

THE RELATIONS BETWEEN RELIGION AND NATION: THEORY AND PRACTICE IN VIETNAM

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Religion is not only a form of social conscientiousness but also a social phenomenon which exists with its special characteristics, i.e. community's beliefs, system of rituals, system of organizations, and system of morals. With such special characteristics, there exist between religion and nation reciprocal, complex relations, which can be served as a premise for the existence of each other, creating a united and perfect whole and specific identity of each ethnic group, each nation. For Vietnam, a multi-ethnic, multi-religious nation, this is a feature, which requires that development must be accompanied by the close relationship between religion and nation in Vietnam, and shall be used as basis for acquiring and acculturate exogenous elements.

1. The Concept of Religion, Nation

What is religion? This is a stale but also usually new question. Since, proceeding from different views, cultural and ideological spaces, people may have different conceptions of religion; on the one hand, basing on the complexity and diversification of the social life, each individual may be involved in behaviour and think about religion in his or her own way. From that, the multidirectional character of conceptions of religion is specified.

Roughly, some ways to approach religion can be provided as follows:

In etymological approach, the term of Religion stems from Latin: *ligare*, *religare*, *legere*, which mean to connect, collect, reap... From that, there came many different ways of explaining, the most popular one is by the Holy/Worldly relation, i.e. the binding ties between human and the supernatural.

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One can also approach the definition of religion according to the points of view by scholars such as E. Durkheim, Luckmann, Schmidt, Y. Lambert, etc. These scholars had initially found out that when touching upon religion was mentioning the holy element, the relationship between the holy and the worldly, and had initially structured the attributes of religion; on the other hand, had observed that religion created important impacts on the social operation (according to 2, p. 197 – 208, 3, p. 164 – 188). Nevertheless, basically, the points of view above usually took nature of religion as the holy, the supernatural, yet in reality, what that were regarded as religion were not referred to as the holy, the supernatural, for example, Buddhism, Confucianism, etc. Furthermore, the above points of view seemingly tended towards researches in respect of religious sociology.

In the views of dialectical materialism and historical materialism to explain social phenomena including the religion issue, K. Marx and F. Engels brought forward their scientific viewpoints on nature of religion, explaining the religion issue as a social form. K. Marx and F. Engels believed that it was humans who created religion, not was created by religion. Humans are the very “world of human beings, states, societies”, and it was such states, societies that created religion.

It was pointed out by Marxist classics that the emergence of religion under the rule of form of conscientiousness is the reflection of society’s existence in the form of fabulousness and unreality. Yet, it was such fabulousness and unreality that would have effect to compensate for the hard life down on earth, “religion is the sigh of oppressed living beings, is the heart of the heatless world, also the moral of the morales social conditions. Religion is the opium of the people” (4, vol. 1, p.570).

From this approach, the Marxist classics gave out this definition of religion: “All religions are but simply to reflect the unreality into human’s mind by the exogenous forces that control their daily life; it is only the reflection in which the worldly forces are in the form of the supernatural forces” (4, vol. 20, p.437).

By such definition, the Marxist classics managed to answer the questions necessary for a definition of religion, i.e. What is religion? What does it reflect? And how does it reflect? Nevertheless, to some extent, K. Marx and F. Engels dealt with religion from an angle of the form of conscientiousness; on the other hand, K. Marx and F. Engels gave out their definition of religion on the grounds of thorough researches mainly on Christianity and its happenings in Europe, but these two men did not have conditions for researching the

religions in the Far East region: India, China, Southeast Asia and South Asia. Specifically, other religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism were characterized by their own aspects compared with Christianity (See more: 5, p. 18). This would be more complicated if applying servilely and mechanically the definition of religion by the Marxist classics to research on religion in Vietnam.

While researching on major issues of religion in Vietnam, Priest Cadiere wrote: "The Far Eastern nations, especially the Vietnamese, are those who deeply characterized by their religion conscientiousness. The term of religion encompass various extents, aspects. If we think religion is the faith in the grand and perfect Supreme Being; the unity of the whole one's heart with the Supreme Being that is present everywhere; the unity of the whole heart with God, full of humanity, dominating and controlling everything; finally, out of gratitude towards the utmost perfection, represented by appropriate worship towards that Supreme Being, then we must say that the Vietnamese do not have any religion. The conception of the Supreme Being escapes from them; they live without God. But, if we have the conception that religion is beliefs and practice influences behaviour for the good of life to a supernatural world, then we can see the Vietnamese have that quality at a high level"

(Quoted from 2, p. 17). This specific feature was commented by Ho Chi Minh as follows: "The Annamese (Vietnamese) do not have priests, do not have religion according to the thinking way of the European. Ancestral worshipping is completely a social phenomenon. We do not have any priests, the old people in the family will carry out the ceremonial rituals. We do not know about what is the prestige of sorcerer, priest" (6, vol. 1, p.478-479). This point was then once again reconfirmed by Pham Van Dong: "From time immemorial, the Vietnamese nation does not have the religion in the common sense of many other countries" (7, p.66).

To sum up the conceptions of religion, we can see that the determination of the contents of the definition of religion is very complicated and diversified. Each way of approaching the definition involves different contents that cannot be denied. However, in order to have a general and united definition of religion, one must surely not be restricted to the existing contents, but these shall be complemented, completed along with the development of the modern science and technique and human's thinking. And so, the question of defining religion is still being imposed and needs to be deeper studied. Anyway, during our research, we still need a minimum definition to be used as a tool for our operation. Before such

requirement, according to us, "...The most general object of religion, East or West, is the invisible supernatural world, which is accepted intuitively and reciprocates in that unreal manner between humans and the world in order to explain the issues of this world as well as of the other world in different historical, geographical conditions" (2, p. 72-73); and naturally, when dealing with religion as a social phenomenon, we should further allow for the constituents of religion: faith and beliefs, rituals, tenets, organization – these are the "bridges" in the relations between the existing world and the non-existing world.

Around the conception of ethnology or nation, there also are many complex questions that need to be explained. First, this term denotes an ethnic group (ethnie) of the same spoken language, has its special characteristics in cultural activities, is ethnic conscientious, for example, Kinh, Tay, Dao, etc.; second, nation is also construed as state, community of population living in the national territory, defined as under the control of the united central government, for example, Vietnam, China, etc. Within the framework of this writing, the author comes to learn about the conception of nation.

The term of Nation stems from the Latin word *Natio*, which means a community of people with the same

political institution, established in a certain territory, under the control of a state, or a community of people with stable development in history, with a territory, economic life, a cultural identity, a common language, controlled by a state. The content of this definition of religion was also referred to by the founders of Marxism-Leninism in their works. According to F. Engels, the emergence of a nation was closely connected with the emergence of a state. In the work "German Thinking System", K. Marx and F. Engels wrote: "The greatest division between material labour and spiritual labour is the separation between urban and rural areas. The contradiction between urban and rural areas, together with the process of transition from the barbarous time to the civilized time, from tribal system to state, from localism to nationalism and has been existing throughout the history of civilization until today" (8, p.80). This way of raising the issue by the classics-founders of Marxism-Leninism purported that nation was a community of people formed from tribes, with the union of tribes as the start. Nation came into existence with the emergence of the state.

In a word, nation or nation, state is a political, social community, directed by a state, established in a certain territory, with an appellation, an administrative language, a general economic life, a common cultural

symbol to make up its own national character. Nevertheless, it should be understood that as the historical element of development of each nation, state is unstable; the structure of national community is much diversified and depends on the historical, cultural and social... conditions. Today, owing to the development of production forces, the social space is expanded and is characterized by globalization; the situation of nations with multi-races is very popular.

2. Relations between Religion and Nation

It can be said that the relations between religion and nation is represented in different forms, depending on approaching angle. However, in whatever approaching mode, it is clear that the movements, changes of religions are closely associated with the movements, changes of the nation issue; on the contrary, the existence of the national community is usually associated with some certain religion. This can be seen in the history of development of mankind. If looking through the history of mankind, from the emergence till humans were organized into societies and along with these, religions have undergone different forms and aspects:

When humans knew how to organize into societies, these were accompanied by the emergence of religions in order to reflect the community's relationships. Such forms of religion as

Totem, Totemism, Wizardry, Soulism, and Shamanism... were also the ties to link the national community together. As F. Engels put it: "religion was born in an extremely primitive time... Therefore, such primary conceptions were usually for each ethnic group of the same bloodline (4, p. 21, p. 445).

When humans stepped in the agricultural time with the appearance trades as growing, rearing which were followed by the coming into existence of the state (socio-political community) with the formation of nation, state, a new religion, i.e. national religion, would necessarily appear. National religion had a general content: to worship the deities that protected the nation, but was presented in different ways, as per each country. Such a change was once again reconfirmed by F. Engels: "After those groups were split into various fractions, they all developed in a specific way in each nation... Deities were created... in each nation, these were national deities; the governing areas of such deities did not cross over the boundary of the nation that they were protecting; and beyond that boundary, the domination was carried out by other deities which no one could struggle for. All such deities could only continue to exist in the imagination of so long as the nation that created such deities would still exist; when the nation would disappear, those deities would disappear" (4, p. 445-446);

Owing to the development of production, particularly the development of trade, with the appearance of 'survival of the fittest' thinking, there came into existence many regional or globalized regions such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. Outwardly, such religions seem to have crossed over certain restrictions of a nation to be widespread in the region and the world over. Intrinsicly, these religions, however, cannot go beyond the nation, state. Because, it has been tested and determined in reality that Christianity usually suits the mental requirements of Westerners; Islam usually conform itself to the Arabic culture; while Buddhism is a place where most of the Far Easterners' spirits are entrusted; on the other hand, whether the regional or global religious contents is universalized or introduced by means of war or piece, introduced to nation, states directly or indirectly, but while existing in a certain nation, state, they have changed somewhat in order to be congruous with the cultural characteristics of that nation.

Thus, a glance at the movements, changes of religion in the correlation of mankind's development has shown that obviously there has been a close relationship between religion and nation. This relationship can be generalized to the following basic contents:

In intrinsic terms, religion is created by humans and usually there appear

certain centers with certain community of people. In another word, each religion exists in one or more certain countries, nations, and naturally, shall be under the impacts of the politico-socio-economic conditions of such countries, nations. But, once coming into existence, religion shall be a moral tie to link the members of the community to a close and strong relationship.

3. The relationship between Region and Nation in Vietnam

The universal characteristics of the relationship between religion and nation as presented above shall be used as grounds for researches on religion and nation in Vietnam.

It can be said that, in a general view, before the introduction of the major religions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity..., in Vietnam, there had also been existing a fairly typical system of national beliefs and religion, namely Worship of Ancestor, which was referred to by some scientists as Ancestorism. Through this system of national beliefs and religion, the relationship between nation and religion, as shown, was very close. "It is in this very religious system that there is the united community effect, and the potential sense for the attachment with the family, the native place and the country; also, the exogenous religions, by way of war or piece, in order to take deep root in the nations, they must be nationalized,

acquired by national religion so as to conform themselves with the national religious conscientiousness (2, p. 312).

Ancestral worship is nothing but "...in a broad sense, is not only to worship those people who gave birth, brought up and have no more been living, namely those who of the same bloodline, but also to worship those who have rendered great services to the community of village, country" (2, p. 315). Ancestral worship is organized at three levels: Country, Village, and Family.

For the countries including Vietnam, characterized by those of a traditional oriental society, personality cult not only involves the supreme representation of the whole community (national, state community) but also the representation of God with the supremacy over the living and the dead in the territory. The prosperity or decline of the whole community depend on the prosperity or decline of the very half-deity-half-man king. The half-deity-half-man king is honoured as the sole representative of the community before deities; the man with imprescriptible rights, with powers identical to those of the community, acting on behalf of God to reign the world; that king is called King – Deity. Therefore, the worship of heaven and earth, cult of King – Deity are the mission and also the destiny of the whole community. In

comparison with God, King – Deity only has relative ascendancy, yet with the community, King - Deity, though earthly, this king has the power not only to control the earth, to head the autocratic state, to rule over the living people but also to manage, to control the supernatural creatures in the territories as entrusted by God. This confirmation is most clearly proved by deifying as per level those who have rendered great services to the country, to the people, or by deifying rivers, mountains and souls credited with illusory services. For that reason, very year, in the sacred land, which has been regarded as the heart of the country, where Heaven and Earth meet, with an invisible tie, on behalf of the entire people, the king prays to God – the deity of destiny of the living, of the community, of the king himself and his clan for a propitious year. In this ritual, the king himself acts as master of the ceremony and does not concede such rights to anybody else; the king also ploughs the first symbolic cut, ushering in a new production year.

For villages, worship of local deities or Tutelary Gods is an example. These gods have different origins, depending on each village, each commune, these gods may be natural ones (river, mountain, soil); sometimes, deities in invisible relations with the community... According to the scientific research by author Nguyễn Duy Hinh in *Vietnamese Tutelary God*

Beliefs (1), it is clear that most of Tutelary Gods were those people credited with building, founding villages, or were progenitors of some certain specific trade of the villages. Besides, Tutelary Gods were also those that rendered great services to the country and hence were acclaimed the names and a phenomenon that in a village, there existed a Tutelary God appointed by the king next to a Tutelary God acclaimed by the villagers. The worship of Tutelary Gods in villages with the function to develop and protect the community represents the attachment between the individuals in the community of villages with the dead through the belief, religious ties; on the other hand, also through the belief, religious ties, one can see the association between villages and the central court – the representative of community of nation, state. This is shown in the form of rituals, i.e. the villages, during their festivals, ceremonies to worship Tutelary Gods are often followed by worship of King – Deity so as to demonstrate their loyalty which is not only shown in daily life but also in beliefs and relations.

For families, researches on individuals in the relations with the community show that each individual, apart from carrying out numerous relationships with the villages, nation, state, has to carry out the relationships of his

bloodline, though not residing in the territory, in social units, in villages, yet still have the blood relations which are represented in family, clan. Ancestor is regarded as a destiny deity of the family, of the clan. Ancestor is commemorated by posterity as the sentiment of both respect and fear (respect: debt of gratitude for giving birth and bringing up; fear: punishment, fear for the belief that the fate of posterity is closely associated with ancestor's decisions). Therefore, ancestor is commemorated, cared for and attended by their posterity – this is the tie that links the living with the dead within infinite limits, since today they are posterity and tomorrow they will be ancestor, and this is the tie to link the dead with the living. In the religious aspect, such relationships are the core of the psyche of the Orientals in general and of the Vietnamese in particular.

In summary, the relationship between religion and nation, via the main axis of Family – Village – Country, creates a strong tie. Characterized by the aforesaid features, author Phan Ngọc observed: “This is also a way to translate a culture built on the basis of patriotism into religious conscientiousness, to use religions conscientiousness to strengthen patriotism” (9, p. 308). Thus, it can be initially concluded that, as early as from the primitive times in Vietnam when the country, as a state, nation,

was formed, the relationship between nation and religion was established too. This relationship was a firm and important foundation for the acquisition and acculturation of the exogenous religions that were later introduced to Vietnam.

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