

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGIONS AND NATIONALITIES IN SOUTH VIETNAM

PHAN AN

1. Nam Bo (Cochin China or South Vietnam) has been established for just more than three centuries. It is inhabited by different ethnic groups including the majority Viet and the minority Hoa, Kho me, Cham, Stieng, Chau ro and Ma. Some of these groups such as the Kho me and the Chau ro are local groups, and many have migrated from other regions during the process of reclamation of this land. The Viet settled in the region quite early. By the time the Nguyen Lord established the Gia Dinh administrative area in 1869, the Viet population, numbering 200,000, had already settled to reclaim land in the region. The Hoa arrived in the region from the middle of the 17th century. They came from the southern coastal provinces of China, such as Quang Dong and Phuc Kien. By the end of the 18th century, the Cham had established small villages along the Hau River close to the Vietnam-Cambodia border. They were descendants of the Cham in central Vietnam. After moving to Cambodia, they traveled along the Hau River back to Vietnam.

Prior to the 17th century, Nam Bo was deserted, with vast and sparsely populated land. Most of the land area was covered by forests and swamps and criss-crossed with rivers and canals with tides infiltrating deep inside the mainland. Local ethnic groups such as the Kho me, Chau ro, and Stieng settled on mounds

and high alluvial spacious areas with fresh water sources. The migrants mixed with the locals and reclaimed the surrounding lowland areas to build rice fields, gardens and markets. The region was full of potential, but also posed great challenges to the new settlers because of its salty and aluminous soil, thick jungles, numerous rivers and canals, and wild animals. Many people laid down their lives while reclaiming land in the quest for new land to build the country.

Nam Bo soon became the center for the exchange of many cultures of different ethnic groups in the country, the region and the world. However, most important were the cultural exchanges between the ethnic groups who have settled down together and reclaimed the southern land. The cultures of local ethnic groups such as the Kho me, Stieng and Chau ro met with those of the Viet, Hoa and Cham. These exchanges have created a common cultural identity of the population in the region. The culture of the southern region has inherited and developed the traditional cultures of local ethnic groups to adapt to regional ecological conditions.

It can be said that the ethnic groups who settled down together in Nam Bo were soon bound together, sharing and helping each other during their existence and development. The migrants were poor farmers and handicraftsmen who had to

leave their native villages to seek new land for their living. Therefore when they met they easily sympathized with and helped each other, and were close together. The desire of the ethnic groups in the region, in the past as well as the present, is to build a peaceful and plentiful life. Therefore they were ready to unite and take up arms against oppressors and invaders to protect their life and safeguard their labour gains in land reclamation. The wars of resistance against the French colonialists and the US imperialists, which were waged by the southerners and ended successfully, were a vivid proof of this.

2. The inhabitants in Nam Bo were not only involved in land reclamation to establish villages and farming for food and clothing, but also for their spiritual lives. They turned their thoughts back to their roots and their ancestors with the belief that the ancestors would support them in their lives in the new land. People who resettled in the region also had to cope with mysteriously wild nature where supernatural powers still affected their lives. Their belief in the interventions of deities and evil spirits in their resettlement and land reclamation was an indispensable factor and a spiritual need in their quest of the new land and adaptation to nature.

This explains why the southern part of Vietnam was where different forms of beliefs and religions converged and were formed. It is noted that with a favourable geographical position, the convergence of transport routes from East to West and

from North to South, Nam Bo was also very favourable for spreading major world religions. Buddhism was imported to Nam Bo quite early. It was present there with both sects - Theravada and Mahayana. Catholicism was imported into the region by western clergymen and traders, and Islam was imported from some Southeast Asian countries. This is not to mention that in the ancient cultural classes in Nam Bo, Hindu influences were also recognized.

Religions and beliefs have become a moral support for those who were conquering the southern land. Firstly, although they believed in deities and saints and the supernatural powers, they, in fact, believed in their own powers and their industriousness and brave land reclamation activities. The communities of the Viet and Hoa brought with them to the new land not only ploughs, hoes and farming experiences, but also customs, traditions and religious beliefs. Upon arrival in the new land, they established villages, markets and shrines – pagodas dedicated to Buddha and temples to deities and saints - and communal houses. The beliefs and religions of these new settlers targeted at building a stable and prosperous life. They wished to enjoy as much support from deities and saints as possible. For this very reason, the spiritual life and beliefs of the southern ethnic groups was rich and somehow different from other parts of the country. This is a favourable condition for the development or import of religions and beliefs in the region. Until the end of the

19th century and early 20th century, this region continued to establish new religions and beliefs, attracting hundreds of thousands of followers, such as the Tu An, Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects.

3. What is worth noting during our study and research on religious issues in Nam Bo is the relationship between religions and nationalities. The beliefs and religions in the region are closely linked with the ethnic groups in terms of content and forms. Ancestral worship is popular in many communities in the region, but the form of worshipping varies from one ethnic group to another. The Viet and the Hoa have worship halls and altars in their homes to worship their ancestors on certain days of the year. The Kho me worship their ancestors in the Dolta Festival (the 15th of the 8th lunar month) every year. The ceremony is held mainly at pagodas whose towers keep the ashes of the remains of their dear ones (stupa or pcheday). Many deities, saints and evil spirits are worshipped and respected by ethnic groups in Nam Bo. But each group has its own selection, so there are certain differentials between groups. The Viet select Thanh Hoang (tutelary god) as the guardian for their villages and the Tutelary God is worshipped at the village communal house. The Kho me worship Nakta (or the evil spirit) as the guardian for their *phum* and *soc* (village) and the Nakta is worshipped in a hut at the entrance of the village. The Hoa have many guardian gods, depending on the linguistic groups they belong to. They are Quan Cong, Lady

Thien Hau, Saint Bon...and they are worshipped in temples and shrines.

The relationship between religions and nationalities is clearly shown in Southern Vietnam. In addition to the religions that have followers from many ethnic groups, there are religions that only have followers from one ethnic group. On the other hand, some ethnic groups follow many religions and some only accept one religion. The Mahayana Buddhists come from the Viet and the Hoa. Catholicism and Protestantism also have followers from different ethnic groups such as the Viet, Hoa and other ethnic minority groups in Eastern Nam Bo. The Theravada Buddhists come from the Kho me only, and the Kho me only accept the Theravada Buddhism. The Muslims are among the Cham community in Nam Bo only. The Cao Dai and Hoa Hao followers are farmers of the Viet community in the region and most of the Hoa Hao followers come from the southwestern provinces such as An Giang, Can Tho and Dong Thap.

Imported religions in Nam Bo such as Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam have, to certain extent, been received by ethnic groups in the region in their own ways, in other words, they have been "*localized*" and "*nationalized*". Buddhism has been accepted by the Viet and Hoa in their own ways. The Buddha has sometimes become a saint or a god giving support to the unfortunate people. The Christ is the same. The Catholics practice ceremonies with their traditional beliefs. The altar dedicated to Christ is

placed next to the ancestral altar where the incense sticks are burnt. For the Muslims, because the Cham maintain the matriarchal regime, the role of the Cham Muslims is more respected here than in some other Muslim countries in the world. The cultural identities of the ethnic groups in Nam Bo have had impacts on the religions they follow. They have selected religious aspects, which are suitable to their cultures and customs. Here, mention should be made to the characteristics of humanity and community of the religions and the closeness to the cultures of the local ethnic groups. This contributes to explaining why in Vietnam in general and in Nam Bo in particular, there have been no disputes and ostracizing actions between the religions of the ethnic groups in history.

The impacts of beliefs and religions on ethnic groups in Nam Bo can be seen socio-economically, but the most important impacts are witnessed in their cultural life. Ancestral worship is the belief of the Viet and the Hoa. It is also their cultural trait and lifestyle. Ancestral worship is not only a ceremonial ritual, but also a reminder to educate the young generations to remember the services of their ancestors, remembering the water source they drink. The Theravada Buddhism of the Kho me has established the good-oriented lifestyles and the close ties in the community. Buddhism has had great and important impacts on the cultural and social life of the Kho me in Nam Bo. Islam has contributed to the culture of the Cham in the region and

makes it different from the Cham communities in Ninh, Binh Thuan province. The religious life of the communities in Nam Bo is very diverse and rich and this is a separate feature of the culture in the region. It is on this land that the beliefs and religions of the ethnic groups have met and exchanged. They have harmonized and contributed to the development of the region in history as well as at present.

4. The issue of religions and nationalities has had an important position and role in the history of development of South Vietnam. Their relationship also has other aspects that draw our attention. The policies on religions and nationalities vary from one regime to another in different stages of history. In general, prior to 1975, the authorities and political powers in Southern Vietnam had tried to exploit the relationship between religions and nationalities to serve their purpose and the interest of a section of population or their individual benefit. The issue of nationalities and religions was in fact a means and scheme of a certain group to achieve or consolidate their domination and rule in the region.

Under the feudal regime, the Nguyen Lords and then the Nguyen who ruled the southern part of the country adopted some policies on religions and nationalities. In general, those policies rudely and roughly treated some religions and nationalities in an attempt to control and assimilate ethnic minority groups. King Minh Mang (1820 – 1840) once promulgated

regulations forcing the Kho me in Nam Bo to register family members with last names fixed by the State such as the Danh, Son, Kim, Lam, Thach, and forcing Kho me monks and nuns to change the colours of their robes. Under the rule of King Tu Duc (1848 – 1883), Catholicism was prohibited and clergymen were ousted. The religious and nationality policies of the Nguyen gave rise to indignation and protest from the religions and people of different ethnic groups in the country, particularly in Nam Bo.

The French colonialists used religions, particularly Catholicism as an initial means. Western clergymen together with their relatives arrived and then the army, paving the way for the colonialist invasion of Vietnam. Catholicism had been introduced early into the Central Highlands and Eastern Nam Bo. The French used religions and nationalities to sow division among patriotic and revolutionary forces in Vietnam, causing hatred among religions and ethnic groups.

Under the domination of the US imperialists and Saigon puppet regime from 1954 to 1975, the relationship between religions and nationalities became very serious and complex. The American and the Saigon puppet regime tried all means to misuse the issue of religions and nationalities in Nam Bo to serve their purpose of maintaining the slavery yoke of the neo-colonialist regime in the region. Immediately after the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1954, the US and the Saigon puppet administration

tried to take advantage of the Catholic forces as their military and political mainstay. Similarly, they drew the ethnic minority people in Southern Vietnam in their war and tried to split religious followers and ethnic minorities from the patriotic revolutionary forces. The consequences caused by the religious and nationality policies of the US-puppet regime were very heavy.

The issues of religion and nationality before 1975 were very complex. The administration and political forces realized the organic relationship between these issues and so tried to misuse them in order to oppose the revolutionary cause of the Southern Vietnamese people. Such policies and schemes were to some extent different from one period to another, but in general they aimed to split and cause disputes among religions and ethnic groups, using religion to delude ethnic minority people and lead them to fight against the communists under different disguises.

5. Religious followers in Southern Vietnam are estimated to make up 40 percent of the population. In fact, it is hard to get precise statistics of religious believers in the region. This is not only because of the fluctuation of their number but also in the concept of religious believers, which is quite vague in some cases. An example can be seen in the Buddhist followers. Many people often visit pagodas, have altars in their homes, eat vegetarian food on some days of the month, pray to Buddha and obey the Buddhist rules, but they are not

Buddhists. However, Buddhism has had certain impacts on the life of many people and on many ethnic groups. In terms of the number of religions in each ethnic group, there are large disparities. 100 percent of the Kho me and the Cham are Theravada Buddhist Hynayanists and Muslims, respectively. For the Viet, Hoa and other ethnic minority groups in Eastern Nam Bo, the proportion of religious followers is low (about 20 – 25 percent), while a large proportion of them follow different traditional forms of belief, which are very complex.

The issue of religions and nationalities and their relationship still play an important role in the process of development in Southern Vietnam. Religions and beliefs remain the spiritual need of ethnic groups. However, the question posed today is different from that of the past. Reality shows that immediately after being founded, the Communist Party of Vietnam attached importance to the issue of religions and nationalities. In the course of leading the Vietnamese revolution, the Party advocated equality and unity among religions and nationalities in Vietnam. Under this correct polity, our Party has rallied patriotic religious believers and people of all nationalities in the struggle for national independence and freedom. The revolutionary movement among people of different religions and ethnic groups before 1975 was a proof of the close relationship between religions and nationalities and their important role in the country's revolutionary cause.

Since the country embarked on renovation, the issue of religion and nationality in the whole country in general and in Southern part in particular has seen a new step of development. The religious policy of our Party and State is more open, respecting the right to religion or non-religion of citizens and considering religious beliefs a spiritual need of a section of the population. With regard to nationalities, the Party and Government have paid attention to the economic, social and cultural development and the improvement of the living standards for ethnic minority people. All the ethnic groups enjoy equality in their development, are united, and help each other in the building of Socialist Vietnam. The achievements recorded by our Party and State in their religious and nationality policies have greatly contributed to the revolutionary cause and development in the country in general and Nam Bo in particular.

6. The Southern Part as well as the whole country today are entering the period of industrialization and modernization, and the issue of religion and nationality continues to play an important role and position in national development. The unity among people of different religions and ethnic groups is a source of strength, ensuring the fruitful development of the region. Stemming from the close relationship between religion and nationality in the region, the unity between ethnic groups is inseparable from that between religions. In the past as well as at present, the

enemy and reactionary forces have tried by all means to split ethnic groups and religions with an aim to weakening the revolutionary forces. For this reason, it is necessary to attach importance to the issue of religions and nationalities and give it first priority.

To achieve unity among religions and ethnic groups in Nam Bo, our Party and State have adopted guidelines and policies on religion and nationalities in general, and specific policies toward some ethnic minority groups in particular. In the situation in which the country is carrying out industrialization and modernization, it is necessary to renew and to be sensitive in the implementation of these. On nationalities, the policy provides conditions and opportunities for all ethnic groups to develop on an equal footing. Because there are economic and social disparities between ethnic groups in the country, special attention and support have been given to disadvantaged minority people. In Nam Bo, the Government has concentrated investment in infrastructure construction, cultural and educational facilities and poverty reduction for the Kho me, the Cham and other disadvantaged ethnic minority groups in Eastern Nam Bo. On religion, the renewal in the implementation of the policies of the Party and the State in recent past, respecting the right to religion or non-religion of citizens, has built confidence among religious believers. Religious followers and dignitaries have undertaken positive activities and developed their position and role in the

cause of national development for today and for the future.

The policies of the Party and the State on religion and nationalities help build the relationship between religions and nationalities in Nam Bo. These policies have created conditions for ethnic groups, particularly minority groups, to develop not only their material lives but also their spiritual lives. The implementation of these policies has contributed to mobilizing resources of all ethnic groups and religions in the region for building a prosperous and powerful country and a civilized and modern society.

The relationship between religions and nationalities in Southern Vietnam is very close and has an important position and role in the region's development. Reality shows that up to now, the enemy and reactionary and hostile forces have been trying to misuse the issue of religions and nationalities and their relationships. Subjectively, in some places and in certain periods we have made some mistakes and shortcomings in the implementation of the policies on religions and nationalities and have not yet mobilized and made full use of the potential and strength of unity between religions and nationalities. The question is here is that we must continue developing the traditional strength and unity among religions and ethnic groups for the cause of industrialization and modernization of the Southern Part and of the country as a whole.