

NEW RELIGIOUS PHENOMENA AND THEIR NEGATIVE EFFECTS ON SOCIAL LIFE IN NORTH VIETNAM TODAY

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Abstract. The twentieth century is the century when new religious phenomena appear, which is recognized as a development trend of world religions. In our country, this term began to be popularized at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. According to statistics of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, the emergence of new religious phenomena has changed the religious life in our country in almost all aspects. The appearance and existence of “new religious phenomena” in the North partly reflected the change in the daily life of the people in the North on both positive and negative sides. This article focuses on studying the negative effects of “hot spots” related to religious phenomena in the North in recent years.

Keywords: religion, the new religion, North Vietnam, phenomenon, influence.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the new religious phenomenon has been intensively researched by many scientists, because it is also an active social phenomenon in our country and has complicated developments in the Northern region. That fact requires religious researchers to conduct intensive studies on social upheavals leading to the birth of new religious phenomena here. Author Nguyen Ngoc Phuong Trang in her research on Japan said that the concept of “new religion” first appeared in Japan after the end of World War II (1945)” [1, p. .4]. There are many interpretations of the term “new religion”. According to Prof. Inoue Nobutaka, Kogakuin University (Japan), there were four interpretations: “Firstly, new religion means religions appearing from the early 21st century; Secondly, new religion means religions that have appeared since the Meiji Restoration (in Japan); Thirdly, new religion means religions appearing from the early 20th century, and finally, religions appearing after World War II”. And Prof. Do Quang Hung, in his studies, pointed out that the “New Ages” movement that appeared in the US in 1967 - 1968 was the beginning of new religious phenomena in the world” [2, p.227].

Received October 16, 2021. Revised October 28, 2021. Accepted November 6, 2021.

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When the author Truong Van Chung approached the history of the term, he said that a definition of new religion had not been given because standards and criteria to describe a group as a religion within the new religious movement failed to be established; because “the new religion term itself is still very vague, does not fully cover the diversity, instability, specificity, religious aspects...” [3, p.298]. Therefore, he said that it was impossible to define or create a common standard to recognize the “novelty” in the phrase “new religion”.

According to author Vu Van Chung with an article on *New Religious Phenomena in some provinces of the Northern Delta at present*: “In a broad sense, only different parallel beliefs arise from religious phenomena of a part of the people, initiated by a person or group of people on the basis of integrating, borrowing religious tenets and rituals of traditional religions and beliefs to form “mixed” and pragmatic beliefs that develop in a different direction from traditional religion, reflecting great upheavals in material - cultural, spiritual, social life and the need for spiritual transformation of a group of people in certain history and social conditions.

In a narrow sense, “new religious phenomenon” is a religious belief of a group of people in society for soteriological purposes, believing in supernatural forces borrowed from traditional religions and beliefs to create “new content”, different from traditional religions and beliefs to pray for health, fortune, cure and practical needs of current society. [4, p.11].

According to the author Hoang Minh Do in the article “*New Religious Phenomenon*”, “*heresy*” - *identification characteristics and raised problems*: “they are religions that have appeared since 1950, just small scale congregations, narrow scope of activities, unclear religious tenets, some are even opposed by the majority of the people. Because they have no humanistic religious tenets.” In this article, the author also introduced the concept of new religious phenomenon through the perspectives of researchers on religion of the Institute for the Study of Religion and Belief under the Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics in the Textbook for religious master’s students in 2014: “New religious phenomena are phenomena of a religious nature that have just appeared in recent years in order to gather a number of people around a character self-proclaiming to be “prophet”, an incarnation of a god, a superman with extraordinary powers to set up a religion with its own religious tenet or ritual practice but to the extent that they are religious phenomena, not yet expressed as a religion” [9, p.1317-1318].

According to the definition of the group of authors working at the Central Committee for Mass Mobilization, “new religious phenomena” are synonymous with the concepts of “strange religion”, “sect”, “heresy”: “Strange religion” indicates forms of belief that have not been unknown at that time, have emerged in recent years, gathering a number of people around a character who self-proclaims to be a “prophet” responsible to the “god” and was missioned by the “god” to establish a religion. The religion has its own religious tenets that are modeled and patched up from many sources... It is unorganized or organized but loose; has its own ritual conventions or regulations on practicing rituals for followers” [10, pp.7-8].

In our opinion, the definition of new religious phenomenon presented in the textbook for Master's students of the Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics is the

most complete and appropriate definition to establish the concept of religions that has just been emerged in recent years. However, in our opinion, further research and regular supplementation of the concept are still needed because the new religious phenomenon is one of daily changes in society, thereby giving the right orientations for the people and helping the governing bodies on cultural and religious issues to come up with the right policies in orienting and managing cultural and religious issues.

2. Content

2.1. Characteristics of new religious phenomena

The new religious phenomenon has quite rich and diverse characteristics, from calling “new religious phenomenon” in each locality and region, there are differences even though they have the same nature. Due to the complexity in the formation of new religious phenomena: from rules, rituals, sometimes a mixture of many existing religions, combining and mixing rituals... in order to solve spiritual issues of the people in a certain locality. Therefore, it is necessary to deepen the understanding of new religious phenomena from within each religion itself, point out the general rules in the activities of those religions, and in our opinion it is very difficult to generalize into a new religious definition in general.

Firstly, the characteristics of the leader or the head: most of new religions are quite similar in the concept of the founder, they must be someone who has grown alive to the truth (whether or not they need revelation).

Secondly, the characteristics of existing religious tenets of traditional religion are only mistakes and do not provide a real path to liberation for people. Only the enlightenment of the master and following the direction of the master may help people come out of the stupor.

Thirdly, the characteristics that determine the difference in rituals of new religions are what distinguish one religious phenomenon from another. These regulations are mainly of a collective nature, may focus on using modern multimedia techniques as well as psychological techniques to take interest in new believers, adapt them to aluminum, this is usually stipulated in the ritual rules of each religion and is strictly adhered to by believers.

Fourthly, most of the leaders of new religions always follow the trend of “exclusive solipsism”, which is also a feature that new religious phenomena emphasize. All new religious phenomena believe that the religion they lead is the most correct and shows a confrontational attitude towards those who are followers of other religions; rather than an attitude of “indifference”, “carefree”, which means that those who have followed a new religion believe that their religion is unique, even they directly confront or discriminate other religions. That creates instability in a part of the population that believes in religion.

Fifthly, a characteristic that we can easily see that there are two opposing views in the religious tenets of new religions: the first is to try to reconcile with scientific theories, the other is to show hostile attitude towards advanced science. This proves that those religions stem from personal viewpoints of the religious leaders and they have not

yet come up with a logical scientific theoretical point system to create the foundation for their religion to develop. It is also a feature that proves such religious phenomena are spontaneous.

Sixthly, the nature of most new religions is not different from traditional religions but a reversal of the “originality” of those traditional religions.

The above characteristics manifest specifically in each new religious phenomenon through the religious tenets, canon law and rituals of each religion.

2.2. Some new religions in North Vietnam today

From the 90s of the twentieth century to the early years of the twenty-first century, according to statistics of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs of the North Vietnam, there were about 70-80 “new religious phenomena” with different origins and names and concentrated mainly in some localities such as Hanoi: 14, Hai Duong: 07, Nam Dinh: 06, Phu Tho: 02, Thai Binh: 05... attracting many followers, which more or less influenced on spiritual life of the people.

In the North of our country, from the 1975s of the last century, new religions mainly appeared in the Northern Midlands and the Northern Delta. For example, Long Hoa Di Lac led by Dao Thi Minh appeared in Hanoi in the 1980s, taking advantage of the festival pilgrimage route to propagate the religious tenets and attract many followers. The phenomenon of Goddess Association was founded by Nguyen Thi The in Hai Duong province, originating from her dream that Goddess Au Co taught that “she is capable of communicating with afterlife world”, then Ms. The founded Goddess Association and now there are also many followers who are engaged to this religion with the title “Goddess The”. Or like Ho Chi Minh Ngoc Phat religion, also known as the Canon Law on Gratitude and People, originating from Hai Phong, it has existed since 1994, attracting a large number of followers even in Hanoi City, up to 3,000 followers upon peak times. “According to the data of the Central Committee for Mass Mobilization in 1997, in our country, there were 32 new religious phenomena with 56,835 followers, present in 30 provinces/cities in which, including emerging religious phenomena: Quang Minh Tu Duc (1990), Thanh Hai Vo Thuong su (1991), Uncle Ho's Religion (1992), ... Synthesized from statistical sources of the competent authorities, from 1980 to now, our country has had more than 100 new religion phenomena [5, p.82-93].

Each newly born religious phenomenon has different regulations, religious tenets and rules of practice. Each religion itself applies ways to attract followers, taking advantage of people's devout psychology, and some religions even receive support from abroad for disguised political purpose, causing disorder and peace in the locality, making it difficult for State management on religious issue. The formation and complicated internal developments in new religious phenomena come from many causes that are both objective and subjective, we need to find out the causes of these new religious phenomena in order to learn more deeply about this issue.

2.3. Causes of the birth of new religious phenomena in the North Vietnam

The first is cultural and historical cause

In daily life, people not only have needs for food, clothing and inhabitat, but also have other spiritual needs. When the country enters the process of strong integration

with the world economy, we have many opportunities to interact with new cultures that have good and suitable things for the development needs of the country but also have widespread bad cultural products, greatly affecting the cultural and spiritual life of the masses. Outsiders who want to destroy us have taken advantage of this mechanism to corrupt in many areas in the North Vietnam, they enticed people into new religions and dubious organizations funded by the outside to destroy us. Our people are still poor, when material needs are met, many people defy anything to follow, when asking them for the reason, they all replied that they did not know what to do in their spare time, so they participated for fun. They are not oriented as well as do not have much ability to choose what is best and most suitable for them, which is also a loophole that we have not had the most reasonable solution.

Along with the development of the market economy, the disparity between the rich and the poor, widespread corruption makes people who are inherently frustrated with the above social phenomena become easier to be propagated and enticed to participate in strange religions. Notably, most of the chieftains have low educational levels but are believed by many people and also attract a part of disgruntled cadres and party members, a part of the backward masses who are dissatisfied with negative phenomena in society. Therefore, we cannot immediately extinguish these new religious phenomena, especially in rural areas in which people's educational level is still low, people's faith is lost.

Another objective reason is that our predecessor's culture considers the worship of famous people and national heroes to be the tradition of when drinking water, think of its source of Vietnamese people. In the history of our country, social regimes from feudalism to the present have honored famous people and national heroes (there are ordinations placed in the churches of the clans, temples and shrines) in order to educate the tradition for generations to follow the good tradition of the predecessors... But now, some bad actors is taking advantage of that good belief and morality of the nation to ascribe some religious tenets and conventions to establish a new religion such as: To Quoc Lac Hong, Tran Hung Dao's Religion, Dao tien, Dao coi, Dao dua ... There are many groups of people who believe and follow these religious organizations. They all are still the people who are dissatisfied with the regime, live in the places in which the educational level is low... Therefore, most of these new religious groups appear in rural and remote areas.

The second is socio-economic cause

Marxism-Leninism has the following religious views: religion is a historical category, it reflects the change of society. In recent years, it is thought that religion has gradually disappeared as many natural phenomena were unexplained, but now science has convincingly proved them. But the reality is not like that, religion is still there and disguised into various forms. And it is increasingly clear that religion is a structural part of the society, the religion has and will exist, transform to adapt to new circumstances, with many variations in form and content. During the transformation of society and religion in general, new religious sects have appeared. Science has its own explanation and religion also has its own explanation. Today, people both respect and fear these subjects, and respect and fear expressions have been covered by layers of overlapping

modern relationships, only to manifest themselves as varied and complex responses to society.

Another root cause is negatives and stresses in society, which caused new religious phenomena to appear as a spiritual therapy to reassure their psychology. For the North Vietnam's characteristics of complex population, many ethnic groups and population classes, social fluctuation, interference with neighboring provinces as well as foreign countries, they have many conditions to approach "new things", new thoughts, new trends, especially in the era of flat world, science and technology development at a superfast speed. Today's new religious phenomena, therefore, tend to develop and be propagated to many different classes of the population and have complicated developments in some localities such as Tay Bac, Bac Giang, Ha Noi, Hai Duong,...

Since the beginning of renewal period in 1986, the North and the whole country have focused all efforts on the renovation work, but at the same time the society has had many complicated upheavals and all classes of society have risen up to assert themselves. However, there is still a group of people that is not easy to get used to the competition in new conditions, they find it difficult to adapt to new things, cannot keep up with the level of development with a lightning speed and daily changes of society. Therefore, they want to explain their perception according to their own models, sometimes according to the religious nature or as a relief or a response, or expressing regret for something done or longing for a peaceful future. That is the opportunity for the new religions to develop, such people, retrieve the spiritual values of a time that used to be overlooked or forgotten. According to the latest studies of religious researchers, they were those who may have been and are vulnerable to psychological and ideological aspects, failed to timely adapt to the changes of modern society, so they followed the new religious sects to find a spiritual support for themselves, such as finding a new belief to be able to continue to exist.

At the same time, in the renewal and opening trend, new religions have opportunity to penetrate into our country. Meanwhile, under the influence of the market economy, some of our nation's long-standing traditional religions are showing more and more signs of degeneration, "commercialization", making people lose their faith. So, if before, when people needed a quiet and peaceful space, they would go to a temple, church, etc. with strict religious tenet and rule systems. Nowadays, most young people readily accept an admiration, informal, non-binding form. That is the reason why new phenomena, religious sects have been born and existed among the people, separate from traditional religion which inherently is a strict and rigorous religious tenet system for followers.

2.4. Effects of new religious phenomena on social life in the North of our country today

First of all, superstitious activities of taking advantage of belief by some new religions have had a significant effect on the spirit and belief of the followers.

Those who are said to be the supreme being take advantage of people's low educational level to seduce them, so there are many people who participate in these religions become confused and completely believe in the supreme being they are worshipping. For example, there were many death cases when they had sick family

members but did not go to the hospital for treatment but only drank unboiled water mixed with freckles and read scriptures at home. Like 3-year-old little kid Nguyen Huu Luong, in Thiet Binh village, Van Ha commune, Dong Anh district, Hanoi, he only had ordinary diarrhea. My father is a follower of “*Long Hoa Di Lac*” religion, so he decided not to take him to the medical station but to stay at home to pray and cure his illness with freckles and unboiled water. In the end, he died unjustly. Or the case of Ms. Nguyen Thi Uyen in Tien Duong, Dong Anh district, Hanoi, because she is the leader of “*Long Hoa Di Lac*” group, she must be exemplary. When she was sick, she only drank unboiled water mixed with freckles, so she died after only 2 days. [6, p.77].

Secondly, the activities of new religions have caused negative economic, cultural, social, even inhuman, and counter-cultural effects in many localities.

First of all, economically, some of the leaders or those who played key role in the group illegally collected money from the participants that nobody could control over. For example, recently there were huge shrines in Thai Binh owned by ordinary farmers and the local authority had to request to demolish, so where did they get the money to build, who blindly screen them, so far there has still been no correct answer. The situation of focusing on illegal missionary and heretical activities caused many people to delay their production and business because they waited for the appearance of supernatural beings who then would make them become wealthy without working, this situation caused a flow of confused thoughts among the people in the locality that has been happening in many Northern localities but the authorities at all levels have not yet had a synchronous solution to thoroughly settle.

Some people from ordinary farmers suddenly one day became “*healers*” who could cure any disease for everyone, the therapies were heavily superstitious and anti-scientific such as massage, taking a remedy that could cured all diseases. Some illegal and heretical missionary activities also caused confusion in school education, even for parents. They sent propaganda letters to students who were too young, when they accidentally or intentionally knew their names and addresses with propaganda content about “*doomsday*”, about “*period of faded religious tenets*”, threatened that if receiving letters and then not writing or propagating to others, they would suffer from risks, accidents, sometimes even death... that caused instability in many residential areas.

While the country is building a new life, building an advanced culture imbued with national identity, a number of illegal and heretical missionary activities organize inhuman and counter-cultural activities such as: nudity, promiscuous sexual intercourse, abandoning of ancestral altars, breaking up with cultural activities and traditional festivals, committing suicide... These illegal activities caused anxiety and confusion in the community, especially in rural, remote and isolated areas, which have become a big obstacle, causing the masses to become dissatisfied, protest and doubt the leadership ability of our Party and State.

Thirdly, many activities of the new religions have harmed political stability, divided the community and even turned into the tool of hostile forces. This is the most serious problem that some religions are impacting us. Relying on the direction, material and financial support of overseas hostile forces, domestic anti-revolutionary organizations covered eyes and organized activities to oppose the State through religious activities,

causing social unrest in some regions, and causing psychological instability among the masses. Not only that, a number of illegal and heretical missionary activities also attracted the participation of cadres and party members who were dissatisfied with the regime and policies of the State. The above situation more or less negatively affected the unity of ethnic communities, affected the leadership and social management of the Party and State, made the political system at the grassroots level become less effective and lose credibility.

Fourthly, the missionary activities of new religions have caused negative effects on the policy of freedom of religion and belief, causing difficulties for State management and social management.

Since its establishment, our Party has always advocated to respect and guarantee the freedom of belief and religion as well as the freedom of having no belief or religion. Our State always respects the equal agreements on religion that the world prescribes. In Vietnam, all religions have right to operate normally in accordance with the law and are equal under the law. The Communist Party of Vietnam has always agreed on a guiding perspective on religious policy in order to strengthen the unity of religious communities in the great national unity block, in order to maximize the synergic strength, in order to build and successfully implement the cause of industrialization and modernization, firmly build and defend the Fatherland, for the objective of “*Rich people, strong country, fair, democratic and civilized society*” [7]. Therefore, the State-recognized traditional beliefs and religions reacted when new religious organizations illegally propagated and held heretical ceremonies. The illegal missionary activities of new religions surpassed the normal threshold, most of them were superstitious and counter-cultural, showed signs of being related to hostile forces and affected genuine religious activities. Moreover, illegal missionary activities caused the perception of the society on distinguishing superstition from the State-recognized traditional beliefs and religions to become more complicated and difficult. Because the perspectives equated all the negatives of illegal and heretical missionary activities with belief and religion, they did not distinguish which one was our people's traditional belief and religion and which one was a distortion and that took advantage of the belief and religion to serve personal goals.

Thus, the illegal and heretical missionary activities not only harm the interests of legitimate beliefs and religions but also increase the complexity of activities in the field of spirituality in our country today. This requires that the social leadership and management in our country need to invest more in research to draw conclusions and propose specific and effective solutions for illegal and heretical missionary activities.

3. Conclusion

Vietnam is going through the religious experiences of an industrialization, opening and market mechanism society in the context of international exchange and integration. The most recent studies showed that the distribution and participants in these “new religion” groups were mostly city dwellers and vulnerable social groups such as retired officials, old-aged women, poor people in provinces, towns, townships... Through some typical new religious phenomena, we realize the potential danger of this phenomenon in aspects of ideology and political security and social safety. In our opinion, more

complete study on this phenomenon is needed to serve as a scientific basis for planning guidelines and directions, contributing to further improvement of the current policy on religion of our Party and State.

Along with the whole country, the North Vietnam is transforming in the revolutionary movement, creating the foundation for our country to basically become a modern industrialized country. In the coming decades, in response to the domestic and foreign religious trend, the activities of religions will also continue to be vibrant and developed with a variety of activities. Meanwhile, many “new religious phenomena” in our country will continue to appear. Some “new religious phenomena” in foreign countries also seek to penetrate into, propagate and influence... making religious life in our country become even more complicated. Therefore, it is necessary to have appropriate policies and measures to effectively implement the strategy of promoting internal resources in combination with external resources in the period of industrialization and modernization of the country in the new period.

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