

International Scientific Seminar:

RELIGION IN VIETNAM'S SOCIETY TODAY

Abstracted by
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For the last three decades, in Vietnam and in many other countries, religious practices are on the rise. In order to approach recent spiritual life of Vietnamese people in comparison with other countries and to contribute to the recognition of the relationship between traditional and modern Vietnam religious activities, the University of Social Sciences and Humanities - Vietnam National University Hanoi in coordination with Institute of Missiology Missio e.V. has recently held the International Scientific Seminar with the topic: "Religions in Vietnam society today".

The Seminar has received more than 20 papers. Through 4 sessions, the Seminar focuses on 4 main topics: religion and Vietnam society nowadays; theoretical approaches; religion to economy and culture; religion and individual; religious life and society. The following article reviews several contents presented and discussed in the Seminar.

1. Roles of religion in Vietnamese modern society

Vietnam religion in recent years has a number of revivals, improvements, and is upward trending. This fact represents not only the return to traditional religion and nationalization tendency, but also the innovation of religion or replacement with new secular sects.

According to researchers, the rise and complex transformations of religious life in Vietnam originate from several causes: a more prosperous and

comfortable material life provides people with more conditions to support spiritual life; negative outcomes of market economy create more risks, financial losses, and high unemployment rate; mystical phenomena that science cannot explain and critical illnesses that modern medicine cannot cure; along with problems created by abusing industrial machinery, deterioration of natural environment and growing insecurity in society, etc. continue to

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cause more concerns and ignite the needs for salvation. Therefore, people seek for creeds and religions, hoping for compensation, rescue, and consolation for their incapability, dependence, and limitation when facing reality. On the other hand, there are numerous perpetrators taking advantage of people's faith for political purposes, as well as superstitious actions and perversions with religious cover... has produces unpredictable consequences.

Besides above reasons, the reversion and development of religions in Vietnam may result from Vietnamese government's principles, guidelines and policies for religion that are currently more and more open, complete, and advanced. It is clearly demonstrated in Resolution No.25-NQ/TW about religious practices from the 7th Plenum of the Communist Party of the 9th Central Committee of Vietnam. Not only does the Resolution consider religion as "spiritual demand of a number of citizens" but also claims that "religion has and will last together with our nation in the process of building and protecting socialism in our country."

To emphasize this religion policy, to affirm religion's importance and long-term presence, Priest Thiện Cẩm has claimed that the existence of religion in society is as much important as that of space and air, because we not only have to resolve human issues in terms of financial aspect but also need to obtain spiritual values as well. Religion is the spiritual dimension that people desire and is the indispensable breath for the

living of humans and all creatures. Consequently, we have to approach religion in ideological and logical aspects with a view to realize the significance and necessity of religion rather than judging from its specific contribution to political, cultural and social life [1].

Critical contributions of religion to the mission of renovating, building and protecting our country have recently been illustrated in many fields, such as education, health, and social care [1]. Current law still does not allow religions to involve in educational, medical and other social programs independently and unrestrictedly; however, according to many opinions, the present status of educational, medical, and social works will be greatly improved if religions are encouraged to have a larger role in innovating and enhancing public morality.

2. Religion and Vietnamese culture

Belief and religion is one of the essential factors constituting our national cultural characteristics. Religions, either endogenous or exogenous, possess significant impacts to the formation of Vietnamese cultures. Among major religions available in Vietnam, Buddhism has the longest history of development and Buddhist culture has become a part of the nation's culture. The number of followers also accounts for the highest proportion (about 10 million people); the number of pagodas and places of worship and practice for Buddhists that are built and repaired is

increasing and seen in every areas and regions. Buddhist philosophy has ingrained in many Vietnamese's minds and consciousness; Buddhist pagoda is the place that myriad people come to clear and liberate from all distress, helplessness and difficulties in life. To them, Buddhism in general and Buddhist thoughts, moral, philosophy of human, compassion and equanimity, causal theory in particular have always entrenched in their minds, the way they treat others, their innermost feelings and controlled their thoughts and behaviors, etc. Buddhism has been and will be the most important factor that remarkably influences the formation and improvement of personal and public morality, as well as remediation of social evils, unfairness, inequality (which seem to be intensifying) in our current society. Buddhism or Buddhist philosophy has made a certain contribution to education, civic responsibility, respect for the law and other community rules, regulations in each individual. Moreover, it restricts and resolves many negative impacts from the market mechanism, scientific development, and modern world's corollaries. As a result, Nguyễn Thanh Bình and Nguyễn Việt Thắng in their paper titled "A view in Vietnam Buddhism in historical and modern days" stated that Buddhism is one of the aspects that create a modern and sustainably developed society.

After Buddhism, Catholicism is the second largest religion in Vietnam today with about 6.3 million followers.

Catholicism exists in Vietnamese culture as an East – West cultural bridge, which helps construct the Quốc ngữ (the foundation of Vietnamese language today) and enriches Vietnamese culture through Catholic festivals, art, literature, press. At the same time, in the process of entering and developing in Vietnam, this religion was partly changed by Vietnamese culture from an unknown Western religion to a familiar one in community. Alternatively, Catholicism is now building a path alongside with our nation, advocating patriotic devoting life for public benefits, sharing opportunities and challenges as Vietnam is integrating into the world. Guaranteeing to develop alongside with our nation, Catholicism has given instruction to help resolve a great number of public issues, such as: educating in catholic regions; preventing social evils like gambling, cocaine using; asking parishioners to participate in elections; following traffic laws or donating for victims of natural disasters... To restrict the limitations of market economy like eroded moral values and rising civil evils, Catholic Church has initiatively promoted charitable and humane activities, organized compassion classes, offered free medical care, built shelters for stray kids and lonesome oldsters. Despite different world views, the Government and the Church both pursue principles that make Vietnam a developed country, a democratic, just, and civilized society full of content citizens. In the process of secularization, it cannot be ignored by

religions. However, to fulfill that goal, it is required that the Catholic and the non-Catholic have similarities. “Living peacefully in Nations community”, “having duty to love and build our fatherland” are the common purposes that both the Catholic Church and the Government strive for and through those unify and harmonize religions and people [5].

Besides focusing on mentioning the contributions of popular religions to Vietnamese culture, papers presented in the Seminar also discuss many types of beliefs, for example: ancestor worship, Đạo Mẫu (worship of mother goddesses), and fertility rite with their humane values and precious traditions. All of them have established the variety in cultural life of Vietnamese people.

Religion is not every cultural values of a country even if a religion is the national religion. The diversity in Vietnamese culture also founded from of other cultures of ethnic minority groups living in Vietnam. The attendees affirmed that the picture of beliefs and religions from every ethnicity in our nation today are exceptionally vibrant.

PhD. Professor Ngô Văn Lê in his research on “*About some specific characteristics of religious beliefs and of Southern people*” stressed that Southern region is considered as one of the areas which have the most various ethnic clans and beliefs compared to others in Vietnam. Among them, religious belief is viewed to be relatively unique with many forms that carry the characteristics

of mixed groups and also have the specific features of cultural-historical region. Religious belief in Southern region includes those of native people, those of migrants; therefore, it is very rich and diversified. Religious belief in Southern region has typical features, such as regional features that manifested through following factors: polytheistic, regional, syncretism, life-entering; and ethnic features that manifested through reserving traditional values and unifying communities. It is these features that make the religious belief in Southern region have its own specifications compared to other areas of the country and also of the world.

In the process of development and integration along with the sense of maintaining the traditional beliefs, many ethnic minorities have absorbed several religious beliefs from foreign countries in different levels. These new religions have been creating many consequences in many aspects to the ethnic minorities themselves and even to the task of implementing ethnic affairs of Vietnamese government nowadays. The growth of some new religions of Hmong people in the Northern mountainous region is an example. In 1978, a “strange” religion named “Vàng Chử” penetrated silently into a Hmong group in Thắng Lợi Commune, Hàm Yên District, Tuyên Quang Province and spread throughout some other provinces where Hmong people lived. Since then, the authorities at various levels and organizations of the political system from the Central to local level have

implemented many solutions in order to reduce the negative outcomes, to prevent and push back the growth of “Vàng Chứ”. However, the expansion of “Vàng Chứ” has not fallen and continued to show an upward tendency in the numbers of believers and other regions. Until now, it is hard to bring out the exact number, but approximately, it is about tens of thousands of people [10]. Facing this situation, in the same time, Vietnamese government should deal with two policies of Ethnic and Religion appropriately; unify religions in the national unity bloc so as to fight against any behaviors that take advantage of religion for political purposes.

The developments of religions in ethnic minority region are very complicated and demand the government to have the right policies of behavior. No matter which ways of behavior, given the picture of various religions nowadays, besides considering religion as a spiritual need of a group of people, we also need to acknowledge religion from the angle of morality - culture, admit religion as a basis, a factor of Vietnamese culture in order to promote the positive values of religion that correct the humans behavior in modern society.

3. Religion and other issues

** Religion and environment conservation*

Religion plays a key role in the development of not only culture, politics or morality pertaining to the spirituality, but also of economy and society.

Noticeable analyses of authors Nguyễn Quang Hưng and Nguyễn Văn Thái in clarifying the role of religion in Vietnams society towards environmental conservation are among the evidences which affirm religion has an effect on every aspect of social life, not only influences social and cultural aspects.

According to field researches of a student group in Environment Faculty, Hanoi University of Science and Technology carried out in 2008 and of a student group from Environmental Science Faculty, University of Science - Vietnam National University conducted in 2012, with a view to consider the epidemic “burning joss paper” as a perversion of religious practices which damages the environment, these authors reached a conclusion that whereas the civil authorities have not regulated the issue, even though propaganda about effect on environment has not much successful, religious organizations are one step ahead in this issue [9].

Firstly, dignitaries of almost all religions have put the environment issue as one of the main contents of their lectures, making this problem closer to modern theology. Obviously, environment is one of the matters which religions play as a pioneer in practicing their functions in the society nowadays.

Secondly, the fact that lecturing the issue of environment conservation, an issue of modern society merely starts from religious and theological bases in prayer-book, shows the ability of interpreting tenets in accordance with

present circumstances. This content also shows the adaptability of religions in modern society.

Thirdly, through mass media which is very easy to promote and influence people, religions educate citizens to have the consciousness of protecting the environment from the most specific and practical actions, evoking the social responsibility in every person...It is impossible to solve a problem related to culture and religion with only administrative solutions.

** Religion and gender equality*

In globalization context, diversification and secularization are the main trends of religion in the modern social context; the religious life is significantly changing. In the past, women's role in religion was not highly appreciated. Today, there have been dramatic changes in different angles. Women have been taking part and making huge contribution to the process of diversifying and secularizing religion in Vietnam. Study by Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc to prove the theory: women are people who impulse the process of diversifying and secularizing religion in Vietnam today, has focused on clarifying some of the contents:

Firstly, it is the role of maintaining and developing religious activities of the female followers. Among them, the women play a fundamental part in activities of pagodas, an important part in the process of reviving the religion in Vietnam. Women are also the contributing factors that help develop the process of promoting the religion

more rapidly; however, the female has no contribution in the growth of theology of religion. The majority of women come to religion by making ceremonial offerings. The final purpose of this action is to resolve issues in their present lives: seeking for health, peace, wealth, and success in business for themselves and for their family members. They rarely study about tenets or religious theories.

For new religious phenomena, a survey shows that believers of new religious phenomena in Vietnam are mostly women. The number of females who lead the new religious phenomena is also outnumbered that of males.

Secondly, there is a role of women which is to maintain the spiritual practices in family.

According to analysis and observation of the authors, in many nuclear families at Hanoi in particular and at cities in general, the task of making ceremonial offerings and worshipping the ancestors and parents is entrusted completely to the women, especially common in those which have the Buddhist altar at home. From the view of the author, 90% of Buddhist altars at home are established and worshipped everyday by the females.

Nowadays, in the nuclear family system, adults do not live with grandparents and siblings do not always live under the same roof. The need of making offering to ancestors is seen in every member of the family, both male and female. Many urban families have currently carried out

the task of worshipping the ancestors and passed-away parents in their own houses instead of focusing only on the eldest son's house. As a result, from the authors' perspective, given developing trends of modern society, the fact that women take responsibility for making offerings for both the spouses' ancestors in the same house will become more and more popular. The role of the woman in spiritual practices will be more appreciated.

In accordance with this view, priest Hà Văn Minh also has analyses about the function of Christian women in the church life and family life. From the author's viewpoint, actually the equal dignity of man and woman is presented in the Bible. The Church always gives prominence to the dignity of the women and fights against any unfair treatment or disdain for women. The role of Christian females in the family is manifested through their vocation of motherhood and the role of carrying on the missionary work. According to the author, to liberate the women from house chores and let them take part in the economy, politics, and society like their counterparts, nowadays, more and more women hold high positions in the authorities or companies, however, along with that, people accidentally "bury" the natural role as a mother. Consequently, the community has many more youth crimes resulting from lack of correct care and education from the mother. The children's life of faith also relies much on the mothers; therefore, the Church always asks for the devotion

of the mothers in transferring and educating belief to the offspring, especially in the present time, so as to build humankind with love and peace, humankind without hatred and respecting the life [10].

About this issue, there are many opposite opinions: some deny completely the part of women in maintaining spiritual activities in the family, believing that this job is for men. The trend that women carry out the making offerings and worshipping ancestors and passed-away parents is, perhaps, only popular in nuclear families and in cities. Nonetheless, researchers all agree that: the role of women in many areas of social life as well as religion is rising day by day, gender equality is possible but all matters related to "vocation", "duty" of the women is impossible to replace even in any places or any times.

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