

## “SPIRITUALITY” AND “SPIRITUAL TOURISM” IN VIETNAM FROM THE THEORY OF RELIGIOUS MARKET

***Abstract:** The terms ‘spirituality’ and ‘spiritual tourism’ have recently appeared in Vietnamese society to refer to activities related to religion-beliefs and economy-tourism. To understand their meanings, this study firstly explains the etymology, then examines the context of the birth and existence of these terms in contemporary Vietnamese society. Based on the commodity theory perspective of K. Marx and the behaviorism of Ludwig von Mises, it explores relevant issues in the period from ‘Đổi mới’ to the present.*

***Keywords:** Spirituality; spiritual tourism; religious goods; human behavior.*

### **Introduction**

What are “spirituality” and “spiritual tourism”? When did they appear? Why does the word “spiritual” in major Vietnamese dictionaries of the 20th century have a completely different meaning compared to the current concept? Why do some people support their existence and others oppose their existence? It can be said that “spirituality” and “spiritual tourism” are words that have been used with high frequency by recent media to promote tourism, but rarely appear in academic research. Is the ambiguity

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of their meaning the reason why they rarely appeared in academic studies? However, the rapid development of spirituality and spiritual tourism in the current period is a fact that can not be ignored. Because without careful studies, they can be misunderstood, maybe even swapped. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to research spirituality and spiritual tourism through etymological explanations in the dictionary and how Vietnamese people use them in contemporary society in order to have an objective view of the current context of the Vietnamese.

To solve the aforementioned problems, it needs to have a suitable theoretical approach in the context of the birth of "spirituality" and "spiritual tourism". It will be a key to helping researchers identify the problem. This study uses Karl Marx's theoretical perspective on commodities and religious markets to understand the birth and development of "spirituality" and "spiritual tourism" in the period of rapid development of the economy and "expansion" of religions and beliefs in Vietnam from the "Doi Moi" to the present.

This study also uses the behaviorism theory of Ludwig von Mises<sup>1</sup> to explain human actions related to the development of a socialist-oriented market economy of Vietnam over the past three decades with the policy of economic renewal and religious freedom in the context of globalization.

### **1. Terms and meanings**

Before referring to the birth, existence, and development of "spirituality" and "spiritual tourism", it needs to clarify some terms that have been confirmed in academia but they are often equated with "spirituality" such as religion; belief; religious belief (*tôn giáo; tín ngưỡng; tôn giáo tín ngưỡng, tín ngưỡng tôn giáo*). *Religion* and *belief* are terms officially used in most

Vietnamese - English dictionaries. Along with the process of legalizing elements related to religion and belief, the State of Vietnam distinguishes between religion and belief in the Law on Belief and Religion (2016).<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, religion belief (*tôn giáo tín ngưỡng*) was relatively common usage in Vietnam before “Doi Moi”, *religion* and *belief* were merged and it was sometimes associated with “superstition”. Religion belief (*tôn giáo tín ngưỡng*) is used commonly in Vietnam, Western academics often separate these two words. Western academics often use *religious belief* with the connotation of *religious faith*. *Religious faith* is the most important factor to confirm the existence of religion.

It is different from the academicized (or legalized) aforementioned terms, “spirituality” and “spiritual tourism” are new phrases that have appeared recently but they are quickly popularized in Vietnamese society. “Spirituality” is commonly used for religion, belief, faith, sacredness, etc. Or even a decorative cross (+), swastika (卐), or dragon image on civil architecture can also be attributed to the “spiritual element.” It is the agglomeration of all relevant (and unrelated) factors to religion and belief in such a single term “spirituality” that makes the meaning of this word to be broad, and vague. It is different from the academic terms, “spirituality” and “spiritual tourism” which are used arbitrarily in both oral and written texts without relying on dictionaries or scholarly research. This is an academic “gap” that causes its domination of academic publications.

In terms of etymology, although “spirituality” (*tâm linh*, 心靈) was included in the Sino-Vietnamese dictionaries centuries ago, its meaning is completely different from the

current usage of the word “spirituality”. For example, the Sino-Vietnamese Dictionary (Hán Việt từ điển) explains that “spirituality” means “Intellect self-existing in the human mind” (p. 562). And the Sino-Vietnamese Dictionary of Thieu Chuu and Đại nam Quốc âm tự vị of Huynh Tinh Paulus Cua have the word “linh” (靈) without “spirituality” (tâm linh). Some dictionaries compiled in the first half of the twentieth century contain the word “spirituality” however, its meaning is completely different from its current usage.

For example, in Tran Van Chanh’s Sino-Vietnamese Dictionary, “spirituality” (tâm linh, 心靈) means 1/ quick, agile, nimble (nhánh nện, linh hoạt, lanh lẹ, tinh, thính) (for example, 心靈手巧/tâm linh thủ xảo = skillful, smart) and 2/ mental, mentality (tâm thần). Similarly, the New Sino-Vietnamese Dictionary of Nguyen Quoc Hung explains that “spirituality” (tâm linh, 心靈) means “The clear mind of men” (Lòng dạ đầu óc sáng suốt của con người). In dozens of major Vietnamese dictionaries published in the 20th century, there is no word “spirituality” with the meaning of religion and belief. Searching in a number of recently published dictionaries, Nguyen Dinh Dien’s English-Vietnamese Catholic Dictionary (*Từ điển Công giáo Anh – Việt*) mentions “spirituality target” (tâm linh đích) means “not belonging to material life or earthly order” (không thuộc đời sống vật chất hay trật tự trần thế) (p. 929) and it is the secondary meaning of the word *spirituality*.

Thus, “spirituality” with the connotation of religions and beliefs appeared recently, during the period of economic boom, especially the development of tourism in Vietnam. The term “spirituality” has not even been included in modern Vietnamese dictionaries (except for the meaning of ‘superstition’ (mê tín) in

Vietnamese dictionaries and is often associated with 'superstition' (negative meaning). Therefore, it is very necessary to define these terms academically in the context of "hundreds of flowers in bloom" of the religious market (also a new term in Vietnamese languages) and the growth of the tourist market.

The term "spirituality" (*tâm linh*) can be considered a product of invented tradition<sup>3</sup> in the context of the Vietnamese religious market, by combining two available words in Vietnamese *tâm* and *linh*, to release hidden memories of spiritual life after half a century of the absence of religious and belief activities. This is also a way of "creating new words" to meet the demand for booming "spiritual tourism". To determine "spiritual tourism" is economic ('spiritual' business) or religious activities, we cannot just rely on its name, since half of the name reflects tourism and the other half reflects religions, and beliefs. In fact, this will depend on the user's behavior and individual's perception of "spirituality" and "spiritual tourism".

According to K. Marx's viewpoint of economy, a commodity is everything created to meet the needs of consumers. "First, the commodity is an object outside of us, whose properties satisfy the human will. The nature of such desires makes no difference, for example, whether they arise from the needs of the stomach or from the preferences of each individual".<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, sellers and buyers help to form a market created by the process of commodification in the law of supply and demand. From this point of view, some researchers have developed a new approach that can shed light on many problems arising in contemporary society such as the transformation of religion through commodities. In which, goods are the process of setting prices so that they can be bought and sold in a place called a market.

Therefore, elements related to religion can be bought and sold, they form a religious market.

Religious goods in the religious market are the exchange between the service provider and the beneficiary of the commodity service in accordance with the law of supply and demand.<sup>5</sup> During the period of the economic boom in Vietnam, “From the perspective of supply and demand, the religious market model also has practical value. In Vietnam, when explaining the flourishing of religious activities during the “Doi Moi” period, it can not help studying it from the perspective of providing religious services by religious dignitaries and organizations”.<sup>6</sup> Currently, “the religious market is an arena where there is growing interest, especially as religious symbols and artifacts are being held by both believers and non-believers who try to take advantage to develop a commodity market”.<sup>7</sup> When elements of religion are commoditized so that they can be bought and sold in a highly competitive religious market like today, it makes some previous concepts such as *hành hương* (*pilgrimage*) or *vãn cảnh* (*sight-seeing*) which is “free” is no longer suitable for a market economy. In that context, “spiritual tourism” has become a prominent word in the social phenomena born in the socialist-oriented market economy in Vietnam. Although the term “spiritual tourism” has just been born, its influence is extremely strong because it meets two higher-order human needs, compared to food-clothes-apartment-travel, those are *travel* (*du lịch*) and *pilgrimage* (*hành hương*). This is no longer related to the “needs of the stomach” as K. Marx mentioned, it is closely related to human behavior at a time when demands for *travel* and *pilgrimage* are increasing.



## **2. The boom of spiritual tourism in Vietnam**

Although tourism could be originated from pilgrimages thousands of years ago, however, tourism considered a recreational economic activity has been identified in English since 1780. So far, the economic, recreational, and educational conventions relevant to tourism in the West have been refined into rules, which have been common in the Western world for centuries. In Vietnam, there are few people who distinguish tourism from pilgrimage, since many pilgrims often engage in tourism activities like tourists. In contrast, tourists also participate in religious activities such as releasing lights or animals, worshiping, etc. They sometimes confuse the visitor's experience with the experience of pilgrims in addition to the confusion of religions and beliefs such as Buddhism, Taoism, and folk beliefs. Since many believers do not distinguish the differences between religions and beliefs.

The word "spirituality" in English is related to spiritualism and "pilgrimage", to the major religions such as Christianity, Islam, etc. In Vietnam, "Spirituality" and "spiritual tourism" were born in the context of a socialist-oriented market economy and the booming tourism after "Doi Moi".<sup>9</sup> When the "post-subsidy" (hậu bao cấp) life has surpassed basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, and travel, tourism becomes the next priority of people with good income. In addition, the removal of the ban on most worshiping activities (which was called "superstition" before 1986) has also created a great impetus to promote the development of "spirituality" and "spiritual tourism".

The communal temples, temples, Buddhist temples, and shrines (which had been requisitioned for storage or abandoned

in the past) have been continuously restored and repaired. Even many temples and pagodas were rebuilt to serve worshipping rituals. However, the organization of worshipping ceremonies is not as simple as the restoration. In fact, the “return” (trở lại) of religious and belief activities after a half-century of atheism is not similar to the period before 1945 (under the domination of the monarchy, under the rule of the King and the Ministry of Ceremonies).

It can be said that religious and belief activities after “Doi Moi” have been mainly restored on the basis of a few records and the “memory” of some people. They are people who were involved in traditional rituals from a very young age (because for almost a half-century such activities did not take place). Since the “traditional” festivals are reconstructed differently depending on their memory (even imagination).

This can be difficult for those who practice religious rituals and beliefs, but it is an extremely fertile ground for invented tradition activities. The invented tradition process of ritual practice over the past three decades has created many new elements, placed in new contexts for new purposes. Obviously, the overarching meaning of the word “spirituality” and the difference in its present meaning from the etymological meanings in aforementioned dictionaries. Moreover, the invented tradition process does not only create products that serve the vibrant religious market but also serves an emerging market that is extremely attractive to investors, which is “spiritual tourism”. This is the reason for corporations to participate in this market with new activities such as “scenarioization of festivals”.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the explosion of the religious market in Vietnam has promoted the birth and development of social demand and a

special economic phenomenon of contemporary Vietnam that is “spiritual tourism”. This is the foundation for “spiritual businesses” (doanh nghiệp tâm linh) to be developed in the past period. With economic potential superior to religious organizations and cultural management agencies, these enterprises have invested thousands of billions of Vietnam Đồng to build spiritual tourism complexes and modern transportation systems.

In addition, there are expensive tourist facilities such as cable cars, tram systems, resorts, etc. With the operation of that high-class service system, “spiritual tourism” has been attractive to both high-income people and “spiritual entrepreneurs”. Therefore, personal needs such as sightseeing, worship, and pilgrimage (which used to be free) are gradually being pushed back into the past.

“Spiritual tourism” has no distinction between religious activities, pilgrimage, and tourism. That is different from the great religions of the world. For example, the ban on non-Muslims in Mecca keeps this holy Muslim city free of tourists. However, for some other religions, especially Buddhism, the space between the two extremes of religion and tourism (Figure 1) always has a big gap for visitors. That is why so many religious sites still attract large numbers of visitors. This gap has helped “spiritual tourism” has an opportunity to develop. Currently, spiritual tourism is no longer a service for high-income people, but it has become a popular social movement known as “going to worshipping”. Many people are not believers but still regularly participate in annual festivals as a form of cheap tourism. This is the time to converge the *necessary* and *sufficient* conditions for a religious market in Vietnam to form and develop.

### **3. The current Vietnamese religious market from a theoretical perspective**

It can be said that the explosion of “spiritual tourism” is a push to the dramatic development of the religious market in Vietnam. There is no full estimation of the religious market’s “revenue” in Vietnam. However, the total revenue of tourism in 2017 of more than 20 billion USD<sup>11</sup> has shown that the tourism economy makes a great contribution to the whole economy of Vietnam. The attraction of religious sites is also the reason for investors to spend trillions of Viet Nam dong to build the “world’s best” “spiritual tourism” attractions. Thus, “spiritual tourism” has become a commodity (just like K. Marx’s point of view).

However, if you look at the laws of the market economy, “spiritual business” in Vietnam is a highly profitable industry but very unstable. In fact, every business effectively operates with sustainable revenue must have transparency. The process of commodifying religion and belief in Vietnam into a “spiritual” product lacks transparency. In fact, the term “spirituality” is too vague for researchers to identify the involved factors (as mentioned in section 1), and it has received little attention from researchers. Therefore, “spiritual business” is very difficult to sustain when a customer (or consumer) suddenly realizes that the item they are consuming is too *vague* while having to spend a large amount of money on “spiritual service”. Therefore, to be able to clearly identify this issue, researchers need to examine the actions of consumer of the aforementioned “spiritual services” through individual behaviors from the behavioral perspective of L. v. Mises.

Praxeology is “the science of human behavior”. Although the term was coined in 1890, it was widely used when the Austrian

school of economics<sup>12</sup> was born. According to L. Mises, human actions are closely related to the relationship between means and purposes in their behavior, this theory is not only applicable to economics but also to all other humanities and social sciences, because human beings are social entities. Accordingly, we cannot separate economic activities and other types of targeted behavior but need to scrutinize the decisive choice of human decisions. Therefore, researchers will have to analyze economic activities based on the “general theory of choice and preference” of humankind.<sup>13</sup>

Regarding Human Action, he argued that “The development of reason, language, and cooperation is the result of the same process; they are inseparable and necessarily linked together. However, this process takes place on an individual basis. It includes changes in the behavior of individuals (...) It merely means that certain actions of individuals constitute collective actions.<sup>14</sup> On the bases of Mises’ theoretical perspective, we can study human behavior towards spiritual tourism activities in Vietnam based on two poles: *Only interested in tourism or only interested in religions* (Figure 1).

It is the “choice and preference” of individuals in his theory. In fact, spiritual tourists’ behaviors are located in the middle of the two aforementioned poles. Therefore, Mises’s behaviorism seems to be the most optimal approach to “spirituality” and “spiritual tourism” in Vietnam today when Marx’s economic viewpoint has problems when placing the concept of “commodities” in abstract objects such as “spirituality” in the context of Vietnamese society in the 21st century. From the diagram in Figure 1, we can realize that the “human behavior” towards “spiritual tourism” is manifested with two poles, the

Economic pole and the Religious pole, which form a disproportionate paradox.

If the Economic pole increases, the revenue increases, which means that the Religious pole decreases. Then the trust of customers/followers will also decrease. This will reduce the number of visitors in the long term.

If the Religious pole increases, the number of visitors (followers) may increase, but their interest is not directed to high-class services (which is what “spiritual businesses” do not expect). If this situation persists, businesses may suffer losses.

Thus, if we examine the reality of Vietnam’s religious market, we will realize the glamor of “the best Asian records” or “the best in Southeast Asian records” in order to attract tourists. However, this type of market is developing unsustainably because of the aforementioned disproportionate paradox. This situation was partly revealed through the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

In short, to be able to solve the aforementioned inadequacies, contradictions, or paradoxes, it needs to have the participation of researchers. It is an important job to face the crises caused by human behavior. Therefore, a suitable theoretical system is a prerequisite. At present, the theoretical perspective of the religious market in Vietnam with the economic view of K. Marx and the behavior of L. Mises may be the key for researchers to solve the problems.

### **Conclusion**

Religious market, “spirituality” and “spiritual tourism” are new issues for religious research in Vietnam today. It is urgent to understand these subjects from an academic perspective. In addition, it also helps managers to plan important goals of the nation.

*In terms of the economy*, the religious market perspective helps us to identify two sides of an issue: Commodities and Religious commodities from the viewpoint of K. Marx.

*In terms of religions and beliefs*, the birth of “spirituality” and “spiritual tourism” has shown that religious transformation can cause the meaning of a term (spirituality) to be far from its etymological meaning. The meaning of this term in contemporary society covers all issues, tangible and intangible objects related to religions and beliefs.

*In terms of society*, the process of commodifying religion has turned personal activities such as pilgrimage, sightseeing, and worship into one of the economic sectors with high turnover which is “spiritual tourism”.

*In terms of policy*, if economic development is not linked to theoretical research, and basic research of the humanities and social sciences, it can lead to strategic mistakes.

As mentioned above, the article shows a specific perspective on “spirituality” and “spiritual tourism” in religious research with K. Marx’s viewpoint of commodities and the behavioral approach of L. Mises. These are the important theoretical perspectives of the prominent theorists of the nineteenth century (Marx) and twentieth century (Mises). This approach can solve many problems related to the religious market. Especially, it needs to clarify vague terms such as “spirituality”. This is also our desire when conducting this research because it not only helps to solve the immediate urgent problems but also can help us to build a sustainable development strategy based on an interdisciplinary academic perspective./.

**NOTES:**

- 1 Ludwig von Mises (1881-1983) was one of the most prominent economists and political scientists of the twentieth century. He was the head, as well as, the one who strengthened and systematized the Austrian school of economics. He is best known for his behavioral studies-the study of human choices and actions.
- 2 Article 2, Chapter 1 of the Law on Belief and Religion:  
Section 1. *Belief* means human belief manifested through rites closely associated with traditional customs and practices to bring about spiritual peace for individuals and the community.  
Section 5. *Religion* means human belief existing with a system of concepts and activities including objects of worship, tenets, canon laws, rites and organizations.
- 3 The Invention of tradition is a set of practices (usually governed by publicly or tacitly accepted rules) that establish certain values and norms of behavior by repeating them continuously with the implication that they are related to the past (cited the Eric Hobsbawm's Introduction in: Hobsbawm, E. & Ranger, T. (Ed.) 2004. *The Invention of tradition*. Cambridge University Press.
- 4 Marx, K. (1976), The Commodity. Chapter One, Volume One, of the first edition of Capital. In Dragstedt, A. (Ed. and Translator) (1976). *Value: Studies by Karl Marx*. London: New Park Publications, p. 45.
- 5 Appadurai, Arjun (2012), "The Spirit of Calculation", *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*. Vol. 30, No. 1 (Spring 2012), p. 4.
- 6 Phan Ngọc Chiến (2009), "Hai quan điểm đối nghịch về tôn giáo: Thuyết thể tục hóa và mô hình thị trường tôn giáo" (Two opposing views on religion: The secularization theory and the religious market model), *Khoa học xã hội*, Viện KHXH Nam Bộ, số 4 (128), tr. 83.
- 7 Mawani S., Mukadam A. (2011), "Living in a Material World: Religious Commodification and Resistance", In: Thomas L. (eds) *Religion, Consumerism and Sustainability. Consumption and Public Life*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, p. 55.
- 8 This is Mises' comprehensive treatise on the Austrian school. He showed that the entire economy is the result of individuals creation through actions, choices, cooperation, competition and transactions with each other. Accordingly, Mises explained how complex market phenomena develop, they are the result of conscious,

purposeful actions, choices and preferences of individuals trying to achieve different desires and purposes and avoid adverse consequences.

- 9 Before "Doi Moi", in the subsidy period, Vietnamese people hardly knew about tourism, they mainly worried about "food and clothes" (cơm no áo ấm).
- 10 Đình Hồng Hải (2020), "Di sản văn hóa trong thang bậc giá trị toàn cầu qua góc nhìn của Michael Herzfeld" (Cultural heritage in the global value ladder through the perspective of Michael Herzfeld), *Khoa học Xã hội và Nhân văn*, Tập 6, số 4 (2020). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1172/vjossh.v6i4.573>, tr 442.
- 11 According to the General Department of Tourism, total revenue from tourists reached 505,000 billion VND, up 20.99% over the same period in 2017.
- 12 "Austrian school of economics" or "Austrian school" is a school of thought that studies economics based on the explanation and analysis of the purposeful actions of individuals with the great contribution of L. Mises.
- 13 Mises, L. (2012, 1949), *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*. Martino Fine Books, p.3.
- 14 Mises, L. (2012, 1949), *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*. Martino Fine Books, p. 43.

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