

# Characteristics of Religious Life in Vietnam Today<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *Religious life in Vietnam today has experienced changes in various aspects. The paper identifies and indicates common features of change which include the existence of several religious forms; the increasingly stabilized development and legal compliance of religious activities; the hidden complexity and negative factors in the religious life; the rapid growth of some religions in ethnic minority areas; the diverse of new religious movements.*

**Keywords:** Religion, Religious Life, Vietnam's Religions, Characteristics of Vietnam's Religions

## Introduction

Vietnam is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. Religious followers in Vietnam account for a relatively large number. According to statistics, as of June 2020, there are 43 organizations of 16 religions in Vietnam officially registered with and recognized by the State (Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2020), with more than 26 million followers, accounting for more than a quarter of the country's population (Cited by Nguyen Thi Dieu Thuy, 2019: 13). Generally, the religious landscape in Vietnam is relatively rich, multifaceted and multidimensional. In recent years, religious life in Vietnam has undergone

radical changes in many aspects, namely, an increase in the number of followers, worship establishments, changing operation of religious dignitaries and organizations, booming social charity and international diplomacy of religious organizations. These changes come from many reasons such as the change of world religions, the impacts of the market economy, globalization, the science-technology revolution, etc. and, importantly, the changes in the Communist Party of Vietnam's and State of Vietnam's views, guidelines and policies on religion. Currently, religious life in Vietnam are increasingly stable, however there are still complicated and negative factors such as the development and expansion of new religious phenomena, the hostile forces abuse religious issues to topple the State, causing social instability, thus posing many difficulties to the management of religion. The article aims to identify and provide

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relatively systematic information about the basic characteristics of religious life in Vietnam mainly based on the collection of published sources from 2010 to now from religious authorities such as the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, the Central Mass Mobilization Commission and scholarly books and journals of religion.

### **1. The intertwined and harmonious coexistence of different religions**

Compared with many countries around the world, the percentage of religious followers in Vietnam is not large, but there exist many religions as well as types of religious organizations. Among the existing religions in Vietnam, the organization size and operation scope of religious organizations are not proportionate.

There are religions brought to Vietnam very early such as Buddhism (over 2,000 years), Islam (nearly 600 years), Catholicism (nearly 500 years), while there are religions newly introduced like Protestants (more than 100 years), Baha'i (about 60 years), or newly born in Vietnam such as Caodaism (over 90 years), Hoa Hao Buddhism (nearly 80 years), etc. In which there are several religious followers with a wide range of activities such as Buddhism, Catholicism, whereas some have less religious believers as well as narrower scope of activities such as Caodaism mainly in the southern provinces, Hoa Hao Buddhism mainly in the southwestern provinces, Protestants mainly in Central Highlands and some ethnic minority areas in the North, etc. Religion has only one organization such as Buddhism with the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam, Hoa Hao Buddhism with the Buddhist Sangha of Hoa Hao, etc.

Meanwhile, there are religions with many independent organizations such as Caodaism with more than 10 sects, Protestantism with a dozen sects, Islam, Bani Islam, etc. Many religions were introduced and harmonized early on, making contributions to creating the culture, morality, lifestyle and mentality of the Vietnamese people like Buddhism; whereas there were also religions during their process of importation and development, had intensified differences, even engendered cultural conflicts, or was abused by hostile forces to widen the gap among the people, leaving scars in relations with the government, such as Catholicism, Protestantism, etc. (Cited by Nguyen Hong Duong, 2012; Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, 2019).

Besides, among ethnic minorities in Vietnam, there are still various folk beliefs and primitive religions such as totem, magic, witchcraft, etc. creating an extremely diverse and rich religious life in Vietnam.

With the diversity of beliefs, religions and religious organizations, Vietnam is often regarded as the miniature picture of the world's religions. The endogenous religions took roots in Vietnam were a result of the combination of doctrines and ideologies of the world's major religions with indigenous religions and beliefs. The major religions of the world such as Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam, which were imported to Vietnam, have enjoyed a high regard and role, with a great number of followers, dignitaries and worship establishments, as the clearly shown in the below summary table of followers, dignitaries and worship establishments of major religions in Vietnam (See: Table 1).

**Table 1: The Religious Statistics of 2018  
in Vietnam**

No.	Religion	Followers	Dignitaries	Worship Establishments
1	Buddhism	14.812,178	29,727	18,210
2	Catholicism	6.976,585	7,491	7,571
3	Protestantism	1.090,748	2,515	934
4	Caodaism	1.178,579	13,464	1,312
5	Hoa Hao Buddhism	1.427,361	160	59
6	Islam	83,102	737	93
7	Others	418,165	1,776	395
	<b>Total</b>	<b>25.986,718</b>	<b>55,870</b>	<b>28,574</b>

Source: Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2018.

In fact, there is a huge difference in the statistics on the number of religious followers by units and agencies, especially those on Buddhist followers. According to the 2019 General Population and Housing Census of the General Statistics Office, there are 13.2 million religious followers in Vietnam, accounting for 13.7% of the country's total population. In particular, the number of Catholics is the largest with 5.9 million people, making up for 44.6% of the total number of religious followers and 6.1% of the total population of the country. Followed by the number of Buddhist followers with 4.6 million people, accounting for 35% of the total number of followers of religion and 4.8% of the population of the country. The remaining religions account for a small proportion (The General Statistics Office, 2020).

Based on the figures of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs and the General Statistics Office mentioned above in terms of the number of Catholics, it can be observed that the figures are

quite uniform, the difference, if any, is not significant. However, with the number of Buddhist followers, there is a quite large "gap" between the statistics of the General Statistics Office and the Government Committee for Religious Affairs. This difference, according to many researchers, is attributable to the different understandings of what it means to be a Buddhist follower. The status of Buddhists has not been clearly defined like those of other religions. Besides, many Buddhists do not claim to be followers in their social relations. On the other

hand, the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam fails to have an effective management method to confirm its followers count, thus the aforementioned situation has been unsolved for many years (Nguyen Thi Minh Ngoc, 2016: 124-125).

Remarkably, despite the religious diversity in Vietnam, in general, both past and present, all religions coexist in an equal, harmonious, and sociable manner with little discrimination, which speaks volume for the needs and openness of the Vietnamese spiritual life. The diversity of beliefs and religions has also contributed to the rich and unique culture of Vietnam.

## **2. The increasingly stable operation of religious organizations in compliance with the undertakings, guidelines and policies of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the State of Vietnam**

*Regarding the operation of religious organizations*, before 1986, only four religions recognized by the State, namely, the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam,

the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North), the rest of the religious organizations had not been recognized; by 2018 there were 40 more organizations recognized<sup>1</sup> (Nguyen Thanh Xuan, 2019a: 7). All legally religious organizations in Vietnam have adopted the mottos in accordance with the Party and State's undertakings, guidelines and laws, for example, "Dhamma, Nationalism and Socialism", "Living the Gospel with the heart of the people", "God-loving and Patriotic", "Living the Gospel, serving God, serving the Fatherland and the people" for the Buddhist Sangha, the Catholic Church (in the 1980 General Letter of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam), the Evangelical Church of Vietnam, and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South), respectively. Likewise, other religious organizations, when recognized, also adopt the forward-thinking mottos such as *Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa* (literally Four Debts of Gratitude) which means "Practising Four Debts of Gratitude - For the Great National Unity"; for the Vietnamese Pure Land Buddhism Association, "Do religious practices and good deeds, benefit the country and the people", etc.

Not only determining the operational direction, religious organizations in Vietnam in current climate also send people to directly participate in elected bodies and socio-political organizations, contributing to materializing the direction into religious and social life. Accordingly, the number of party members who are religious followers have increased

significantly, as of 2016, there were 82,752 members following (an increase of 45,766 party members compared to 2004), accounting for 1.74% of the total number of party members in the whole country (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 2017a: 13). Moreover, in an official report of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, in 2015, there were 10 religions in Vietnam having members in the 13th National Assembly, 123 held membership to Provincial People's Councils (accounting for 2% of the deputies), 958 were members of the district People's Councils, 13,037 were members of communal People's Councils; 50 were members of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, 556 were members of the provincial Fatherland Front Committee, 3,036 were members of the district Fatherland Front Committees, 17,631 were members of the Communal Fatherland Front Committees; 10 were members of the Central Executive Committee of 5 socio-political mass organizations, 647 were provincial-level members, 7,706 were district-level members, 28,411 were commune-level members, etc. (Central Committee of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, 2015).

*Regarding religious practices*, some followers who used to face difficulties, nowadays can do ordinary religious practices at homes and places of worship in line with the traditional rituals of their own religions. The religious establishments and facilities are also provided such as places of worship, scriptures and dignitaries guiding for religious practice. Some religions, notably those within a local scope, was just recently born or introduced. Recently, several religious practices took place on a

<sup>1</sup> Including Hoa Hao Buddhist Church, Caodaism: 11 organizations (sects), Protestants: 12 organizations (sects), Islam: 06 organizations (provincial level), other religions: 11 organizations.

large scale such as *the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Protestantism to Vietnam*, in Da Nang, Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City in 2011, attracting dozens of thousands of followers, dignitaries and international visitors, *the United Nations Vesak - Vesak 2019* at Tam Chuc Pagoda, Ha Nam province with the participation of 1,650 international delegates from 112 countries and 20,000 domestic delegates (Trung Hieu, 2019).

The training of religious dignitaries is an important aspect, because they are “officials” of religion, who guide believers in religious practices and in many cases play the role of mediators between God and his people. Prior to 1986, there were only a few institutions that trained dignitaries of Buddhism and Catholicism. By 2015, 17 universities training dignitaries were established. Of which there are 04 Buddhist academies, 07 major Catholic grand seminaries, 03 Protestant schools, 02 schools of Caodaism and 01 school of Hoa Hao Buddhism. In addition, there are 40 colleges and intermediate schools of religions, especially Buddhist, bringing the number of schools for religious dignitary training in Vietnam by 2015 to nearly 60, with a total of about 10,000 students. Also from 1986 to 2015, there were more than 1,000 religious dignitaries studying abroad for masters and doctoral degrees (650 people in Buddhism alone) (The Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2015).

*Publication of religious texts and books* in Vietnam previously was limited. But by 2015, at the central level, religious organizations has published 15 active newspapers and journals, including prestigious ones such as *Buddhist Culture*, *Buddhist Studies*, *Khuong Viet*, *Theravada*

*Buddhism*, *Enlightenment* (the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam), *Vietnam Catholic Church News*, *Vietnamese Catholics* (the Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholics), *Catholicism and People* (the Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholics in Ho Chi Minh City), *Pastoral News* (Protestant), *Cao Dai* (Caodaism), *Lotus Scent* (Hoa Hao Buddhism), etc. There are also many websites - official pages of active religious organizations (The Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2015).

### **3. The existence of complicated and negative factors in the religious life**

In the current social context, when the downsides of the market economy have deepened the rich-poor divide and spurred social evils, the religious practices, including Buddhism, may make contributions to preserving cultural traditions, ethics of the nation and the health of the society. However, in recent years, a number of Buddhist worship establishments (especially at the beginning of a year or a month, etc.) have practiced religious rituals that are inconsistent with the traditional teachings of the Buddha, superstitious manifestations and spiritual profiteering, causing public frustrations such as praying for relief from bad luck, retributive calamity, dispelling evil spirits, imprisoning spirits, offering practices, praying for love, making offerings to forsaken spirits, requiem, etc. (See: Vu Chien Thang, 2019a; 2019b).

Currently, following open economic, cultural and social policies, along with the expansion of democracy, and promotion of the rule of law and citizen’s rights, civil complaints and lawsuits have mushroomed, of which those on religion or religious land

account for a remarkable proportion (The Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2020).

There are a number of hot spots that are not purely religious but related to political and ethnic issues, thus the situation has increasingly complicated, such as gatherings for crown claim, establishing the Mong Kingdom, disrupting security and order in Muong Nhe district, Dien Bien province in 2011; Radical Catholics in Vinh diocese colluded with entities of reactionary organizations at home and abroad to incite parishioners to march and protest against the Party and State's policy in addressing the impacts of the incident of marine environmental pollution in the central provinces of Vietnam in 2016, 2017, etc. (The Central Committee, 2017a: 10); On May 5-7<sup>th</sup> 2018, thousands of Catholics and many priests in some parishes of Quynh Luu district, Nghe An province and some Catholic churches in Thach Ha, Can Loc districts, Ha Tinh city of Ha Tinh province, in Ho Chi Minh City, etc. gathered to march against the National Assembly's adoption of two bills, namely, the Law on Cyber Security and the draft Law on Special Administrative - Economic Units (Cited by Minh Hieu, 2018: 4).

In recent years, the emergence and formation of religious-ethnic communities is also a complicated issue in religious life in Vietnam due to its consequences and impacts. According to Nguyen Phu Loi (2019: 25), the formation of religious - ethnic institutions has changed many traditional values of these communities, notably the position and role of elders, chiefs, village leaders, clansmen have been replaced by religious leaders such

as leader, missionary, pastor (Protestant), territorial prelate, abbot, exarch, vicar, prefect, bishops (Catholic). According to Nguyen Hong Duong (2012: 135), this appearance again gave rise to conflicts between residents of the same ethnic group but followed different religions, such as the Ba-ni Cham, which stood in contrast to the Cham Muslim or Mong Protestant contradicted the Mong with traditional beliefs.

The complicated and negative feature of religious life in Vietnam is a particular concern because hostile forces always takes advantage of religious issues in strategic areas such as the Northwest, Central Highlands, and South West against the State of Vietnam. According to the preliminary report for the first 6 months of 2020 of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (Government Committee for Religious Affairs, 2020): *In the Northwest*, in January 2020, in Ta Tong, Muong Te, Dien Bien communes, some reactionary Mong people outside the country strengthened the relations and directed a number of H'mong Protestants in the country to collect evidence and send them to the U.S. Embassy in Vietnam and international organizations to accuse Vietnam of "violations of human rights", "suppression of religious freedom"; continue to distribute propaganda materials about the "Mong state" and fight for the release of the detainees who participated in the establishment of the "Mong state". *In the Central Highlands*, the number of FULRO' leaders and "Dega Protestantism" in the US made use of the Internet to propagate and incite activities to establish an "independent Dega state" in this locality; directed the number of

core “Dega Protestants” in the Central Highlands provinces to organize the “16<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the second riot” and scaled up propaganda, mobilization and attraction of discontent dignitaries and Protestants to participate in “Dega Protestantism”. *In the southwestern region*, a number of people in the U.S. KKK ‘hate groups’ directed a number of the extreme Khmer Theravada Buddhist monks in Tra Vinh province to propagate, distort and disobey measures to prevent and control the Covid-19 pandemic, claiming that these measures were actions to prevent the Khmer from celebrating the Cambodian New Year (Chol Chnam Thmay), aim to assimilate Khmer people; they directed the continuation of organizing the Chöl Chnam Thmay festival in 2020 as planned; organized filming and photography if prevented by local authorities to denounce Vietnam as “suppressing the Khmer”, “violating democracy and human rights”.

#### **4. Fast-growing religions in ethnic minority regions**

Among the religions operating in ethnic minority areas, most notably the rapid restoration and development of Protestantism in ethnic minority areas in the Central Highlands, Southern Truong Son mountain range, neighboring provinces, especially in the northern mountainous provinces with a large number of Protestant H’Mong ethnic minorities. If there were only about 55 thousand Protestants count in 1975, by 2017 it would increase to 775 thousand, more than 14 times (Nguyen Thanh Xuan, 2019b: 104). According to the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (2018), by the end of 2018, there are 1,090,748 Protestants, compared to Buddhism and Catholics, this number of

followers can be said to be very small, but the impact of Protestantism is notable. Currently, Protestantism has presented in most provinces and cities in the country and its followers are also very diverse.

According to Nguyen Thanh Xuan (2019b: 104-105), Protestantism is growing rapidly and strongly in ethnic minority regions in Vietnam today due to both subjective and objective reasons, both economically and socially, and the explanations can stem from the very characteristics of Protestantism. Particularly, due to the policies of renovation, opening up, international integration, especially the process of national industrialization and modernization, given the advantages of Protestantism in the process of evangelization and practices (simple, compact and easy to follow rites, active practice direction and operation, easy to renovate and adapt from the formality to the substance in order to fit in social circumstances).

The development of Protestantism in ethnic minorities has both positive and negative impacts on economic, political, cultural - social aspects, etc. Remarkable problem is the abuse of radical Protestant people and political organizations in the cloak of Protestantism to regularly organize activities to buttress their influence, expand the scope, attract more new followers, provoke the thought of self-determination and liberation, start ethnic-religious hot spots, propagate and distort the undertakings and policies of the Party and State, breaking up the great national unity.

However, since the Government made proper policies on religious practices in ethnic minority regions (Directive No. 01/

CT-TTg dated 4<sup>th</sup> February 2005 of the Prime Minister towards Protestantism, Notice No. 42/TB-VPCP dated 25<sup>th</sup> May 2001 of the Office of the Government and Project No. 03-ĐA/TGCP dated 12<sup>th</sup> July 2001 of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs on Protestantism), the religious situation in the ethnic minority regions has gradually stabilized, the negative effects have been minimized and the positive effects have been increasingly evident.

Despite being less powerful and clear as Protestantism, Catholicism and Buddhism also have extended their scope to ethnic minority areas. Since 2015, provinces of Son La, Lai Chau, Dien Bien, etc. have had Catholicism-related activities and a part of ethnic minority Catholics. Traditional Buddhism exists mainly among the Kinh people, and nowadays also develops in ethnic minorities in the Northwest and Central Highlands. Other religions such as Hoa Hao Buddhism, Caodaism, *Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương* (literally Strange Fragrance from the Precious Mountain), *Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa* (literally Four Debts of Gratitude), Baha'i, etc. have also gone beyond traditional areas (Caodaism in the South; Hoa Hao Buddhism, *Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương*; *Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa*, etc. in the South West, Baha'i in the South) and attracted followers from other localities.

### 5. The diversity of new religious movements

From the 1980s, new religious phenomena took shape in Vietnam, also known as "strange religion" with various different names. According to statistics of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, as of July 2017, there were more than 100 organizations, groups, religious sects newly imported from abroad, 14

groups and new religious organizations related to spirituality towards President Ho Chi Minh, 05 organizations related to Buddha worship and 14 groups of polytheistic beliefs, etc. (See: Central Executive Committee, 2017b).

New religious phenomena has presented in various localities due to many reasons, but directly the changes in economic, cultural, social and environmental conditions affected by the industrialization, modernization, integration and globalization. This change has raised pressing social problems. In addition, the effects of the intellectual level, the media, the abuse of freedom of religion and belief by domestic and foreign organizations and individuals are also factors paving the way for new religious movements to grow.

In general, the emergence of new religions are forecasted to be nationwide with complicated developments. According to the preliminary report in the first 6 months of 2020 of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (2020), there are 56/63 provinces and cities with about 34,904 people believing in new religious phenomena, which adversely affect the cultural life, security and order. Some new religious phenomena such as Falun Gong, Supreme Master Ching Hai, *Nhật quán đạo*, "Duong Van Minh sect", "The Church of God the Mother" keep promoting their activities and growth. In some ethnic minority areas, such as "strange religions" of *Bà Cô Dợ*, *Giê Sùa* and *Hà Môn* have shown signs of recovery, increasingly enticing people to participate.

Regarding the development of new religious phenomena in Vietnam in the coming time, Ngo Huu Thao (2018: 198-199) suggests that the demographic

composition of population of new religious phenomena will be more diverse and the number of believers will increase steadily; the number of new religious movements may be reduced, followers will switch to other new religious movements, of which the ones with more “advantages” will emerge. New religious movements will eliminate elements of superstition and counter-culture, and increase the political nature and purposes instead.

Meanwhile, Do Quang Hung (2011a: 5) shows that “all new religious movements in Vietnam today are likely to make use of the spiritual philosophy or the form of rituals and practices of indigenous beliefs to develop”. The classification of new religions in Vietnam based on their characteristics and distinct manifestations is as follows: religious forms newly introduced to Vietnam, religious forms related to Buddhism, the sects close to folk beliefs, the extreme religious behaviors, and the unaffiliated. Further, Do Quang Hung (2014: 249) confirms that although the new religious issue has not yet been legalized, it has become a definite religious force which has its own life, operation, followers, birth and end, ups and downs and target audience. This is a market which partly contributes to the diversity of the general *religion market* of Vietnam.

Generally, the new religious phenomenon has the intertwined positive and negative elements, which requires the Party and State of Vietnam to adopt many measures and solutions to ensure the people’s right to freedom of belief and religion and prevent new phenomenon of religious nature from adversely affecting the stability of society.

## Conclusion

As a matter of fact, the religious life in Vietnam today is diverse and lively. To a certain extent, the paper barely identifies and outlines its basic features. Researchers have different assessments and judgments on specific aspects and characteristics by different perspectives and approaches. However, there is a variety of general viewpoints on the characteristics of the transformation of religious life in Vietnam today, remarkably, “there is a ongoing fundamental change in ‘religion’, more precisely, ‘reconfiguring religion’ in social life in general and in particular in its relationship with the legal system” (Do Quang Hung, 2011b: 59-70); or “new concepts have emerged such as Internet evangelization, @-era prayer, online religious life in the 4.0 revolution” (Nguyen Phu Loi, 2019: 25). Besides, most researchers (in some studies on religion in Vietnam such as Nguyen Hong Duong (2012), Nguyen Phu Loi (2019), Nguyen Thanh Xuan (2019a), Nguyen Thi Minh Ngoc (2016), etc.) all agree that basically Vietnamese religions operate and develop stably, accompanying with the development of the nation; religious belief have returned and changed in its appearance and restructuring, with the popular trend of diversity, pluralism and modernization of religion. Their works also highlights potential complicated and negative factors in the religious life that require better management from the national specialized departments and agencies.

Against the background of globalization and international integration, religions in Vietnam not only actively operate on a national scale but also enhance international exchanges in different aspects to promote

foreign policy of the Party and State of Vietnam, contributing to the diplomatic struggle against the rhetoric distorting the religious situation in Vietnam by hostile forces, and to the stability and development of the country □

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