

## THE ROLE OF RELIGIONS IN BUILDING THE VIETNAM CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

*Abstract: The Vietnam revolutionary reality shows that the power of national solidarity including religious solidarity was promoted and it brought success of the revolution. Beside pointing out the role of religions, this article focuses on analysing the religious values in connecting community and society, in building society in general and Vietnam society in particular. Based on the data, the author proposes the basic tasks of the religious policy of the Communist Party of Vietnam and State in order to reach success in the national innovation at present.*

*Keywords: Ethics, present, religion, role, society, Vietnam.*

### 1. An overview of the role of religious entities in society

As a social entity, religion always plays certain role in the social life, creates diversity and richness in the national culture, and contributes to formation moral value of the masses in the historical periods. Since formation, the Communist Party of Vietnam has become aware of the importance of this issue. Respecting and guaranteeing freedom of religion and belief is a consistent policy of the Party. The Article 5 of the Ordinance on Belief and Religion affirms that the State shall guarantee the right to belief and religious activities in compliance with stipulations by the law; respect the cultural and moral values of religions; preserve and promote positive values in the tradition of worship of ancestors, remembrance and glorification of persons who have rendered meritorious services to the country and/or communities, with a view to helping consolidate the all- nation unity and meeting the spiritual needs of the people.

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Resolution of the 11<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam also confirms that “Promoting the cultural and ethical values of the religions; Encouraging religious organizations, dignitaries and believers to live a good secular and religious life to contribute actively to the cause of national construction and defense”<sup>1</sup>.

The cultural and ethical values of the religions contributed to the strengthening of the social relationship among human beings and the relationship between humankind and the nature, to the building of new morality and personality of the Vietnamese today. These values significantly contributed to overcoming moral degradation caused by the negative impact of the current market mechanism. In fact, “Some places where religion is stable, has a large number of believers, there are less social issues (the order is stable and the lifestyle is more moral”<sup>2</sup>.

However, it does not mean that religion is just positive. In fact, some conflicts which have caused consequences for society have also arisen from the abuse of religion. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the role of religious ethics in order to promote the values of religion and limit its negative impact on the improvement of the personality of the Vietnamese at present.

It can be said that despite differences in the world view and the method of achieving the goal between non-religious people and religious people, however, they have similarities such as towards the good, building a good society; liberating people from oppression, injustice; desire to build a strong, rich, democratic, equal and civilized country. This is the link between the religious values and the humanity values of socialism, which mobilizes the strength of the great national unity in the cause of building and protecting the nation. During the transitional period to socialism in Vietnam today, accepting differences, clarifying religious values, seeking similarities, consensus among believers of different religions, and between religious people and non-religious people creates a synthetic motivation in building the national unity, the success of national renewal.

## **2. Establishment the connection between community and society, creation motivation in social construction of religion**

Religion contributes to build and consolidate of moral and ethical values in every individual, family and society, as well as, to overcome the limitations of moral degradation caused by the negative impact of society, to guarantee the peace of mind for a part of the people.

Religion is a social entity associated with the development of social life, so religious ethics are an integral part of social morality and close link to social morality. Religious ethics and social morality lead people to kindness, eliminate evil, promote community, equality among people. Religions have established a system of moral norms that have many similarities with the morality of family and society, including Marxist ethics. Scholars of Marxism-Leninism even admitted that “In the early Christian history, there are remarkable similarities compared to the modern movement of workers. Both Christianity and workers’ socialism propagates human liberation in the future from slavery and poverty”<sup>3</sup>. President Ho Chi Minh profoundly summarized that the moral values of the great religions of the world, Christianity with the spirit of charity, Buddhism with compassion; Confucianism with benevolence<sup>4</sup>.

Religious ethics lead people to do goodness, to avoid evil, to regulate human behavior, to build a spiritual order in society.

Goodness and evil are two opposite categories, also two basic categories in religious morality and social morality. However, the kindness or evil behavior in religious ethics is encouraged or deterred by the reward or punishment of the gods, so it reaches high efficiency in education.

Religion believes that if followers regularly practice the doctrine, canon law, or ethical rules of religion they will go to Heaven, to Sukhāvātī (the Western Paradise), if they do evil thing they will have to Hell. Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam considers Hell as a place for those who commit many evils. The doctrine of the Caodaism requires believers to cultivate themselves, to restrain immoral desires; to respect the life of themselves as well as of others; are not greedy. Hòa

Hào Buddhism teaches the followers to cultivate body and mind for being good, free from the confusion of ignorance (*vô minh*), sufferings, as well as, also training a perfect person while living in the social community. In the first commandment of the 8 commandments of Hòa Hảo Buddhism pointed out: should not drink wine, play gambling, opium, must keep the five cardinal virtues.

Religious ethics also emphasize tolerance, loving people. Tolerance is the attitude of concession, harmony, respecting for differences from us. According to Buddhism, the greatest quality of human beings is without prejudice. The Catholic morality appreciates loving God and loving people. The features of religion's altruism and charity are out of self-interest, refusal of the repayment for gratitude.

The dogma of religions also sets ethical norms in family life. For example, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male, etc.,", "Honor your father and mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you", you shall have a display of filial affection your parents, prohibition sinful acts in the marriage (Buddhism); do not have sexuality out of marriage (Caodaim), etc..

In addition, religions are also involved in preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of the nation and humanity. Therefore, religion plays an important role in building a cultural lifestyle of the family, community and society. Religion, in the process of development, does not only convey the faith, but also contribute to the maintenance of social morality. It has a strong influence on the spiritual life of humankind. As a part of ideology, religions have brought to each nation, each ethnicity, each region characteristics manifested in behavior, lifestyle, custom, and in material as well as spiritual culture.

Religion has a profound influence on the culture, society, psychology, morality, lifestyle, customs and habits of many countries in the world, including Vietnam. Each religion contains a wealth of historical, moral and cultural content, so its power dominates the development of social and political dimensions. Its contribution to

human culture is expressed in the fields of literature, art, architecture, sculpture, lifestyle, morality in the tangible and intangible forms.

In Europe, Christianity has a great role in the culture of this region. Christianity and Western civilization have coalesced to form a system of material and spiritual culture for two thousand years. Thus, the Western civilization has been called Christian civilization.

In Asia, during the Ancient and Medieval Ages, Buddhism and Hinduism created their own features. The philosophical thought of Buddhism, Confucianism has had a profound impact on the spiritual life of the inhabitants on this continent. The ancient architectural monuments related to Buddhism, Hinduism such as Golden Temple, Angkor Wat, etc. have become the cultural heritage of mankind.

Currently, the role of religion has been more exploited than ever. Humankind has had many activities to honor the cultural and moral values of religions and affirm their contribution to human culture and development. In recent years, the United Nations has brought the Buddhist Vesak celebration to its official agenda.

In Vietnam, during the Chinese domination (Belonging to the North - Bắc thuộc), Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism was introduced and gradually played an important role in the lives of the Vietnamese, especially Buddhism. After the country gained independence, Buddhism was widely spread and profoundly affected to social life. During the reign of Đinh, Early Lê, Lý, Trần dynasties, Buddhism were highly respected. Monks were also intellectuals. In the Lý - Trần period, Buddhism contributed to the creation of many valuable art works that remained at the present time such as temples, statues. In the Trần dynasty, after three resistance wars against the Mongol invasions, the Buddhist denomination Trúc Lâm Yên Tử (Bamboo Grove) was founded by Emperor Trần Nhân Tông with special thoughts.

By the fifteenth century, Confucianism was used by the monarchy as a priority of thought in ruling the nation, however, Buddhism had contributed much to the Đại Việt culture. Taoism, Buddhism still existed and developed in social life, which were an indispensable requirement in the spiritual life, added and created the cultural values of the nation.

By the sixteenth century, Catholicism was introduced into Vietnam despite many difficulties, it gradually confirmed its role in Vietnamese culture. Catholicism has contributed to the enrichment of the Vietnamese culture through architectural works, lettering, music, rituals, etc..

Hồ Chí Minh rapidly realized that religion has been a component of culture. He stated that “For survival as well as the purpose of life, humankind created and invented language, lettering, morality, law, science, religion, literature, arts, tools for daily living such as dressing, eating, inhabiting. All this creativity and invention is culture. Culture is the synthesis of all modes of living and its expression that has been produced by human beings to accommodate to the needs of life and the demands of survival<sup>5</sup>. Then, he instructed authorities, civilians to preserve the cultural heritage of religion. He was also interested in the ancestral worship and needs to express people, architectural works, music of religion; in exploiting the cultural values of religion to enrich the culture of the country.

Currently, in Vietnam, religious heritages have been preserved and promoted. Many national historical and cultural monuments have been restored to become a famous tourist destination of both domestic and foreign tourists. Resolution of the fifth plenum of the Party Central Committee (Session VIII) on the building of an advanced Vietnamese culture deeply imbued with the national identity (16 July 1998) affirmed: Encouraging the religion’s idea of fairness, love, kindness, etc...<sup>6</sup>.

However, despite the uniqueness and diversity of cultural and religious values, religious culture is still a product of the specific historical condition of each nation, region and the whole human being- where religion was formed and developed. Thus, religious cultural values are always one of the spiritual materials that connect a religion to the other ones, religious communities with non-religious communities, and contribute to the strength of the great national unity in the cause of social liberation.

Despite the absolute belief in Divine Entity, religions have been always oriented towards the origin, the ethnicity, the country in their

own way, in the process of formation, introduction and development in Vietnam. All religions have contributed at different levels to the cause of national liberation in the past and socialist construction in our country at present. That contribution, first of all, is reflected in the religious practice of each religion, for Buddhists: “Dhamma - Nation - Socialism”; for Catholics: “Living the Gospel life in the heart of the nation to serve the well-being of the people”; for Protestants: “Living the Gospel life, serving God, serving Nation”; for Hòa Hảo Buddhists: “Revitalizing the religion, associating with the nation in accordance with the State policies and laws, contributing to the construction and defense of the country”; for Caodaists: “glorious country, bright religion”, etc.. The guidelines of religious practices have differences, however, they are generally attached to the nation. Therefore, one of the tasks of religious affairs is “education the patriotic traditions, the consciousness of protecting the independence and unification of the nation that makes the religions associate with the nation, the socialism, significance, build and defend the country<sup>7</sup>.”

The practicalities have showed the objective role of religion in the process of building and developing the national unity in the history of social liberation of the nation.

Currently, the material and spiritual life has been constantly improved in Vietnam. However, there is still a part of the people are experiencing difficulties in life. It needs the help of community and society. With the tradition of “loving, kindness” of the Vietnamese people, many individuals and organizations, including religious organizations, have participated in charity work. In fact, religions have actively engaged in social charity, health care and significantly contributed to improve the material and spiritual life of the people.

Loving people is the similarity between religious ethics and social morality so the strength of religions lies in social charity with the spirit of volunteering. Tuệ Tĩnh Đường of Buddhism is a free place for medical treatment by traditional and modern medicine; Elderly houses for helpless elderly people are one of the important social charity activities of the organizations belonging to the Vietnam

Buddhism. In order to have a stable material life, some religions have organized vocational training classes, kindergartens for love, contribute to the shared responsibility with the national education system. With the spirit of engagement, the Vietnam Buddhism established counseling centers as well as many facilities for take care of HIV/AIDS people. Catholicism have spent a great finance on disaster relief, helping disable people, poor students to improve their lives<sup>8</sup>.

Thus, the social charity activities, the welfare of the religions have contributed, along with the State, to solve the social security issue. It has produced the social unity and the consensus between the social classes and the State.

### **3. The current orientation and requirements of the Party and the State for the promotion of religions' roles**

Since the establishment, the Communist Party of Vietnam has issued guidelines and tasks of religious solidarity, solidarity of religious and non-religious people and national solidarity in order to bring the cause of people's democratic revolution to success and to socialism.

At the same time, President Ho Chi Minh affirmed the similarities of liberating people goal between the Vietnamese revolution and the religions. He called on all compatriots, indiscriminate of religious and non-religious people, closely unite in the resistant war to preserve the country and also to freedom of religion. "We participate in the resistance to protect the country, increase productivity, reform land bring fields to the peasants, freedom of faith. Thus, what the Government and people have done is harmony with the spirit of the Gospel"<sup>9</sup>.

The General Secretary Trường Chinh stated that Communists are atheists, Catholics are theists, however, the Communists and Catholics still have the similarities. The communist ideology is not much different from the ideal of Christ. God wants people not to cheat, not to exploit each other. God desires people to love each other. Communists also desire those things<sup>10</sup>.



In the Resolution 25-NQ/TW, the Communist Party of Vietnam affirmed the “similarities” between the ideals of religion and socialist ideals: “The goal of prosperity for people, a great nation, an equal, democratic and civilized society is similarities in order to engage believers with the common goal”<sup>11</sup>. To concretize the issue of religion in the Constitution, the Standing Committee of the 11<sup>th</sup> National Assembly promulgated the Ordinance on Religion and Belief (adopted on 18 June 2004, effective from 15 November 2004). It is a legal basis for religious activities and religious affairs, contributes to the building, development and strengthening of the national unity in the cause of building and defending the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the innovation period.

In recent years, the objective, scientific views of the Communist Party of Vietnam on religion such as religion is the spiritual needs of a part of the people; religion still exists for a long period of time; religious ethics have many things in accordance with the construction of new society; religious activities, conformed with aspirations and legitimate interests of believers, are guaranteed; the cultural, ethical values of religion are respected, encouraged and promoted, ... were shown in some typical documents: Resolution No.24-NQ/TW (1990), Directive No.37-CT/TW (1998), Resolution No.25-NQ/TW (2003) is important in continuing to renovate the policy and to improve the legal system of religion, to promote the power of great national unity in the process of industrialization and modernization of the country at present.

In order to further promote the role of religion in building the Vietnamese contemporary society, the basic requirements have been set by the Party and the State as follows:

Firstly, it is necessary to summarize religious situation in the aspects of the religious life and activities of religious organizations in the complex context of the country, the region and the world in order to improve the Party’s viewpoints and policies on religions to instruct the religious activities and religious affairs in service of the objectives of prosperity for people, a great country, democracy, justice and civilization caused by the great national unity.

Secondly, modification, supplementation and improvement the legal system on religion in the direction of concretizing the regulations, contents and spirit of the 2013 Constitution warrants the religious freedom of all people and in accordance with the international conventions on civil and political rights. In that spirit, the Law on Religion and Belief should be urgently built with the addition, modification of basic contents that are suitable with the reality to replace *the Ordinance on Religion and Belief*.

Thirdly, dissemination and education of the masses (both believers and non-religious people), civil servants and officials of organizations in the political system on Ho Chi Minh's thoughts, on the Party's undertakings, on the laws of the State towards religion and the great national unity; on the distortion and anti-revolution of the hostile forces in the field of religion and the national unity in order to contribute to strengthening the national unity in the current situation.

Fourthly, good management of religious activities on the basis of promoting the role and tasks of the Party, the government organizations, and promoting the role of dignitaries and religious followers in participating in to formulate policy and law on religion in order to efficiently carry out the task of building the great national unity.

Fifthly, enhancement and increase the efficient operation of the Committee of Vietnam Fatherland Front and its member organizations in propagating the Party's undertakings and policies and the State's laws on religions for dignitaries, monks and believers to further promote their role in the process of building the unity. /.

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**NOTES:**

- 1 *Văn kiện Đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc lần thứ XI* (Instrument of the 11<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam), Nxb. Chính trị Quốc gia - Sự thật, Hà Nội, 2011: 245.
- 2 Nguyễn Thanh Xuân (2005), “Trở lại những quan điểm đổi mới về công tác tôn giáo của Nghị quyết 24” (Discussion on perspectives on religious affairs innovation of the Resolution 24), *Công tác Tôn giáo*, số 2: 8.
- 3 *C. Mác, Ph. Ăngghen Toàn tập*, tập 22, Nxb. Chính trị Quốc gia - Sự thật, Hà Nội, 1995: 664.
- 4 *Hồ Chí Minh Toàn tập*, tập 6, Nxb. Chính trị Quốc gia, Hà Nội, 1995: 225.

- 5 *Hồ Chí Minh Toàn tập*, tập 3, Nxb. Chính trị Quốc gia, Hà Nội, 1995: 431.
- 6 *Văn kiện Hội nghị lần thứ năm Ban Chấp hành Trung ương khóa VIII* (Documents of the Fifth Conference of the Central Executive Committee Session VIII), Nxb. Chính trị Quốc gia, Hà Nội, 1998: 67.
- 7 *Văn kiện Hội nghị lần thứ Bảy Ban Chấp hành Trung ương khóa IX* (Documents of the Seventh Conference of the Central Executive Committee Session IX), Nxb. Chính trị Quốc gia, Hà Nội, 2003: 52.
- 8 Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc (2014), “Vài nét về hoạt động từ thiện xã hội của các tôn giáo tại Việt Nam hiện nay” (The Social Charitable Activities of Religions in Vietnam at present), *Nghiên cứu Phật học*, số 3.
- 9 *Hồ Chí Minh Toàn tập*, tập 7, Nxb. Chính trị Quốc gia, Hà Nội, 1995: 197.
- 10 *Báo Nhân dân*, số ra ngày 27/01/1955.
- 11 *Văn kiện Hội nghị lần thứ bảy Ban Chấp hành Trung ương khóa IX* (Documents of the Seventh Conference of the Central Executive Committee Session IX), Nxb. Chính trị Quốc gia, Hà Nội, 2003: 49.

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3. *Hồ Chí Minh Toàn tập*, tập 3, 6, 7, Nxb. Chính trị Quốc gia, Hà Nội, 1995.
4. Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc (2014), “Vài nét về hoạt động từ thiện xã hội của các tôn giáo tại Việt Nam hiện nay”, *Nghiên cứu Phật học* (The social charitable activities of religions in Vietnam at present), số 3.
5. *Văn kiện Hội nghị lần thứ năm Ban Chấp hành trung ương khóa VIII* (Documents of the Fifth Conference of the Central Executive Committee Session VIII), Nxb. Chính trị Quốc gia, Hà Nội, 1998.
6. *Văn kiện Hội nghị lần thứ bảy Ban Chấp hành Trung ương khóa IX* (Documents of the Seventh Conference of the Central Executive Committee Session IX), Nxb. Chính trị Quốc gia, Hà Nội, 2003.
7. *Văn kiện Đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc lần thứ XI* (Instrument of the 11th National Party Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam), Nxb. Chính trị Quốc gia - Sự thật, Hà Nội, 2011.
8. Nguyễn Thanh Xuân (2005), “Trở lại những quan điểm đổi mới về công tác tôn giáo của Nghị quyết 24” (Discussion on Perspectives on Religious Affairs Innovation of the Resolution 24), *Công tác Tôn giáo*, số 2.