



Impact of religious change on social life in Vietnam today

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Abstract

The cause of the change in religions in Vietnam is due to the impact of the process of changing awareness, policies and ways of economic development and social management of different levels of government. In which, the direct factors are changes in economic, social, cultural and living conditions brought about by the process of industrialization, modernization, integration and globalization. This change has given rise to pressing social problems. Besides, the strong impact of people's intellectual standards and media; taking advantage of the freedom of religion and belief of organizations and individuals at home and abroad; ... are also important factors for the emergence and development of new religious phenomena in Vietnam.

Keywords: Change, life, religion, impact

1. Introduction

Religion is a complex social phenomenon, born very early in human history. During its existence along with the development of society, religion has sometimes acted in the same direction or in the opposite direction with the progress of mankind. In recent years, the world has witnessed conflicts, social outbursts, even armed conflicts or regional wars causing a lot of suffering and death whose causes are related to the religious issue. "The key issue of the end of this century is that the religious issue was presented in a different form" (Institute for Religious Studies, 1994, p. 13) ^[19]. Vietnam is a multi-religious country. Along with the comprehensive renovation of the country, the religious life in Vietnam has also undergone drastic changes. There are more and more contradictory trends in religious change such as: trend of religious diversification and individualization; trend of both competition and dialogue between religions; trend of religious internationalization and nationalization; trend of both being secular and increasing the sacredness of religion; and trend of religious modernization. These trends have both positive and negative impacts on social life in general and on religious life in Vietnam in particular, having a significant impact on all areas of social life such as economy, politics, culture and society. In the fact of such impact, the government at all levels in Vietnam have been sometimes being confused in their awareness and settlement, and even deviations and loopholes have been existing for hostile forces to take advantage of and disturb social security and order. On the basis of analyzing and clarifying the current status of religious change and its impacts on social life, the article points out the key manifestations and causes leading to the religious change in Vietnam today.

2. Research history and methods

2.1. Research history

Regarding the research on religion, religious changes and impact of religious changes on social life in recent years in Vietnam, there have been many typical authors and works such as: Dang Nghiem Van (2006) ^[15], About new things appearing in the current religious life; Nguyen Van Minh (2007) ^[8], Religious belief change and its impacts; Tran Van Trinh (2008) ^[12], Discussion on some religious development trends; Pham Van Dan (2008) ^[2], The influence of Buddhism on the spiritual life of the people of the Northern Delta; Nguyen Phu Loi (2010) ^[9], The change of religious life in Vietnam under the impact of globalization; Do Quang Hung (2012) ^[5], Reconfiguration of religious life in Vietnam today: Legal issues and challenges; Le Van Loi (2012) ^[10], Religious culture in Vietnamese social and spiritual life; Nguyen Hong Duong (2012) ^[11], The viewpoint of Communist Party on religion and religious issues in Vietnam today; Center for Religious Studies (2014) ^[13].

Postmodernism and new religious movements in the world and in Vietnam; Do Quang Hung (2014)^[6], State – Religion – Law; Nguyen Minh Ngoc (2017)^[7], The role of religion in building social trust, Through the above works, they show that the religion in Vietnam is a field attracting a large number of scholars. The works have many different viewpoints on the religious changes in Vietnam in the past time, depending on different approaches. There are changes being no longer mainstream but being mixed with other trends and dominated by them. However, there are also new changes that have appeared in recent years, strongly influencing other trends (trend of religious secularization, trend of religious diversification.). The scholars have had views on “religious life” as a social entity having been undergoing marked changes in accordance with such certain trends.

2.2. Research methods

The article uses methods such as: analysis-summarization, history-logic, comparison, combination of theoretical analysis with practical summary, structural system method, interdisciplinary method. The main approach of the article is a philosophical approach, based on the principles of dialectical materialism and historical materialism on the dialectical relationship between social existence and social consciousness, between material life and spiritual life. In particular, in order to understand the religious changes, the article especially applies the pair of possibility-reality, cause-effect as a direct basis for researching the current religious changes, which is the basis for assessing its impacts on religious life in Vietnam today. In addition, the article is also interested in multidisciplinary approaches such as: Approach of religious anthropology when considering the religious life in the change in both time and space, in both personal life and public life, thereby helping the article to have a deeper insight into the religious life; Approach of religious sociology helps the article to recognize and assess the impacts of religious change on social life in Vietnam through statistical data,...

3. Research results

3.1. Manifestations of religious change in Vietnam

3.1.1. Conversion

The phenomenon of switching from polytheism to monotheism, or from traditional religion to Catholicism and Protestantism is quite common in Vietnam today, especially in areas such as the Northwest, the Central Highlands, and the Southwest. More specifically, “In the Northwest region, there has been a fairly common phenomenon of Hmong and Dao people abandoning their traditional religion to follow Protestantism. In the Central Highlands, many local ethnic minorities have abandoned their traditional religion to follow Protestantism. In the Southwest region, there has been a conversion from Khmer Theravada Buddhism to Protestantism” (Tran Hong Lien, 2014)^[11]. There has been also the phenomenon of switching from traditional religions, Catholicism, Protestantism and Buddhism to new religious phenomena such as Ho Chi Minh’s Spirituality, Nhat Quan Cult,... In terms of nature and extent of religious belief, conversion has been taking place quite commonly in the context of international integration in Vietnam without disappearing a rather prominent feature of religious belief of Vietnamese people, which is the diversity in the religious belief of Vietnamese people. That makes Vietnamese people can believe in many different gods at the same time. “Each

Vietnamese people gets involved in many different religious acts. Followers of each religion easily accept gods of other religions on their own shrines” (Dang Nghiem Van, 1998, p. 134)^[16]. In other words, Vietnamese people have diverse religious beliefs. They can believe in many different gods at the same time, “they spread their belief in many gods, because in their eyes, all are the same, if those gods fulfill their request their request and satisfies their religious spirituality. Therefore, sometimes they believe in “ghost” more than “Buddha”, sometime they believe in “Buddha” more than “Saint” (Dang Nghiem Van, 1998, p. 136)^[16],... The conversion from one religion to another, especially from beliefs in traditional religions to beliefs of monotheistic religions such as Catholicism, Protestantism,.. does not mean that people “break up” completely with traditional religions but they can still attend the activities of traditional religions. Vietnamese people inherently have polytheistic beliefs, they can believe in many different gods at the same time, so, in the context of international integration, new religions have been accepted, due to the process of exchange and contact beliefs and religious from outside imported into Vietnam, as well as due to the process of Vietnamese people going abroad to study and work, making the religious beliefs even more abundant and more diverse. This fact manifests itself on all levels: individual, family and community. For example, there is a phenomenon of each member in the same family having different religious beliefs.

3.1.2. Change in structure and mechanism of religious beliefs

International integration, along with globalization process and explosive information revolution, have led to many religions being imported into Vietnam in any way, with many new methods of evangelization applied for the purpose of meeting the requirements of new context, as well as to enhance the competition between religions. That has made the reception and formation of religious beliefs of the people more diverse. For example, in the past, in order to receive religious beliefs, people often had to go to a place of worship or be directly led by religious dignitaries and missionaries. However, in the current context, people can receive religious beliefs completely through radio stations, tapes, disks, books, newspapers, even through websites. Even in recent years, “Online Pagoda” has appeared (Mai Thi Hanh, 2014, p. 49)^[3]. Therefore, perhaps one of the quite common features of religious beliefs among Vietnamese people in the past being “most Vietnamese people believe in Buddha and go towards Buddha by rituals, but not from Buddhist teachings” has changed. “The followers are not as “docile” as in the past, having doubted their beliefs, and having seen the support for trend of returning to their nation and returning to their roots” (Dang Nghiem Van, 1998, p. 137)^[16]. If in the past, the fact that people have a lot of religious beliefs was due to emotional factor or due to the influence of emotion, then in the current context, especially with the development of information, communication, books, newspapers and quite abundant religious publications, people have a better and more complete awareness, as well as have a more careful selection before receiving religious beliefs, besides the change in religious beliefs as mentioned above.

3.1.3. New type of religious practice

First of all, it is easy to see the change of traditional religious practices, especially those of ethnic minorities. Such change

occurs along two somewhat opposite trends: the trend of “simplification” and the trend of “complexity”. For example, in the funeral of the Hmong, the cumbersome procedures in the condolence and reciprocal ceremony have been omitted a lot. Instead of having to kneel 3 times and drink alcohol 3 times, they now only need to perform rituals and drink some wine in a symbolic manner. In many areas of the Dao, their biggest worshipping ceremony-Ban Vuong worship-has been also less organized, and the offering has been also simpler in case of performance, which the “God Pig” does not need to be as big as before, but the two pigs are enough as prescribed, and the ritual period is also shortened. Contrary to the above trend, in some areas where the lives of people are well developed and their economic life is good, there has been a need for organizing larger traditional ceremonies to affirm their role in the community. “Especially, in many areas of the Tay and Nung, the years of renovation have greatly improved the economic life of the people, since then a number of festivals with traditional religious ceremonies have been restored after many years of neglect, even which were associated with superstition during the subsidy period. Notably, there is the re-development of the rain praying ceremony in the Nung ethnic group and the Long Tong festival in many villages of the Tay” (Vuong Duy Quang, 2011) ^[14], ... The change of religious practice is also reflected in the change in form, manner, scale, level, ... of religious practice. Specifically, the appearance of online pagodas shows the modernization of Buddhism in the way of going to pagoda, practicing Buddhist rituals and spreading the Buddha dharma” (Mai Thị Hạnh, 2014, p. 51). Whether indirect religious practice such as going to an online pagoda can replace going to a real-lifereligious facilities completely or to some extent is an issue in need of further research. In addition to online pagoda, there has also been an online death anniversary phenomenon in recent years. It can be called a spiritual service, which is also a form of indirect religious practice. Due to geographical, time, ... conditions, some people cannot directly go to the graves of their grandparents and parents to burn incense on the occasion of death anniversary, New Year’s Day, ... They use services to perform ceremonies, burn incense and take care of their grandparents’ and parent’s graves as required.

3.1.4. Pragmatic religion

Religion belief and religion practice in Vietnam in recent years have been tinged with economy, and international integration is one of the causes leading to the above characteristic. This may also be due to the fact that the abuse of religion belief and religion practice for profit has become a fairly common phenomenon. Phenomena such as divination, conjuring, worshipping, burning votive papers,... are quite widespread in the religious life of people today. The manifestation of the fact that religious belief and religious practice are tinged with economy and pragmatic nature is the appearance of phenomenon of fighting, scrambling for and robbing offerings at worship facilities and festivals which has taken place a lot. Pragmatic religious belief and religious practice have led to the phenomenon of overcrowding at some worship facilities and festivals. Many people believe that it is not enough to “burn an incense from the sincere heart” in order to be blessed, but it is required to have enough offerings. The more the offerings are, the more people will be blessed. Therefore, it is necessary to “give money to the Buddha” to feel secure and be sure to be protected by the

Buddha. Another aspect of pragmatic religious belief and religious practice is that there are followers converting their religious beliefs just because of material needs. Through a number of field surveys in the Central Highlands, we found that there is a phenomenon of so-called “frog followers”, that is, the followers easily “jump” from one religion to another, from one denomination (Protestantism) to another, for which the main reason is materialism. One of the reasons for ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands to convert to Catholicism and Protestantism is that “worshiping Jesus is less expensive”. In these cases, the acquisition of religious belief is then not simply “belief in sacred objects”. It can be said that the fact that pragmatic religion belief and religion practice are tinged with economy as described above is the signs showing that religious belief and religion practice are alienated. In addition to the change in belief and practice, the religious communities also have changes under the impact of globalization and international integration.

3.1.5. Ethnic and regional religion

Among ethnic minorities in the mountainous areas of Vietnam today, there is a fairly common phenomenon of abandoning traditional religions to follow other religions, such as in the Central Highlands and the Northwest. However, that is not the case with the Kinh living in lowland areas, such as in the Northern Delta. In this area, for the Kinh, the traditional religion has grown stronger than before. Thus, it is possible to clearly see the difference between the mountainous area and the plain area, between the ethnic minorities and the majority people (the Kinh) in terms of traditional religious belief and practice. If, in the ethnic minorities, the traditional religious practices tend to be reduced and simplified, those practices, for the Kinh in the delta, increase in scale, scope, extent,... to the contrary.

3.2. Causes of religious change in Vietnam

It can be determined that one of the main factors for the emergence of new religious phenomena in Vietnam is the impact of new religious movements from outside. However, it cannot be denied that the “explosion” of new religious phenomena since the reform, especially in the North and the ethnic minority areas, has been due to the strong impact of the process of changing awareness, policies and ways of economic development and social management of different levels of government in Vietnam. The causes of religious change formation can be summarized in a number of aspects as follows:

The first is cultural and spiritual factors. The challenge of globalization and the downside of market mechanism are the main causes for the decline of many traditional moral, cultural and social values. Faced with this situation, a part of the people has turned to new religious phenomena, including “evil cults” that are “superstitious”, even anti-cultural and inhumane, such as: Chan Khong Cult in Ha Tinh, Thien Co Cult in Thai Binh, Thien Nhon Cult in Hai Duong,... Some people, due to illiteracy, low education level and poor awareness, have been mesmerized, leading to extreme actions causing death or mass suicide. Since the elimination of subsidies in the cultural and sports sector, in rural and remote areas, the cultural facilities have become increasingly degraded, lacking the attention of the authorities, mass organizations and cultural organizations. Therefore, a part of the masses with poor spiritual life and limited cultural understanding has turned to other cultural forms, including

new religious phenomena to satisfy their spiritual needs. The second is socio-economic factors. The development of the market economy, in addition to important and great positive impacts, has also contributed to social division, especially the widening gap between the rich and the poor among the parts of population in different regions and ethnic groups. Some people have sought protection and support from beliefs and religions to pray for luck from supernatural forces. When shifting from a subsidized economy to a market economy, many people have quickly adapted to the competitive environment and succeeded in the new conditions. There are also a large number of people encountering difficulties and failures caused by risks, tribulations, illnesses,... and they have become short-sighted and unable to keep up with the change of society. They look for an explanation of fate in their own way and ask for the help of gods and spiritual values to be able to overcome the actual situation. These people, according to researchers, are psychologically vulnerable to all changes of society and easy to follow other religious phenomena to find an outlet in their thinking and feeling about reality. The development of market economy makes traditional religions and beliefs more and more clearly show their powerlessness and their reducing sacredness. People not only seek to satisfy their spiritual needs in communal houses, pagodas and churches with cumbersome and binding rituals compared to the daily routine of an industrialized and modernized society, but also easily accept a simpler and more appropriate form of belief. This is the reason for the emergence of new religious phenomena. The market economy associated with an industrialized and modernized society requires high labor intensity, including both hands and brains, so people often look to new religious phenomena, looking for a way to relax and entertain, for the purpose of reducing stress in modern society. Therefore, many new religious phenomena often organize visits and exchanges, and these activities attract many participants. The misfortunes in life caused by natural disasters and health problems, the injustices and social evils arising out of lack of employment and difficult life,... are also reasons for some people to seek out the new religious phenomena. In particular, some people are unable to find suitable jobs in modern society, and they find out that religious activities are also an "occupation". However, it is incapable of operating in traditional regions and beliefs, so they automatically create new cults to practice.

The third is the dissociation of traditional beliefs and religions. In many countries around the world and in Vietnam, the dissociation of traditional religions and beliefs has been taking place, reflecting the diversity and complexity of contemporary life. This dissociation trend as a rule in the movement and development of beliefs and religions depends on socio-economic conditions and political institutions. Besides, the denial of traditional religions and beliefs by new religious phenomena is reflected in the harsh criticism that the mainstream religions are conservative, backward and troublesome. The rapid emergence of new religious phenomena in Vietnam in recent years has reflected the inadequacies of traditional beliefs and religions, especially the issues of deterioration in ideology, morality and lifestyle under the impact of the market economy, reflected in the commercialization and secularization of religion and belief, making the sacredness reduce. Therefore, people also easily accept new religious phenomena.

The fourth is the process of expanding international

cooperation. The current new religious phenomena show that the process of globalization and international integration has created conditions for some strange cults to penetrate from outside into Vietnam. Under such conditions, the hostile forces often take advantage of new religious phenomena to conduct anti-government activities, provide money for a number of new religious organizations such as Ching Hai Supreme Master, Dega Protestantism, Vang Chu Protestantism,... Some strange cults through the propagation of teachings and worship activities have their content of operation associated with political issues quite clearly, such as criticizing the Communist Party, State and local government; disturbing social order; violating the law; causing panic among the people; complicating and making the trouble for the state management of belief and religion.

The fifth is the political system. Many localities have not been fully aware of the nature of new religious phenomena in a timely manner, and not considered them to be "evil cults", so the measures for fighting and elimination have been mainly taken. Some localities have considered these to be "miscellaneous cults", so they have disregarded and subjectively thought that the settlement would not be difficult. In some places, the social management has been still being loose, the mass affairs have been not being thorough, not detecting in time and leaving strange cults to penetrate and develop; and when detecting such cults, the local government in such places has been appearing to be embarrassed and being incapable of handling them completely. Therefore, while these cults have not been handled, others have appeared. When being handled, such cults have shrunk, even given up, but in fact, they have still existed quietly waiting for the opportunity to develop again and spread to other areas. It can be said that the new religious phenomena formed, penetrating into and developing in Vietnam are caused by the limited social management process of the political system at all levels, directly in the localities; the understanding of religion and belief in general and new religious phenomena in particular; the abuse of religion or belief by the hostile forces; the assignment of functions and tasks of management and settlement of new religious phenomena by authorities at all levels and sectors having been unclear, and mainly entrusted to the functional agencies to perform; the lack of well-trained staff directly performing the tasks; especially, the lack of a legal framework in dealing with new religious phenomena.

3.3. Some major impacts of religious change in Vietnam

3.3.1. Positive impact

A number of new religious phenomena originating from Buddhism and traditional beliefs of the nation have met the spiritual needs and offset psychology and belief in the face of difficulties in the life of a part of the people. In which, a number of new religious phenomena have activities associated with the preservation of historical and cultural relics; respecting those who have contributed to the country and the nation such as: National Ancestor (Hung King); Tran Hung Dao; Ho Chi Minh Jade Buddha,... Others have been associated with exercise to improve health, combining healing with simple "spiritual" and "remedy" elements, so they are "attractive" to the poor who cannot improve their health and treat serious diseases. Religion is a reflection of human psychology and emotions towards society. New religious phenomena appear as one of the ways for a part of the people to express their thoughts and attitudes towards the

actual society; thereby contributing to the authorities and managers being closer and more direct with the people and the raised economic, social, cultural and environmental issues. New religious phenomena are also factors contributing to the formation of religiously affiliated communities, coexisting with other communities, with an ethnic cohesion in a certain residential area. New religious communities, with the links between people of the same or different ethnicities, living in the same or different areas of residence, have had a certain cohesion in their belief organization and development; helping each other in life, especially when facing difficulties and tribulations. This fact has made the relationship of people of the same religion more open.

3.3.2. Negative impact

In addition to a few new religious phenomena having not yet had negative effects on society, the rest are mostly “superstitious”, causing many harmful effects to people and society. In addition to the above negative effects, the emergence of new religious phenomena in ethnic minority areas, especially political organizations dominated by the hostile forces in the Northwest and the Central Highlands, also destabilizes political security, social management, ethnic psychology and awareness, and preservation and promotion of the cultural values of ethnic groups,... Besides, the formation of religiously affiliated communities within each ethnic group or of interethnic relations at home and abroad is also one of the factors causing local conflicts between people not sharing the same beliefs, regardless of the same or different ethnic groups. Some new religious phenomena also seek to oppose the State, organize activities and propagate the criticisms of real society. Some others resist and obstruct the officer; compose poems, songs and chants with the content distorting international relation issues; slander the leader and the regime; adversely affect political security in the region and the country. Several new religious phenomena have attacked legitimate traditional beliefs and religions. These activities have further complicated the awareness of people of the distinction between taking advantage of beliefs to carry out illegal “superstitious” activities and practicing belief and religion under the law. It can be said that the activities of new religious phenomena in Vietnam in recent years have caused many consequences not only for the interests of society and people, but also for the normal operation of legally recognized beliefs and religions. Traditional beliefs and perceptions with legal status have voiced out and reacted to these awareness and behaviors, especially with “evil cults” having surpassed the threshold of ordinary religion, tinged with superstition and non-culture because some people take advantage of beliefs and religions to “do business” with many sophisticated tricks. These activities have upset the peaceful life of people in many localities, even sowing unhappiness and suffering in the material and the spiritual, as well as the life and the family happiness for many people; causing instability in social order; causing difficulties for the state management of religion and belief; harming community cohesion and ethnic unity bloc.

4. Conclusion

The process of globalization and international integration along with the development of science and technology and field of information and communication, have made religious life in Vietnam have many changes. The religious change

takes place on all aspects of belief, practice and community as well as on the levels of individual, family and community. The change in religious belief not only reflects the trend of religious needs, but also reflects the characteristics of social beliefs. The religious change in Vietnam in the context of international integration is an inevitable phenomenon of movement and development of history and society. Such change, on the one hand, helps religions supplement and absorb new values, filter out the values being no longer consistent with the new context, and increase the vitality and competitiveness of religious. However, on the other hand, it may create other social changes, even create social complexity and create social contradictions and conflicts.

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