



RELIGIONS' INFLUENCE ON SHAPING MODERN VIETNAMESE SOCIETY

Thi Soi Tran

Kien Giang University, Viet Nam

*Corresponding author: tsoi@vnkgu.edu.vn

Abstract: The Vietnamese Revolution showed that robust national unity, which included religious unity, was crucial for its success. This study investigates the impact of religion on Vietnamese culture, specifically exploring how religious beliefs foster community connections and contribute to nation building. It emphasizes how religions support moral principles, regulate social interactions, and offer spiritual solace. Despite having different perspectives, religions have common goals such as liberating individuals from tyranny and establishing a fair society. Various religions supported Vietnam's fight for independence and currently endorse the establishment of socialism. The Communist Party of Vietnam seeks to utilize this influence by promoting the cultural contributions and patriotism of faiths. The report proposes actions for religious policy such as formalizing citizens' religious freedom according to the 2013 Constitution, providing education on religious policy, and encouraging collaboration between the state and churches in social welfare initiatives. It promotes maintaining the humanitarian aspects of religions while avoiding their misuse. Vietnam's religious policy should promote faiths to contribute to national development and socialism by maintaining their cultural values and promoting community service and patriotism.

Keywords: ethics, contemporary, religion, role, society, Vietnam.

1. Overview of the role of religious entities in society

Religion, as a social institution, has consistently influenced and contributed to several facets of social existence. It has fostered diversity and cultural wealth in the nation and influenced moral principles for the general population in specific historical eras. The Communist Party of Vietnam has acknowledged the significance of this matter since its inception. The Party has consistently maintained a stance of respecting and safeguarding freedom of religious belief throughout its history. Article 5 of the Ordinance on Beliefs and Religions states that the State guarantees the freedom to practice religious and belief activities within the boundaries of the law. It also acknowledges and supports the cultural and ethical principles of religions, as well as upholds and encourages the positive aspects of ancestor worship traditions. Additionally, it recognizes and pays tribute to individuals who have made significant contributions to the nation and society, aiming to enhance national unity and fulfill the spiritual and emotional requirements of the population. The 11th National Party Congress Resolution reiterates the importance of promoting the positive cultural and ethical aspects of religions, urging religious leaders and followers to lead exemplary lives and contribute actively to national development and defense [1. P. 245].

Religious cultural and ethical ideals have enhanced social interactions among individuals and their relationship with nature, hence playing a role in shaping contemporary

Vietnamese ethics and identity. The values played a crucial role in addressing the moral decline caused by the adverse effects of the capitalist system today. Empirical evidence demonstrates that in regions where religions have a strong and numerous following, there is a decrease in social problems, an increase in social order, and a more structured and ethical way of life [2. P. 8].

Nevertheless, religion is not exclusively beneficial. Society has faced significant consequences due to conflicts arising from the misuse of religions. It is essential to accurately determine the function of religious ethics to enhance the virtues of religions and mitigate their adverse effects on shaping the modern Vietnamese character.

Religious and non-religious individuals may have differing worldviews and approaches to achieving goals, but they both aim to promote goodness and work towards creating a better society. They seek to free people from oppression and injustice and aspire to establish a prosperous, democratic, fair, and civilized nation. This is the intersection where human values in religion and humanism principles of socialism converge, uniting to strengthen the national unity bloc in the pursuit of national liberation and development. During Vietnam's current shift towards socialism, fostering acceptance of diversity, defining religious principles, identifying shared beliefs, and fostering agreement among followers of various religions and between religious and non-religious individuals will generate a collective drive to construct a strong national unity front to effectively advance the national reform agenda.

2. Religion establishes values of community and social cohesion, creating motivations in building society

Religion contributes to building and strengthening ethical and moral standards for each individual, family and society, while also overcoming the limitations of moral degradation due to negative impacts of society, contributing to ensuring spiritual peace for a part of the population.

Religion is a social entity associated with the development of various aspects of social life, so religious ethics is a part of social ethics and closely tied to social ethics. Both religious ethics and social ethics guide people towards goodness, eliminate evils, promote community spirit and equality between people. Religions have built a system of ethical standards with many common points with family and social ethics, including Marxist ethics. Even the classics of Marxism-Leninism also admitted: "In early Christian history there are striking points of resemblance with the modern working-class movement. Christianity as well as Communism preached the liberation of the oppressed, of the slaves, in the near future" [3. P. 664]. President Ho Chi Minh profoundly summarized the ethical values of major religions in the world, with Christianity being the spirit of philanthropy, Buddhism being compassion; and Confucianism being benevolence [5. P. 225].

Religious ethics guides people to do good deeds, avoid evil deeds, and adjusts people's ethical behaviors, establishing a spiritual order in society.

Good and Evil are two opposing categories, which are also two basic categories in religious ethics and social ethics. However, Good and Evil behaviors in religious ethics are encouraged and discouraged by fair and strict rewards and punishments of the deities, so their educational and deterrent effects are highly effective.

Religions believe that followers who abide by and regularly practice religious teachings, doctrines or ethical rules will go to Heaven, Western Paradise, while evildoers will

go down to Hell/Purgatory. Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam believe Hell is a place for those who commit many evils. The teachings of Caodaism require followers to self-cultivate, restrain desires against traditional ethics; appreciate their own and others' lives; not be greedy, unrestrained, or harm others for personal gain. The first of the 8 Precepts of Hoa Hao Buddhism points out: not drinking alcohol, gambling, using opium, indulging in prostitution, but maintaining ethics of three bonds and five constants.

Religious ethics also emphasizes tolerance, love for people. Tolerance is an attitude of appeasement, harmony, respect for anything different from oneself. According to Buddhism, the greatest human quality is having no prejudice. Catholic ethics emphasizes loving God and loving people. The prominent feature of religious altruism is non-profit and refusal of repayment.

The teachings of religions also set ethical standards in family life. For example, not coveting others' spouses and being filial to parents. Those who are filial to their parents will be rewarded with long life, otherwise they will be pecked by crows and eagles (Catholicism); prohibition of adulterous behaviors in marital relations (Buddhism); no indulgence in lust, no extramarital affairs (Caodaism), etc.

In addition, religions participate in preserving and promoting the cultural heritage values of the nation and humanity. Thus, religion plays an important role in building a cultural lifestyle in families, communities and society. In the development process, religions not only convey people's faith, but also help maintain secular social ethics. It has a strong influence on people's spiritual life. As a component of ideology, religions have brought unique expressions in behaviors, lifestyles, customs, habits, in material as well as spiritual cultural elements for each country, nation, region.

Today, the role of religion is emphasized more than ever. Contemporary humanity has many activities to honor the cultural and ethical values of religions and affirm their contributions to human culture and development. In recent years, the United Nations has included the Vesak celebrations of Buddhism in its official activities.

In Vietnam under the Northern domination, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism were introduced and gradually took on an important position in the life of the Vietnamese people, especially Buddhism. When the country regained independence, Buddhism was widely propagated and profoundly influenced social life. Under the reigns of the Dinh, Early Le, Ly, Tran dynasties, Buddhism was exalted. Monks were also intellectuals. During the Ly-Tran period, Buddhism contributed to creating many valuable artistic works that still exist today such as temples and statues. Under the Tran dynasty, after 3 resistance wars against the Yuan-Mongol invaders, when the country was at peace, with brilliant intellect, Tran Nhan Tong established the Truc Lam Zen Buddhism in Yen Tu with its unique thoughts still preserved today.

In the 15th century, Confucianism was used by the ruling dynasty as the primary ideology in governing the country, but Buddhism still made many contributions to Dai Viet's culture. Along with Taoism, Buddhism continued to exist and develop in social life, an indispensable need in spiritual life, complementing and creating unique spiritual cultural values of the nation.

In the 16th century, Catholicism was introduced to Vietnam and despite many difficulties, it gradually affirmed its role in Vietnamese culture. Catholicism contributed to enriching Vietnamese culture through its architecture, texts, music, rituals, etc.

Ho Chi Minh was someone who early recognized religion as a cultural component. As he clearly stated: "For the sake of survival as well as the purpose of life, human beings created and invented spoken and written languages, ethics, laws, sciences, religions, literature, arts, tools for daily life including clothing, food, housing, and methods of use. The entirety of those creations and inventions is culture. Culture is the synthesis of all modes of life and their expressions that human beings have generated to meet the needs of life and the demands of survival" [4. P. 431]. Based on that, he instructed officials, soldiers and people in localities to preserve the cultural heritage within religions. He cared about ancestor worship, the expression needs of the people, architectural works, music in religions; focused on exploiting the fine cultural values in religions to enrich the national culture.

Today in Vietnam, the material and spiritual lives of the people are continuously improved. However, besides that, there remains a part of the population encountering difficulties in life. That reality requires sharing from the community and society. With the traditional spirit of "mutual affection and assistance", "the hale leaves protecting tattered ones" of the Vietnamese people, many individuals and organizations, including religious organizations, have participated in voluntary work. In reality, religions have been very active in social charity work, humanitarian relief, making an important contribution to improving the material and spiritual lives of the people.

Due to the common point between religious ethics and social ethics which is love for people, the strength of religions is doing social charity, humanitarian relief in the spirit of volunteering. Tuong Tinh Duong of Buddhism is a place for free medical examination and treatment using traditional medicine and modern medicine; Nursing homes for the elderly, especially the elderly without support, is one of the important social charity activities of organizations affiliated with the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha. To have a stable material life, some religions organize vocational training classes, compassionate kindergartens, contributing to sharing the responsibility of national education with the public education system. With the spirit of secularization, Vietnamese Buddhism established many facilities for HIV/AIDS patients as well as HIV/AIDS counseling centers; Catholicism allocates a lot of funding for natural disaster relief, helping the disabled, assisting poor students [7].

Thus, to a certain extent, the social charity and humanitarian activities of religions have contributed together with the State in solving social security issues. Through that, social classes have bonded, united and created consensus between social classes and the State.

3. Basic directions and requirements of our Party and State today regarding promoting the role of religions

Since its inception, the Communist Party of Vietnam has put forth the policy and task of religious solidarity, religious and non-religious unity, and great national unity in order to carry the national democratic revolution and move towards socialism to success.

During his lifetime, President Ho Chi Minh affirmed the common points on the goal of human liberation between the Vietnamese revolution and religions. He called on all fellow countrymen, regardless of religious differences, to unite closely and resolutely fight to defend the country and also for religious freedom. "We are fighting to save the country, emulating

production and thrift, land reform to give land to the tillers, and freedom of religion. Thus, what our Government and people are doing is in accordance with the spirit of the Gospel" [6]. General Secretary Truong Chinh stated clearly: "Communism is atheistic while Catholicism believes in God, but still Communism and Catholicism have some similarities. The Communist ideal and the ideal of Jesus Christ are not much different. Christ wants people not to cheat, exploit each other. Christ wants people to love each other. Communists also want that" [8].

In Resolution 25-NQ/TW, the Communist Party of Vietnam affirmed the "common points" between the ideals of religion and the ideals of socialism: "The goal of a prosperous people, powerful country, and just, democratic and civilized society is the common point to bond religious followers with the common goal" [9. P. 49]. Concretizing the issue of religion in the Constitution, the Standing Committee of the 11th National Assembly promulgated the Ordinance on Beliefs and Religions (passed on June 18, 2004, effective from November 15, 2004). This is the legal basis for religious activities and religious work, contributing to continuously building, developing and strengthening the great national unity bloc in the cause of building and defending the socialist Vietnam Fatherland in the renovation period.

The Party's recent objective and scientific assessments of religion, such as: religion being the spiritual need of a part of the population; religion continuing to exist for a long time; religious ethics having many points in line with the cause of building a new society; religious activities in accordance with the legitimate wishes and interests of followers being ensured; fine cultural and ethical values of religions being respected, encouraged and promoted, etc., reflected in a number of typical documents: Resolution No. 24-NQ/TW (1990), Directive No. 37-CT/TW (1998), Resolution No. 25-NQ/TW (2003) are important in continuing to renew the policy and improve the legal system on religions, and promote the strength of the great national unity bloc in the current context of accelerating industrialization and modernization.

To continue to promote the role of religions in building contemporary Vietnamese society, the basic requirements posed for the Party and the State are:

Firstly, it is necessary to review the status quo of religions in a way that closely follows religious life and activities of religious organizations in the context of rapid and complex changes in the country, the region and the world in order to supplement and improve the Party's viewpoints and guidelines on religion. This aims to direct religious activities and religious work to serve the successful implementation of the goal of a prosperous people, powerful country, democracy, justice and civilization by the strength of great national unity.

Secondly, amend, supplement and improve the system of legal documents on religion in the direction of concretizing the provisions, contents and spirit of the 2013 Constitution, ensuring the freedom of religion of everyone in accordance with international conventions on civil and political rights. In that spirit, the Law on Belief and Religion needs to be urgently developed with supplementary and revised contents appropriate to reality to soon be promulgated to replace the Ordinance on Belief and Religion.

Thirdly, it is necessary to promote propaganda and education for the masses (including religious dignitaries and non-religious people) and officials, civil servants and employees of organizations in the political system on Ho Chi Minh's ideology, the Party's guidelines, the State's policies on religion and great national unity; on the distortions and sabotage by hostile forces in the field of religion and great national unity in order to contribute to strengthening the great national unity bloc in the current situation.

Fourthly, well managing religious activities on the basis of promoting the roles and tasks of Party, government and people's organizations, and promoting the roles of religious dignitaries and followers in participating in building policies and laws on religion to effectively implement the task of building the great national unity bloc.

Fifthly, strengthening and improving the efficiency of the Vietnam Fatherland Front and its member organizations in disseminating the Party's guidelines and the State's policies on religion to religious dignitaries and followers in order to further promote their roles in the process of building the great national unity bloc.

4. Conclusion

This research has shown that religion has had a substantial impact on Vietnamese culture and society across time. Religious concepts have governed social relationships by imparting moral norms that restrain destructive behaviors and encourage virtues such as compassion, tolerance, and community service. Religions provide ethical direction and spiritual fulfillment to help create structure and significance. Major religions in Vietnam, such as Buddhism, Catholicism, Caodaism, and indigenous practices including ancestor worship, have influenced unique cultural forms in architecture, music, literature, and lifestyle traditions.

Vietnam's religions, albeit having different perspectives, aim to free people from oppression and establish a fair society. Religious leaders and groups significantly contributed to the national fight for independence. They are currently engaged in charitable initiatives that support underprivileged people and disaster relief efforts. Religious organizations' social welfare activities supplement government initiatives in tackling poverty, education, healthcare access, and societal issues.

The Communist Party of Vietnam acknowledges the lasting significance of religion in Vietnamese society. It highlights the use of religious organizations to promote national unity, protect cultural assets, and encourage involvement in development. Policies are designed to guarantee religious freedom, uphold beneficial cultural principles, and foster collaboration with religious groups. Current tasks including enhancing the legislative framework on religion to conform with the 2013 Constitution and international rules, educating citizens on religious policies, engaging religious leaders in policymaking, and bolstering the Vietnam Fatherland Front's role in collaborating with faith organizations.

Vietnam should utilize the cultural wealth, social influence, and ethical principles of religion to benefit national interests, while preventing its misuse for harmful ends. The government can collaborate with religious institutions to tackle social issues and promote socialism. Adapting management practices is necessary as religious dynamics change due to increasing diversity of faiths, increased urbanization, and global integration. Additional research is needed to explore the precise mechanisms via which religion impacts contemporary Vietnamese identity and culture. Empirical research can evaluate the performance of social programs and pinpoint areas of unmet needs. Religion is expected to remain a significant aspect of Vietnamese society. If utilized wisely, its contributions can promote unity and advancement towards a successful, fair, and civilized nation.

References

[1] *Documents of the 11th National Party Congress*, National Political Publishing House - Truth, Hanoi, 2011, P. 245.

- [2] Nguyen Thanh Xuan (2005), “*Revisiting the renewed perspectives on religious work of Resolution No. 24*”, Religious Affairs, No. 2, P. 8.
- [3] *C. Marx, Ph. Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 22, National Political Publishing House - Truth, Hanoi, 1995, P. 664.
- [4] *Ho Chi Minh Complete Works*, Vol. 3, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 1995, P. 431.
- [5] *Ho Chi Minh Complete Works*, Vol. 6, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 1995, P. 225.
- [6] *Ho Chi Minh Complete Works*, Vol. 7, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 1995, P. 197.
- [7] Nguyen Thi Minh Ngoc (2014), “Some features of social charity activities of religions in Vietnam today”, Journal of Buddhist Studies, No. 3.
- [8] *Nhan Dan Newspaper*, issue on January 27, 1955.
- [9] *Documents of the 7th Plenum of the 9th Central Committee*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 2003, P. 49.