, according to statistics of the Vietnam Fatherland Front Central Committee, religions in Vietnam have participated in socializing education, health, social protection, and vocational training with impressive figures as follows:

1) In education, there were 39 provinces and cities with private preschool education institutions (of which 26 have school-level scale) established by religious individuals in the whole country with 269 preschools, 905 independent preschool groups and classes, accounting for 15.6% of the number of non-public preschools nationwide. Those institutions have contributed to educate 125,594 children, accounting for 3.06% of the total number of children going to preschool nationwide and accounting for 18.3% compared to with children to non-public preschools.

2) In health care, religious organizations and individuals have opened 185 health centre, of which 143 combined Oriental or Western medical centres, 42 Western medicine facilities (33 cabinets, 09 pharmacies) and 01 clinic. In 3 years, between 2011 and 2014, the total number of people receiving health service at those facilities was nearly 1.5 million. In particular, religious organizations have coordinated mobile examination and treatment, free medicine for more than 177 million turns.

3) In social protection. By 2014, there were 402 social protection centres, of which 233 were non-public (majority of religious organizations and individuals). Localities have many social protection centres of religions as Ho Chi Minh City, Binh Duong, Thua Thien-Hue, Khanh Hoa, Hanoi, Vinh Long, etc.

4) In vocational training. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam has a number of vocational institutions (schools and centers)

such as the Episcopal See of Xuan Loc diocese (Dong Nai) with Hoa Binh Vocational College (training 10 intermediate-level occupations according to the framework of the General Department of Vocational Training, the Ministry of Labor, Invalids - Social Affairs); The Don Bosco order (Lam Dong) has Tan Tien Vocational Intermediate School (the school has 06 faculties: mechanical engineering, dynamic engineering, electricity, information technology, garment, corporate finance; opening 4 vocational centers in other localities); Da Lat Lasal Vocational Center (under the Vietnam Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools); Da Lat Vinh Son Vocational Center (under the Vietnam Vincentians).

It can be seen that we have identified the viewpoint of promoting religious resources quite early, but lack of orientation and no specific solutions and regulations to promote and manage in reality.

Orientation to promote religious resources

1) Religious followers in Vietnam are in the majority of society and will increase in the future. Therefore, the first resource in religion that needs to be promoted is the combined power of the masses from different religions. The core goal of the work of religious affairs, approved by the Party Central Committee IX in Resolution No. 25-NQ / TW (2003), is making all different religious followers to unite together and with non-religious people in order to form a great unity of the whole people and to share a common effort to build the country.

2) Functional approach clearly shows that religions have the advantage to carry out charitable activities, social protection, the disabled, people with HIV, disaster victims, and raising capital to construct civil and welfare projects (bridges, roads, clean water wells, etc.). This is an available resource of all religions and religious organizations and can be classified as follows:

(i) Charitable activities and social protection.

(ii) To share and reduce the load for the state and to contribute to improving the quality of education, health and vocational training.

(iii) Preserving, nurturing, promoting and enriching the national culture; Building a business investment environment, a brand of goods (Halal products of Islam, for example); Forming morality and personality.

(3) The promotion of religious resources in economic development should be based on the national development objectives in each period to determine appropriate religious resources to be promoted; At the same time, it needs to be paid attention to promoting the strength of each religion and religious organization.

Religion in Vietnam is a community of different entities. Therefore, it should pay attention to the specific characteristic and ability of each religion and religious organization to exploit and promote. For example, for Catholicism, a religion of strict, obedient, closely ecclesiastical authority, and being a religion that used to have a certain distance from the nation, the union of followers, clergies in the national unity should be the highest goal. For Buddhism, seeking social consensus through Buddhism is an exploitable channel because Buddhists are nearly two times Catholics and far more than other religious followers, not to mention the number of people who have feelings for Buddhism. Buddhism has the ability to “call upon” large and fast sources for welfare projects. For Protestantism, the number of believers is scattered among many organizations, but it is necessary to see that Protestantism has a wide international relationship, especially close to the countries that are strategic partners of Vietnam such as the United States, South Korea, some European countries, etc. The international relationship of Protestantism in some cases are also religious resources. Halal product of Islam is approved by all Islamic countries and that is also a channel to bring Vietnamese goods to export to other countries. In order to the promotion of religious resources to be effective in time, it is necessary to take care of the friendly relationship between religion and the state, not to be “mercenary” for religion.

Some issues to note in promoting religious resources

1) It is necessary to recognize rightly and objectively the resources of religion, to avoid “making pink” for a “familiar religion”,

“blackening” to a prejudiced religion. Religion has strengths, but it is not absolute or highly overruled religious resources for them compared to other components and social forces; it is aware that religious resources are not an irreplaceable resource.

2) On policies, a legal corridor needs to be created so that religious organizations participate in fields as other legal entities without any preferential policies. the available religious resources are only opened and operated in the legal framework with the same criteria as other legal entities.

3) Regarding management, it is necessary to distinguish charitable activities, social protection, health, education and vocational training of religions from religious activities and it should separate these activities from the religious administrative; directing religious organizations to register their own legal entity (either a non-commercial legal entity or a commercial legal entity, depending on their purpose) to run operations on the fields that religions are capable of participating / supporting such as education, health, vocational training, social protection and business. For example, if a religious organization operates economic activities, it must establish its own legal entity and be governed by a common economic and tax policy and law as other economic entities. In this way, religious resources and both religious life and to facilitate management are brought into play. This method has been mentioned by President Ho Chi Minh in Decree 234 / SL in 1955 on religion.

4) Putting the issue of religious resources development in socio-economic growth, it is also to accept the fact that the presence and influence of religion in the social life will increase accordingly and compete with the services of the state and other social organizations.

5) Should avoid commercialization and politicization of religion in promoting religious resources.

6) Promoting religious resources does not mean to open-ended the negative effects of religion.

Conclusion

In fact, whether or not the State discusses the positive aspects of religion, promoting or not promoting the good moral values of religion, religion still participates and affects every aspect of social life daily. When the State questions the identification and promotion of religious resources, the development of religion will be a development oriented; religious resources will be concentrated to serve the nation's revolutionary cause.

However, promoting religious resources is not entirely simple. This issue needs unity of awareness, rather than the direction of the central government to concretize the viewpoint of promoting the religious resources in the Communist Party of Vietnam's socio-economic development into legal provisions from Civil, Economic and Land Law to education, health, vocational and charity, social protection activities, etc. Besides, it is necessary to complete the system of sanctions to ensure religious activities taking place within the legal framework, limiting the negative influence of religion, correcting awareness and dealing with religion in both a heavy prejudice and easy and emotional ways. /.

NOTES:

- 1 Nguyen Hong Duong (2015), "Resources of Religion and Belief - Some Epistemologies", *Journal of Religious Affairs* (Vietnamese), N°. 10, p. 9.
- 2 Synthesized from the Provinces and Cities 15 year Summary Report Implementing Resolution 25-NQ/TW. Before the Belief and Religion Ordinance was issued, Vietnam had 18 believers, 34,181 clergies, 78,913 dignitaries, and 20,929 worshipping facilities totally.
- 3 *Ho Chi Minh Collected Works*, Vol. 3, National Politics Pub., Hanoi, 2009, p. 431.
- 4 Bùi Đình Thanh, "Some thoughts on the methodology of studying religious sociology" in Dang Nghiem Van (chief author, 1998), *Theories on the Reality of Religion in Vietnam*, Social Sciences Pub., Hanoi, pp. 166-167. [*Những vấn đề lý luận về thực tiễn tôn giáo ở Việt Nam*, Nxb. Khoa học xã hội, Hà Nội].
- 5 Bùi Đình Thanh, "Some thoughts on the methodology of studying religious sociology" in Dang Nghiem Van (chief author, 1998), *Theories on the Reality of Religion in Vietnam*, *ibid*, p. 166.

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