

Religious Life in Vietnamese History

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ABSTRACT: The author provides a review of religious life in Vietnamese History. He then argues that Vietnamese spirituality is basically an open spirituality with an open pantheon. Its tolerance makes it easy to acquire different religions in a peaceful way. The core of Vietnamese spirituality is the love for the country and ancestor worship. The love for the country has constituted a “bronze wall” in Vietnamese spirituality that no one is allowed to violate. If anyone tries to break the wall, he will be surely punished despite belonging to religion.

At the beginning of the Christian era, two oriental religions were introduced into Vietnam: Chinese Taoism and Indian Buddhism. Christianity came into Vietnam long time after that, in the XVI century.

Yet before that, did Vietnamese people have any religions?

About the VI century BC, the Đông Sơn culture was formed with the use of various and sophisticated bronze objects such as kettledrums and bronze jars. In the spiritual perspective, there are 3 symbols. The first is the four pairs of statues of males and females having sex with each other on the Đào Thịnh bronze jar. The second is the statue of Văn Điển man with his penis magnified. The third are statues of a toad on the Hữu Chung kettle drum. They are not sex toys or pure fine-arts but statues for worshipping. They are sacred objects. Nowadays, they are explained as symbols of fecundity belief. The appearance of statues for worshipping purposes proves that belief had developed akin to religion which I call “quasi-religion”. Statues of males and females having sex, and the man with the magnified penis, represents the desire to have many children. The toad statue shows the need to pray for rain, one of the most important elements for a good rice crop, which is the main source for existence of the Viet people. These are the two specific contents of

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Vietnamese fecundity belief before the Christian era. Spirituality and religion had been created and formed in accordance with the need for human reproduction and sources of existence. Fecundity beliefs have always existed in Vietnamese spirituality. The Viet in fact acquired Buddhism and Taoism on the basis of that belief.

Buddhist Mahayana came from India into Luy Lâu in Vietnam via the seaway. Early signs of its religious foundations can still be traced at the Dâu town, Thuận Thành district of Bắc Ninh province. They are pagodas worshipping Tứ Pháp (the four dharma Mother Goddesses or the Four Ladies): Pháp Vân, Pháp Vũ, Pháp Lôi and Pháp Điện or Cloud dharma, Rain dharma, Thunder dharma and Lightning dharma respectively. Then they became symbols of femininity of four natural phenomena relating to rain. Later, the Four Mother Goddesses were integrated into Mahayana Buddhism, formed the four Buddhas: Pháp Vân Buddha, Pháp Vũ Buddha, Pháp Lôi Buddha, Pháp Điện Buddha. The formation of these Buddhas is the result of not a person but of community work. The community here included a number of old villages with bloodline relations in the Dâu area. That is why the story of Man Nương in *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái* (Extraordinary stories recorded in Lĩnh Nam) tells about the bloodline relations of the Four Ladies with Thạch Quang Buddha.

Buddhist life that is based on community is the foundation for the establishment of a pagoda in each village. The Four Ladies were originally four village goddesses then turned into Buddhas. Yet the gods of each village were still maintained. In the Lê dynasty, the King selected one of the gods in each village to appoint as a Thành Hoàng (tutelary god) who would govern all other gods. The tutelary god is also responsible for country protection and people support. Namely, he would help to fight against foreign invaders and control the weather for a good harvest. The belief in a village god is one form of fecundity belief. It is a pre-religious phenomenon. There are statues, ceremonies and “texts”. The “texts” here were the “family annals” and petitions to the gods when a ceremony for peace was performed. Because the “family annals” are still very simple, the belief cannot be considered a “religion”. The tutelary god however was converted into a god in the Taoist pantheon with the highest god named Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế (Yellow Jade Emperor). Now offerings to the tutelary god have been restored throughout the country with the main content of asking for the rain and a peaceful life. The belief in a tutelary god is one of the

important elements of contents of religious life in Vietnamese communities from the past until present. This belief is very different from the belief in tutelary gods in China which worship the god who would protect the military within a citadel. The tutelary god in Vietnam protect the nation and each village.

Buddhist Mahayana is different from Buddhist Theravada on a basic point: The Mahayana focuses on life while Theravada focuses on destruction. The trend to life is suitable with fecundity belief. Until the present, Vietnamese mothers keep going to pagodas asking the Buddha for a child. When drought happens, Vietnamese pray for rain by inviting the Four Ladies or performing a ritual for rain in pagodas.

Buddhism peacefully came into Vietnam in the way of cultural exchange without war or conflict. Indian monks went with trading boats to Dâu to promulgate the religion. At that time, Vietnam was under the rule of Han feudalism with the dominant ideology of Confucism. Buddhism firstly came at the grassroots and legend says that Man Nương was the first follower. Man Nương with the stick to protect against drought was thought to be the great Mother of the Four Ladies.

A Buddhist pagoda that is built within a village is called a village pagoda.

A village pagoda is the religious centre of the whole village even without a monk. Everyone in a traditional village believes in Buddha. They would go into a pagoda to pray to the Buddha, saying “*Namah Amitabha*”. Thus, some researchers have difficulties in determining who is a Buddhist and who is not. This represents the fact that Vietnamese religious spirituality is full of community characteristics.

It is obvious that monks are more sagacious than ordinary people. Vietnamese monks had been intellectuals who contributed significantly to the development of the Đại Việt empire. When the independent government was established, monks had played the role of thinkers who supported the ideal of independence from the Chinese. High monk Khuông Việt (933-1011) followed and aided the two dynasties: Đinh and pre-Lê. Vạn Hạnh bonze (? - 1018) helped Lý Công Uẩn set up the Lý dynasty. The independent government of Đại Việt never destroyed Buddhist pagodas; it even built a state pagoda and established a department to manage Buddhist followers.

The feudal government organized a national contest of Three Religions. Only when too many people hid in the pagodas to avoid joining the military did the King of Trần dynasty issue a regulation that limited the number of people under 50 years old wished to become monks. This does not mean that Buddhism was suppressed.

When monk Phạm Sư Ôn's uprising happened in 1389, the government of the Trần dynasty mobilized troops to crack down upon it immediately despite the fact that one of the Trần kings, Trần Nhân Tông (1258-1308), set up a famous Buddhist sect named Trúc Lâm. Even though the Trần government gave prominence to Buddhism (some scholars put it as the national religion at that time). People were very pious. What undermined national security and sovereignty was given special consideration. Timely measures applied to protect national sovereignty could not be considered suppression of Buddhism. Under the Lê–Nguyễn dynasties, when only Confucianism was respected and other religions including Buddhism were restricted, kings still held offering ceremonies in pagodas for soldiers who died in war.

In modern times, during the two periods of resistance to foreign invaders, Buddhist temples were still preserved. Many monks participated in national military such as bonze Thích Trí Độ and monk Tâm Minh Lê Đình Thám. Some monks died during the wars. However, there were pagodas that were totally or partly destroyed by the invaders' attack such as Pháp Vũ and Hương. The revolutionary government and Vietnamese people never destroyed Buddhist temples.

At present, Buddhism enjoys a significant development. It contributes much to nation building while actively participating in charity works. Recently, Vietnamese Buddhism Sangha organized a mass for fishermen who died in the Chanchu storm early 2006 even though they were not Buddhists. Many people want to send their parents' souls into a pagoda after they have died and have monks perform a mass for them. This trend becomes more and more popular as not only ordinary people but also state officers want to bring their parents' souls to a pagoda. Consequently, people are taking advantage of this belief to "commercialize spirits and gods", and of course they will be punished according to the laws.

These are the fundamental characteristics of Buddhist life in Vietnam from the past to the present. Now the Buddhist temple represents Vietnamese spirituality. It is not a place just to worship Buddha. In a pagoda, one can find Buddha, Ngọc Hoàng (or Jade Yellow, the highest god in Taoism), Mẫu (great Mother goddess), ancestors along with revolutionary martyrs. The soul of the sudden-dead is also protected in the pagoda under Buddha's power. The Kim Mã pagoda was first a temple to worship the soul of the sudden-dead then became a Buddhist pagoda. The Buddhist Vu Lan ritual (held annually on the 15th of the 7th month of the lunar calendar for people to express their gratefulness to their mother) has now become an offering for

ancestors and the sudden-dead. The ritual is now not only performed at pagodas but also at home.

What about Taoism?

Chinese Taoism was established in 141 AD with the leadership of Trương Đạo Lăng. Taoism, however, developed on the basis of Tao studies and Belief in immortals by Lao-tzu (sixth century BC) and Chang-tzu (fourth and third centuries BC). In the second century BC, when the Han empire imposed a ruling regime in Vietnam, Tao studies and Belief in immortals were firstly brought into the nation. Chinese Taoism was introduced into Vietnam long after that because it was established later. Even though Taoist hermits provided their services to the government, basically Chinese Taoism was an ideological tool of the grassroots movement to oppose the feudal government. This is why it was always outlawed and suppressed.

Belief in Immortals and Vietnamese Taoism always accompanied the nation and were considered one of the three ideological pillars in the era of Đại Việt empire. At the governmental level, there was a department named “ti tăng lục” which managed both Buddhism and Taoism. The government built many splendid temples and made Tam Thanh statues from gold. Trần Nhật Duật (1253-1330) once mobilized a Taoist hermit Hứa Tông Đạo to fight against the Mongolian invader.

There was a Taoist hermit who fought against the King. In 1140, a fortune teller named Thân Lợi brought his gangs to attack and then occupied Thượng Nguyên and Hạ Nông districts. He even conferred himself the title of king and wanted to take over the capital city. In 1141, the Lý dynasty brought troops to suppress Thân Lợi then caught him. Peace came back to the country soon afterward.

Vietnamese Taoism is practised in a way that is much more similar to popular Taoism than to what Taoist hermits do in their temples. At present, Mother worship and spirit possession are still the basic content of popular Taoism that can be found in Phủ Dầy and Phủ Tây Hồ. In minor ethnic, such as the Tày and Dao in the North, the ritual to confer a title to a Taoist practitioner is still performed. Many PhD theses and collections of Taoist paintings have been published.

Almost every Vietnamese dreams of living a happy life such as that of the immortals. They have a passion for Taoist beliefs and strongly believe in Mother goddesses. Many people take part in a ritual of spirit possession from the angle of an art-performance rather than a spiritual ritual.

Nowadays, people still go to worship at famous Taoist temples such as Trần Vũ Quán and Linh Tiên Quán which have rather old and beautiful sets of statue even though the Taoist church no longer exists. However, there appear to be activities where people take advantage of spirit possession for personal interests. Of course, the fake magicians will be punished by law.

Vietnamese Taoist life highlights the sense of community. The wish for a wonderful life in Heaven is reflected in sayings such as “as beautiful as an immortal” or “as happy as an immortal”. Businessmen come to Taoist temple to pray for luck and prosperity. However, no one thinks of being an immortal. They only wish to be an immortal after they die. This can be seen in laudatory writings such as “ride on a holy crane to the place of immortals” or “freely wandering in the place of immortals”. These laudatory writings can be embroidered on red cloth and sold to anyone in streets. The Communists knew but they never prohibited the business. Funerals were used for parades to farewell the dead and take them back to hang over the altar.

It is told that Từ Thức, a Vietnamese, once came upon the world of immortals with so many beauties, marvelous scenery and shining palaces. But then he missed the earth too much that he decided to go back home.

The Vietnamese only want to lead a life that is as happy as an immortal among the community with the ups and downs and happiness and sorrows rather than a lazy life in the Taoist Heaven.

Taoism is a religion that has lost its organization in Vietnam a long time ago but is still alive in Vietnamese people’s spirituality.

What about Confucianism?

In my opinion, even Confucianism is not a religion. But it is religious in the worship of Confucius in Temples of Literature at central and local levels along with offerings and rituals. The emphasis on ancestor worship is also a religious characteristic of this doctrine. This helps us understand the reason for the concept of Three Religions (Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism) from the Lý and Trần period. This concept, in fact, comes from China but bears a different meaning in Vietnam. In China, the concept shows the independent existence of and the struggle among the three different doctrines. In Vietnam, it means a harmonious co-existence of the three

doctrines. Three Religions in Vietnam under the Lý and Trần dynasty does not refer to three different religions but three different systems of ideology.

Confucianism is a political doctrine which can be summarized via the phrase of “self-improve, manage one’s household, govern a country and pacify the realm”. This is an order with a very close relation: the latter must be based on the former. This is an effective educational way for national governors. This method appeared in China when the King of the Zhou dynasty divided the realm into different parts for his children. Each part could be equivalent to an autonomous area. However, Confucianism highlights “filial piety”, represents the idea of male chauvinism. Male chauvinism belongs to paternity, but in the perspective of belief, it has a tight relation with ancestor worship. When a daughter gets married, she has to worship the husbands’ ancestors that belong to the different blood line. Only the son worships his family and is supposed to have at least a son of to continue the worship. This is also a sign of fecundity belief with human reproduction that is directed towards paternity. The idea of male chauvinism is, however, rather suitable with the fecundity belief in Vietnam and thus leaves a deep influence. Yet ancestor worship is not an initiative by Confucianism. The Yin people worshipped ancestors before Confucius. Because Confucianism highlights the word of “filial piety”, ancestor worship becomes an essential part of the doctrine. And because of ancestor worship, Confucianism takes the form of a religion. It is the ideal of ancestor worship that leads to the main conflict with Christianity later on.

The Temple of Literature was built under the Lý dynasty, worshipped Confucius. At the Lê dynasty, steles of doctors were set up in the Temple. Despite the rise and fall of history, steles remain upon stone tortoises. From 1945 until the present, the Temple has been regularly maintained and rebuilt and become much more beautiful. Many visitors have come. The worship for Confucius as well as ancestors has never ceased.

What about the Christianity?

Christianity was introduced into Vietnam in the XVI century. At that time, Vietnam was separated by the internal conflict between the South and the North. Western missionaries established relations with Nguyen Lord in Cochinchine (the Southern region) and Trinh Lord in Tonkin (the Northern region) and converted some very important characteristics of these two political rivals. Then Christianity (mostly Catholicism) was free to promulgate in Vietnam. In 1840, there were 340.000

followers in Tonkin, 80.000 in Cochinchine; made 420.000 in the whole country. There were 27 native priests in Cochinchine, 117 in Tonkin; made 144 in the whole country.

On the history of missionary work in Vietnam, there are many documents and books by Westerners. In 2001, Prof. Nguyen Van Kiem published *The import of Christianity into Vietnam from XVII to XIX century* which summarized rather adequate different materials and I basically cite from this book. In its earliest time, priest I-ni-khu came to teach about the religion in Ninh Cường, Quỳnh Anh and Trà Lũ villages in Nam Định provinces but not until the year 1840 did the missionary work begin. From 1533 to 1840, there existed conflicts among different missionaries from different denominations and different countries and the Cochinchine and Tonkin regimes' changing policies which allowed or banned missionary work at different periods of time. However, the fundamental obstacle was the contradiction of the religious ideology. The Vietnamese people, included the ruling class, were all imbued with ideology from the Three Religions. In Vietnamese religious life, ancestor worship is placed at the top. Yet the Western missionaries strongly criticized ancestor worship and forced Vietnamese Christianity's followers to abolish this belief. Sometimes, the followers were compelled to throw the ancestor altars onto the road, the Buddha statues into the pond.

The conflict of religious ideology was a conflict of Western and Oriental cultures. It was more serious in China than in Vietnam at the beginning. Only when the Christian Church recognized the mistake in enforcing the abolition of ancestor worship did the conflict stop.

Therefore, in my opinion, in the early time, Christianity was free to carry out its missionary work. If conflicts took place, it was not Cochinchine or Tonkin's policy to prohibit the new religion but Western missionaries' mistake for not knowing how to adapt to real life in Vietnam.

In 1858, the French battleships fired into Đà Nẵng to protect the Western priests. The war of invasion began under the claim for freedom of Christian mission work and some Western priests participated in this action. Of course, the foreign invasion was resisted and Christian mission work became a national issue. This was the reason for the "bình Tây sát Tả" movement (movement to fight against the Western people and kill the Christian missionaries). It requires a scientific attitude to approach this issue, on the basis of historical reality. We cannot only blame people who carried out "bình Tây sát Tả" because "bình Tây" means carrying out the

resistance for the national independence and “sát Tả” means eliminating the ones who supported Westerners at that time.

The history of Western missionary work turned to a new stage. The basic contradiction was the war of invasion by the French and the resistance for national independence by the Vietnamese. One could say that the fight was bloody because at that time one would hear not the teachings of Gospel but the terrible sound of cannons.

Prior to August 1945 when Vietnamese people regained national independence; the French came again with fighter planes and tanks. Once again, Vietnamese people had to stand up to fight against the French and then the Americans. Complete national independence could only come in 1975. During this time, many Catholics, even famous priests such as Phạm Bá Trục and Hồ Thành Biên, joined the Resistance.

There were, however, bad Catholic believers who carried out anti-national activities such as priest Lê Hữu Từ who organized troops in Phát Diệm. Of course the fight against the French included the elimination of Lê Hữu Từ's group which was backed up by the French imperialism. Besides Lê Hữu Từ, Phạm Sư Ôn and Thân Lợi could be considered special phenomena of the three private spiritual movements.

But the Phát Diệm church still stands on its ground and on 18 January 1988 was ranked as a historical cultural heritage by the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The church has not been destroyed although it once was the very headquarter of anti-national forces.

The Vietnamese Catholics now enjoy a free religious life. The Catholics freely perform ceremonies at churches, including Phát Diệm. In Hanoi, not only Catholics but also non-religious people gather to celebrate the annual Noel eve.

As regards Protestantism, the situation is almost the same as Catholicism.

What about Caodaism?

Caodaism was set up by intellectuals who had Western education and worked for the French government in order to raise spirits by means of Ouija. The founder was Ngô Văn Chiêu, a district chief. The religion was permitted to open by the French government in 1927. The most important teaching is in the *Thánh ngôn hợp tuyển*

(Collection of Saint's words) which promulgated the ideology of the Three Religions with an emphasis on Taoism. When Phạm Công Tắc, one of the leaders of Caodaism, stood with his troops to fight against the French, he was caught and exiled to Madagascar. Caodaism was originally a set of many different factions. After some time, again separated into different denominations. These were denominations participated in the national movement. Other leaders – mostly from the Tây Ninh denomination - went with the French or the Americans and organized troops to fight against the South of Vietnam Liberation force or each other. As conflicts happened inside Caodaism at that time, Phạm Công Tắc fled to Cambodia and then died in Phnom Peng. After 1975 when the South was liberated and the country was unified, Caodaism restored its activities and actively participated into the progress of national building. Caodaism's oratories in Tây Ninh and in other provinces are still maintained along with the ball and the eye for believers to come to worship.

What about Hoahao Buddhism?

This religion was established in 1939 by Huỳnh Phú Sổ in An Giang province. Huỳnh Phú Sổ was an intellectual peasant. Suffering from illness, he went up on the Thất Sơn mountain to look for herb medicine. Finally, he was taught some esoteric remedies by hermits who lived in a secret retreat in the mountain. He cured the ill people and promulgated his belief which relied on Buddhist thoughts via main teachings written in *Sấm giảng* (teachings descended from sky). When the August Revolution took place, he once participated in the anti-French war. Then, some leaders of this religion brought troops to surrender to the French military. Finally, the Hòa Hảo troops was eliminated by the Ngô Đình Diệm' regime. After the South was liberated in 1975, the religion began to revive. Hòa Hảo believers' main activity is to help people with sickness. Hòa Hảo Buddhist followers still perform rituals at the Tổ đình (Temple for ancestor worship), Hòa Hảo pagoda, before the red silk (trần điều).

Some Hòa Hảo and Caodaism believers fled overseas and carried out activities against the Vietnamese nation.

What is presented above is the basic situation and a summary of Vietnam's religious life from old times until the present. It is much more complicated when we investigate deeply.

Vietnamese spirituality is basically an *open spirituality with an open pantheon*. Its tolerance makes it easy to acquire different religions in a peaceful way. Yet the

core of Vietnamese spirituality is the love for the country and ancestor worship which has shaped the nation. The love for the country is a “bronze wall” in Vietnamese spirituality that no one is allowed to violate. If anyone tries to violate this, he will be surely punished despite belonging to any religion.

Religion is an ideology. In mankind’s history, any ideology has its mainstream and a “reverse stream”. This “reverse stream” can be big or small, strong or weak, depending on time and space. This is the same in Vietnam from the old times until the present.

The mainstream in Vietnam’s religious life focuses on the love for the country and the need to protect national independence. This love is a touchstone of Vietnamese spirituality. This is a historical truth that cannot be denied and distorted.

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