

RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATION AND ITS EFFECT ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN VIETNAM

***Abstract:** Religions are really an integral part of the system under the perspective of considering religions are a part of the social system with their functions and roles, along with the concept of sustainable development. If religions negatively change with instabilities or recession, they will directly affect the whole system, weakening the system. On the other hand, if religions thrive, but it is less positive developments, they will make the system weakened. It can be said that religious changes affect the implementation of sustainable development strategies. In this article, the author indicates the role of religions and the effects of religious changes on sustainable development in Vietnam.*

***Keywords:** Transformation; religion; sustainable development; Vietnam.*

1. Some general theoretical perspectives on sustainable development

Sustainable development is a concept initiated by the United Nations in the 80s of the twentieth century. The concept of sustainable development was firstly mentioned in the report *Our Common Future* published in 1987. The World Commission on Environment and Development gave a definition of sustainable development as follows: “Sustainable development is the idea that human societies must live and meet their needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

* Institute for Religious Studies, VASS

Then, this concept was added and became the agenda in many countries, and applied in many fields. For each country or each region, specific factors have been integrated into the sustainable development strategy of each country. In short, sustainable development is handled in all aspects such as economy, politics, security, environment with specific criteria as follows:

- 1) Economic development increases GDP without harming the environment and natural resources for the future generation;
- 2) Development must not destabilize political security;
- 3) Economic development must be in harmony with social development.

Presently, the cultural aspect also can be seen as a norm for sustainable development. Thus, sustainable development is basically based on four main pillars, namely economy, society, culture, and environment.

Referring to sustainable development, it must first indicate harmonious development, the balance among the four aforementioned pillars. It means that it can not focus on one pillar and overlook the other pillars. If one of the four pillars does not develop, or develops poorly, etc., it cannot be called sustainable development. On the other hand, the development of the pillars must not adversely affect or hinder the development of other pillars. In other words, there is no main pillar or secondary pillar among the four aforementioned pillars. However, depending on different stages and different objective and subjective conditions, one or two pillars may be prioritized.

In addition, sustainable development also means that each pillar must also be developed in a sustainable way. The sustainable development of the pillars will contribute to sustainable development in general. Humans are identified as an important factor of sustainable development. Human beings are the center,

goal of sustainable development, and also a key factor participating in the entire sustainable development process. Humans are both a decisive factor of sustainable development and also a cause of imbalance. In Vietnam, sustainable development has only been proposed in recent years. Besides the economic development achievements, there have been consequences on environmental pollution, indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources, loss of many traditional cultural values, etc. Many studies on sustainable development have been conducted, many seminars and workshops on sustainable development have been held which attracted the attention of researchers, leaders, managers, as well as the whole society. One of the interesting topics is *the role of culture in sustainable development*.

Along with the new perception, culture is considered as a “fundamental element and the fourth pillar of sustainable development”¹. The Party and the State affirmed that “culture is the goal, the motivation and the spiritual foundation of the country’s development”². In the current context, culture is also considered as a criterion and a measure of sustainable development³.

As key factors, how do culture and religion participate in sustainable development? In the context of many dramatic changes in lifestyle and customs as well as the degradation of morality, What does the role of religion (with its values such as morality, aestheticism, education) in the field of economic and social development, especially in building human ethnicity? This issue will be explained in this article.

Recently, culture has been recognized that can, directly and indirectly, contribute to economic development, social stability, and environmental protection. Cultural diversity will create a rich and diverse world, nurture human potential, creativity. Therefore, religion can be also seen as a social resource. Religious values will influence and even create new social values.

2. The role of religion in sustainable development

Firstly, as a spiritual pedestal for people, in which human beings are the driving force, goal, and main agent in sustainable development, religion plays a crucial role for development in general and for sustainable development in particular. Religion participates in sustainable development with the role of meeting the spiritual needs of society, which are the needs of religious believers. Resolution No. 24/NQ-TW dated October 16, 1990, of the Politburo, identified that beliefs and religions as the spiritual needs of a part of the people. If it consists of communities of ancestors worship, perhaps it is accounted for 90% of the population. In the context of religious diversity like in Vietnam, religion has been changing strongly in recent years, it is necessary to consider the relationship between religious change and sustainable development.

How does religion participate in sustainable development? And how religion can affect sustainable development in a positive way? It can be seen in some of the following aspects:

In terms of stabilizing spiritual life, religion has brought effective effects. The reality shows that a sustainable development society must fully meet both material needs and spiritual needs. Therefore, sustainable development must consist of religious factors, religion is favored to participate in social development and promote its role in meeting the spiritual needs. The reality of Vietnam shows that religion and religious practices have contributed to satisfying spiritual needs for nearly 90% of the population.

In terms of the socio-economic aspect, religion has been participating in sustainable development as a resource of social development. One of the requirements of sustainable development is to promote the contribution of the resources. It is not only a material resource but also a spiritual resource for development. Religion, a resource for socio-economic development, has been widely recognized by researchers. A conference organized by the

Institute for Religious Studies, the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, and the Central Theoretical Council in October 2018 in Hanoi has once again affirmed that religion is a social resource expressed in many aspects such as economic capital, social capital, social security system, spiritual security. The most recognizable is the contribution of many religions in Vietnam into the fields of charity, social relief, social security, education, health care, and mental security, etc.

In terms of the political aspect, the role of religion in sustainable development must also be considered in relationship with politics. Most of the current states and regimes are organized according to the principle of separation between the state and the church. However, it does not mean that religion does not absolutely play any role in politics. As a social resource, although it does not participate in the government apparatus or hold political power, religion plays a significant role in national security and has an impact on politics. The political decisions, the policies of the countries cannot help accounting for the religious factor. And when there is a viewpoint from the religion on an issue on a national scale or on a worldwide scale, governments and states cannot “ignore” it. The 1963 event with the self-immolation of Venerable Thich Quang Duc to protest the persecution of Buddhists by Ngo Dinh Diem’s government led to a movement against the dictatorship. Although it did not directly lead to the defeat of Ngo Dinh Diem’s government, it is undeniable that Buddhism influenced the political system at that time.

In terms of environmental protection, religion also plays a significant role. As regards the doctrine, there is no religion that requires people to destroy the natural environment, on the contrary, all religions advise people to treat nature as they treat humans. Religious followers are taught to protect the environment. Religions are also active in activities to protect and preserve the natural environment.

Existing as an element of culture (a viewpoint that considers religions as the core of culture), religion directly participates in the process of shaping the cultural identity of an ethnic group or a nation. Religion also directly creates customs, even the way of thinking and behaving of individuals and communities. Shreds of evidence have shown that the Vietnamese people's thinking of living in harmony with nature in the past came from polytheism. Therefore, the conversion of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands to Protestantism and Catholicism led to changes in lifestyle and cultural artifacts.

Thus, studying the elements constituting the current system such as economy, politics, culture, society, religion, national defense, security, environment, and classifying religion as a separated factor beside other factors like social or cultural factors, means emphasis the role and position of religion. The reality of Vietnam shows that religion has a significant impact on culture, lifestyle, behavior, even politics. The lesson from the policy of religious persecution during the reign of Minh Mang King and the policy of proscription superstition in the years 1954-1980 has shown consequences on political security and caused damage to the tangible cultural heritage. In particular, the issues of the Northern mountainous region in the 2000s related to religious phenomena such as Vang Tru, the character Duong Van Minh and of the Central Highlands with the strong penetration of foreign religions (because of the spiritual gap, the lack of indigenous religions) have shown the close relationship between religion and politics, security, national defense, other socio-cultural issues. The complexity of religious factors has led to great consequences and influences on development in recent years. Therefore, it cannot help mentioning religion and its role in the Central Highlands, Northwest, and Southwest. Therefore, religion needs to be considered in all aspects of development.

According to the aforementioned concept of sustainable development, religion is a part of the social system with its function and role, a fundamental part in human development (spiritual part), *religion can be seen as a constitutive element of the system. Therefore, if religion itself has problems, contains instability, or declines, it will directly affect the whole system, weakening the system.* On the other hand, if religion grows strongly, but its growth negatively affects other elements of the system, it will also weaken the system. It can be said that the impact of religious change in sustainable development is remarkable.

In addition, the most specific and recognizable role of religion for people and society today is *satisfaction the spiritual needs of people.* In fact, human life always requires spiritual and material needs.

For Vietnamese people, religion is not only satisfying their spiritual needs, but it is also participating in community activities. Believers join a new community (community of faith) to have new knowledge about life and behavior. They feel more confident in social interactions, expand their social relationships, have fun, sing, etc. Thus, participating in religious activities and practices, individuals are integrated into a large community that shares common views, values, and faith. It helps them to be more secure and happier in their spiritual life. “Survey results of ethnic minorities in many regions showed that most of the respondents answered that they felt happy, comforted, encouraged, and shared when they became believers. Religious activities impact their business”⁴.

Religion has created an ‘institution’ to meet people’s spiritual needs that no other ‘institution’ can replace. First, religion with sacredness satisfies the spiritual life of people. Religion soothes sadness, spiritual compensations. Besides, through participation in religious activities, individuals are immersed in the collective with the same faith, thereby believers receive the support of the

religious community. Religious communities create social capital and opportunities for individuals and families in daily life activities⁵.

This contributes to the strengthening of religious faith. Since religious activities have a strong attraction to believers (it contains 'sacredness' as well as it also brings many other benefits). Therefore, it can be said that religion often creates a strong cohesive community. Meeting spiritual needs and satisfying other needs give religion a long-lasting vitality. From this aspect, religion can be compared to an 'assurance'.

3. Religious change and its influence on sustainable development strategy in Vietnam

How religious change is taking place and how does it affect the current sustainable development strategy. What aspect of religious change impacts sustainable development. What policies should the State promote the positive role of religion to serve sustainable development?

The religious transformation has been taking place in what ways

Discussion on the transformation of religion is to talk about the shifting, changing of religion in comparison to itself in the past. A change or a shift can be in a positive or negative direction.

If it is in a positive direction, it will create a healthy mental state for individuals, families, and society. If a person well cares for his/her spiritual life, raised in a safe environment with exemplary morality, he/she will have a healthy lifestyle and be kind. At the social level, when the whole society is covered by a healthy religious life, it will also lead to good relations among people, the trust will be strengthened in the society. Therefore, the happiness index will increase. If the cultural, aesthetic, and moral values of religion are promoted, it will be imbued in thinking, determine the way of life and behavior so people will be less violent, live in harmony with nature.

Another argument on the economic aspect shows that changing religion in a positive way will create new value systems appropriate to current economic subjects. *Therefore, its impact is not to create specific assets but it is value systems that religion creates through the behavior and attitudes of the subjects participating in economic activities.* It means that newly formed religious moral values participate in economic relations and determine the behaviors of businessmen.

As a particular social entity, where the union of communities with the same faith and ideas about the sacred object, religion has performed many social functions in the past and present, in which being spiritual support seems to be the dominant function. Coming to religion in different circumstances, with different national and cultural psychological nuances, human beings have a common sense that *people will feel peaceful and have a healthy spiritual life* when they are helpless and weak in front of social reality. In the world, many scientific works have proven the close connection between religion and well-being life. The findings of Chaeyoon Lim and Robert D. Putnam showed that religious people have a higher level of happy life satisfaction. Recently, social science researchers have conducted interdisciplinary research on happiness and life satisfaction in relation to religion⁶. Some other studies highlighted the social networks that people find in religious organizations *as the primary source of life satisfaction*⁷. These works showed that frequency of attendance at religious services is consistently correlated with subjective states of well-being (Ferriss, 2002). In addition, several other studies indicated inner dimensions and the spirituality of religion are also related to subjective states of well-being (Ellison, 1991; Greely và Hout, 2006; Krause, 2003). Research on elderly Christians (Krause, 2006) found that the skeptics towards religious faith had lower subjective states of well-being. It has also been verified in the history of religious and social development in Vietnam.

In the past, the Tran Dynasty unified the Zen sects in Vietnam and established a new one named Truc Lam, the most noticeable thing about this Zen sect was entering the world. The engagement of Truc Lam Buddhism created a new social dimension under the Tran dynasty. Nearly all classes, from aristocrats to commoners, meditated according to Buddha for peace of mind. The idea of being close to the people and compassionate was the basic behavior of the Tran aristocrats. Therefore, this period created people with dual values such as the king - the Zen scholar (Tran Nhan Tong); a politician – a monk (Tue Trung Thuong Sy), etc... And history has recognized the contemporary Buddhist values that contributed to the strength of the Tran dynasty. It played a significant role in the victory against the invasion of the Yuan dynasty as well as the economic development of manor. Especially, this period had valuable tangible cultural heritages. Thus, the religious transformation created a new value system and this value system became the moral foundation, lifestyle, and behavior of the whole contemporary society.

In fact, the transformation of religion in general and the transformation of folk religion in particular in Vietnam in the past 20 years has shown positive impacts on social aspects. The transformation has created a diversity of folk religions that have been restored. The recovery of folk religions has created typical tourist products of localities. It has greatly increased social resources. Therefore, many localities have mobilized the entire population to participate in the restoration, embellishment, and restoration of many tangible cultural heritages which have been degraded or lost in previous periods. In particular, the major religions such as Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism with current trends of engagement have been participating in the public service system, ensuring a part of welfare for the community along with the State. For example, there are the medical facilities with traditional medicine of Buddhism, the ambulances for poor patients

of Hoa Hao Buddhism, the kindergartens of Catholicism, the charitable meal programs for the poor patients of religions in hospitals.

On the negative aspect, when religion has many changes in terms of function, it will lead to distortion, the materialization of rituals, costs for the subject who participates in religious practices. Moreover, some religious establishments become spiritual services, and these services “trick” people instead of teaching people wisdom (through cultivation and enlightenment) or to be spiritual support. In general, this type of service is the consultations with ambiguous advice, however, it may lead individuals and families to bankrupt because of following expensive ritual practices. Some families even separate by consultations (named of divines). In recent years, the rituals of offering stars to relieve the misfortune, worshipping Kumathong, bringing talismans at home, changing the karma of the spirits in some facilities are typical examples of folk religion transformation in a negative direction.

On the other hand, if the transformation of religion arises many new religions, it will cause suspicion and panic among people because they do not know what is right or wrong, true or false. The enticement of new religions has led to the instability of spiritual life. The events of the church of Mother God (Hội Đức Chúa Trời Mẹ) in Hanoi and in many other localities have also caused many consequences. Believers of this church threw the ancestral altar, abandoned the New Year’s anniversary, refused to participate in many local customs and practices.

Changing folk religions also damages tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The disruption of architectural structures and materials leads to the loss of artistic and religious values, and distortion of folk religious heritages. The elements of cultural code, ethnic identity, and national ideology hidden in religious practices are being lost. The trend of restoration and embellishment of folk religious establishments has been taking place wildly in many

places, out of control. While repairing the monuments, people have thrown away materials with historical values. Besides, they put fake hybrid products into the relic. For example, The Mother goddesses temple (Hiep Hoa, Bac Giang) has turned into a Buddhist temple with green stone pillars, stone steles are scattered outside the place of worship.

In addition, there are many debates about the architecture of religious establishments. For instance, the temple of the Mulberry goddess (Bà Chúa Dâu Tằm) on Ky Lan mountain (Phượng Cách, Quốc Oai district) was demolished, the statue of the goddess and ordination of the king disappeared leading to conflicts between villagers and local authorities. Lang pagoda in Hanoi city is another example. After the restoration, the two stone dragons on the steps were placed upside down. Moreover, there is a trend of placing stone lions (the fierce lion which is the sacred animal guarding tombs according to the motif in China) in front of communal temples and temples in Vietnam. This situation has been opposed by many researchers in recent years.

The transformation of folk religious establishments into “typical tourism products” of localities throughout the country in recent years has accelerated the transformation process of folk religions. Presently, many folk religious establishments have fallen into a chaotic state because of inadequate space and infrastructure to welcome millions of visitors. Trade-in souvenirs and food products are rampant, leading to environmental pollution. In addition, the situation of expansion and construction of more shrines has occupied the space for the ceremony and worshiper. It has led to jostling in many folk religious establishments during the festive season.

The widespread practice of votive dance rituals (hầu đồng) all over the North of Vietnam is a bad impact of folk religion changing. In addition to festivals to practices at the Three and Four Palaces in order to honor the world cultural heritage, there are ritual

practices with unacceptable variations when performing religious rituals at market corners, at cafes, restaurants. The votive dance ritual is organized everywhere, individuals opened many private temples. The practice of spiritual rituals has tended to become a variety show. This situation has led to a lot of angry public opinion, especially the votive dance performers and artisans who are loyal to traditional rituals and religious standards.

Besides, because of the pursuit of economic and profit purposes, there is also an unfair competition among the establishments of worshipping Mother Goddesses. This happens even in the original homeland of this type of folk religion. The situation of “following the heritage of mother worship”, the motherization of folk religion establishments are losing the unique identity of many localities. Many folk religion establishments have added the Three and Four palaces in order to attract worshipers. For instance, the temples of Thăng Long Tứ Trấn in Hanoi have been transformed⁸. Moreover, in order to attract the resources of individuals and businesses, people added Ta Ao (a feng shui master) to worship as the ancestor of hairdressers in the main sanctuary of the Kim Lien communal temple.

In particular, the ambition to achieve records in Vietnam and the region of many religious establishments, especially Buddhist temples, has led to serious damage to the landscape, forests, and ecological environment. It can be said that these religious changes impact the sustainable development of the environment in many localities throughout the country.

Moreover, the number of votive dance performers of the Mother worship practice and Buddhists rapidly increased in the past decades. Some of them were moral degeneracy. Phenomenon of many individuals considered religious practices and building temples as a job to earn money. It has caused social instability and shaken cultural and religious values.

The widespread of religious festivals, traditional festivals according to the available scenarios from years, festivals organized by cultural agencies have led to the gradual loss of regional identity. The inhabitants were organizers, they become spectators. The role of the celebrant was originally played by religious dignitaries, it is replaced by local officials in many localities. In Vietnam, there are nearly 8,000 festivals a year, which means 22 festivals a day on average. This is a huge waste of human resources and time and money, especially in the context that the country is in a period of capital accumulation for economic development. The fact shows that changing of religion in general, and folk religions, in particular, have created opportunities and challenge the managers today.

Conclusion

Religious transformation is taking place in all religions in Vietnam in general. However, the extent and manner of change have occurred unevenly among religions, so its impact and influence on sustainable development in many localities throughout the country have been different. Preventing the negative impact of religious change on sustainable development in Vietnam is no longer a forecast, it must have a strong action in all aspects such as strategic planning for religious institutions, a framework for religious practices, and sanctions for violations in order to return the true values of religion and approach the standards of sustainable development in Vietnam./.

NOTES:

- 1 Hà Đình Thành (chủ biên, 2013), *Phát triển bền vững văn hóa vùng Trung Bộ - Thực trạng, vấn đề và giải pháp/ Sustainable cultural development in the Central Vietnam- Situation, problems and solutions*, Nxb. Từ điển Bách khoa, Hà Nội, tr. 22.
- 2 Trung tâm KHXH & Nhân văn quốc gia (1994), *Văn hóa và phát triển kinh tế - xã hội/ Culture and socio-economic development*, đề tài KX. 06.

- 3 Hà Đình Thành (chủ biên, 2013), *Phát triển bền vững văn hóa vùng Trung Bộ - Thực trạng, vấn đề và giải pháp/ Sustainable cultural development in the Central Vietnam- Situation, problems and solutions*, Nxb. Từ điển Bách khoa, Hà Nội, tr. 24.
- 4 Kết quả khảo sát tại Tây Nguyên Đề tài cấp Nhà nước “Tôn giáo với phát triển bền vững Tây Nguyên”/ Survey results in the Central Highlands of the State-level project “Religion and sustainable development in the Central Highlands”, lưu tại Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo.
- 5 Nguyễn Ngọc Mai (2011), Mạng lưới xã hội của các căn đồng/ Social network of the votive dance performers, *Nghiên cứu Con người*, số 6.
- 6 Xem: Ferris, 2002; Greeley and Hout, 2006; Hadaway, 1978; Inglehart, 2010.
- 7 Xem: Greeley and Hout, 2006
- 8 Nguyễn Ngọc Mai (2018) *Biến đổi tôn giáo truyền thống và phát triển bền vững ở Việt Nam/ Transformation of traditional religions and sustainable development in Vietnam*, Báo cáo tổng hợp đề tài cấp Bộ, lưu tại Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo.

REFERENCES

1. Andrew Greeley and Michael Hout (2006), *The Truth about Conservative Christians: What They Think and What They Believe*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
2. Hadaway (1978), *Life Satisfaction and Religion: A Reanalysis*, Source Social Forces
3. Nguyễn Ngọc Mai (2011), Mạng lưới xã hội của các căn đồng/ Social network of the votive dance performers, *Nghiên cứu Con người*, số 6.
4. Nguyễn Ngọc Mai (2018), *Biến đổi tôn giáo truyền thống và phát triển bền vững ở Việt Nam/ Transformation of traditional religions and sustainable development in Vietnam*, Báo cáo tổng hợp đề tài cấp Bộ.
5. Trung tâm Khoa học Xã hội & Nhân văn Quốc gia (1994), *Văn hóa và phát triển kinh tế - xã hội/ Culture and socio-economic development*, đề tài KX. 06.
6. Hà Đình Thành (chủ biên, 2013), *Phát triển bền vững văn hóa vùng Trung Bộ - Thực trạng, vấn đề và giải pháp/ Sustainable cultural development in the Central Vietnam- Situation, problems and solutions*, Nxb. Từ điển Bách khoa, Hà Nội.
7. Nguyễn Quốc Tuấn (Chủ nhiệm, 2016), *Phát huy giá trị của tôn giáo nhằm nâng cao đạo đức, lối sống của người Việt Nam/ Promoting the religious values in order to improve the morality and lifestyle of the Vietnamese*, Đề tài cấp Nhà nước.