

## **THE RELATION BETWEEN RELIGION AND MORALITY IN VIETNAM IN RENOVATION PERIOD**

---

**Lê Văn Lợi <sup>(\*)</sup>**

In history, many researchers attempted to explain the relation between religion and morality. Because the researchers had different standpoints and views on religion and morality so their views on the relation between religion and morality were also different from each other. Basing on views of historical materialism, Marxist classics affirmed that both religion and morality were created by human beings. Religion and morality were not products of supernatural forces. According to them, both religion and morality were forms of awareness and parts of the social superstructure in the fixed forms of economy and society.

As a form of social awareness, morality is the combination of principles, rules and social standards. It corrects human behavior in the social and human relation. Morality is implemented by individual faith, tradition and force of public opinion. From the angle of awareness, religion is "All religion however is nothing but the fantastic reflection in men's minds of those external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of supernatural forces"

In fact religions and morality have passionate sentiment and responsibility. The moral values and standards can exist because they have infiltrated into the human soul and they have become indispensable needs of human beings. People have considered them as human dignity and obligation. When speaking of religion, people often think escape from misery. Although religions bring about illusory solace and happiness, they direct towards good ideals. Dogmas of religions advise people to avoid the evils and to do good things. It is the similarity between morality and religions.

However, some researchers affirm that "the unification of religion and morality is manifested in humanities and concrete moral standards; but they differ in nature and origin" <sup>(1)</sup>. On history, morality came into the world along

---

<sup>\*</sup> Dr., Hồ Chí Minh National Academy of Politics and Public Administration

<sup>1</sup> Lê Bách, *Ethics*, Educational Publishing House, Hanoi, 2002.

with the appearance of human society but religion was born ten thousands of years ago when human being knew how to enter and to carry out the rites. So we cannot confuse morality with religion and we cannot think that religion is the source of social morality. Both morality and religion reflect the social existence but the natures of these reflections are different from each other. Basically, the reflection of religion is illusory and unreal one. But the reflection of morality is true one. It reflects objective relations in social life. Religions satisfy spiritual need of human beings. But this satisfaction is unreal and vague. Morality is the real and perfect satisfaction in social relation of human beings.

Religion and morality belong to social superstructure. They are regulated by social infrastructure and they also change in accordance with changes of social infrastructure. Both religion and morality influence social infrastructure and they impact on each other. Morality contributes values and standards to human culture. Human beings use contributions of morality to create religions. In the course of existence, religions continue to receive moral values of society. However, religions only inherit moral values that are conformity with their faith, dogmas. On the other hand, when the moral values of society become moral values of religions, they are deified and mysticized in accordance with religious dogmas. The impacts of social morality on religions are objective in the development of spiritual life. But these impacts depend on faith, dogmas and institution of each religion.

Because of human powerless in face of their circumstance, religions influenced morality of society when they came into the world. Religions directed people to good values of supreme beings. Religions "provide" moral standards and values for people. These standards and values are considered to be good by religions. However, some moral values and standards are suitable to social morality in which religions exist but some moral value and standards are not suitable to the morality of society. When religions infiltrate into political thought, they attempt to deify the moral relation in particular and social relation in general. The religious institutions are legalized and social morality is covered by religious relations. Since we find that effect of religion on morality depends on many elements but the most important element is the role of religion in contemporary political regime. Although religion is the deciding factor, its effect on morality influences the historical process of each nation as well as the history of humankind.

Vietnam is known as a nation of having a long standing culture. Vietnamese are open-hearted and tolerant people. They do not discriminate the differences. They are ready to accept cultural values from abroad to find and defend our country. Indigenous religions and beliefs of Vietnam have accepted religions that arose in other countries. The Vietnamese have turned some foreign religions into the spiritual property of the nation so the religious life of Vietnamese is very plentiful. In the process of founding and defending our country, our forefathers established social morality with many good values and standards. Both indigenous and polytheism religions have to actualize moral and cultural values of the nation if they would like to exist and develop. In historical process, the combination of moral values of nation with faith, dogmas and the morality of religions have made religious morality to become more humane. However, traditional morality of our nation depended on the agricultural economy and feudal regime lasted thousands of years so this morality has some restrictions such as egalitarianism, patriarchal behavior and conservatism. These restrictions have influenced more or less on religions.

On the other hand, in historical process, religions themselves also have made tremendous impacts on the morality of our nation. In history, Buddhism sometimes infiltrated into and identified itself with the main thought of the nation. Buddhism sometimes played an important role in orientation of social morality and spiritual life. But in Vietnam there are not any monopolist religions. In historical stages, any religion could become a part of the thought system of nation while other religions could exist and develop. Furthermore, religions could infiltrate into a national thought system, they could not cross out essential values of a nation such as patriotism, human thought, national indomitable spirit. On the contrary, religions what could change to correspond with national thought values, they could play certain roles in the spiritual life of the nation. Not any religions can dominate Vietnamese society. This is why religions can promote their roles and contribute many good values to national morality.

Before Vietnamese have carried out the innovation of our country, we spent two wars. Although, we had to face severe historical conditions, under the leadership of Vietnamese Party, the Vietnamese have carried out the thought revolution. We abolished almost survivals of feudal and colonial regimes and have built a new morality in accordance with Marxist - Leninist views and Hồ Chí Minh thoughts. We cannot deny the great achievements of morality and

culture which are achieved in renovation period. However, it is hard for social morality to develop comprehensively when the social economy meets many difficulties.

During the renovation period of our country, social morality has changed drastically along with the establishment and development of market economy. A new moral values and standards which were established before renovation period can be promoted and they have regulated social relations. However, some of these values and standards are not suitable for the new stage. Many new values and standards of morality are born when traditional morality continues to rule powerfully social relations and the Western moral standards and lifestyle are infiltrating into Vietnam. We can say that social morality of Vietnam is an amalgamation of many moral styles, among them there is new socialist morality. This morality is being fixed and it gradually occupies an important position in society. However, the struggle between the advance and the backward; the true values and valueless is taking place violently. In fact, moral regression of some people, especially of officers and of members of Party remains a great challenge in the work of building spiritual life of socialism. But unstandardized problems in moral life make valueless to revive and develop. The complicated questions of social morality have influenced religions.

When speaking of influence of morality on religions in our country, we should deal with strong influence of standards of socialist morality on religions. Thanks to the great achievements of the economy, new moral values have developed. They have taken part in regulating and orienting people including believers. When we build Vietnamese culture deeply imbued with national identity we develop national culture in general and social morality in particular. The values of traditional morality such as patriotic spirit, charity and gratitude influence on belief activities of believers. New moral values such as cooperative spirit, decisive will and sense of responsibility have influenced religions. They have made believers aware of how "better secular and religious life is". Because of the strong effect of advanced moral values, religions have changed their practices and religious activities. For their development, all religious organizations pay attention to moral aspects that do not belong to religions. Religious organizations also take part in social movements having the spirit of a new morality. Although religions seem to "diverge from material life" and have conservative views, they are changed by impacts of national culture and a new morality. The new morality impacts vigorously on religions

because it reflects objectively the benefits and meets the thirst of the masses. At the same time, new morality has attachment to Marxism- Leninism and Hồ Chí Minh thought. This ideology is consolidated more and more in social life. On the other hand, along with the tendency of secularization, religions integrate into national culture on their own initiative. So that new morality has favorable conditions to infiltrate and regulate religious and social relations of believers.

Not only values of advanced morality but also backward morality have influenced religions. The reverse of market mechanism also governs social relations. The impact of worthless things influences badly belief life of believers. In fact, religious organizations also find the danger of inhuman behaviors and religious organizations try their best to stop these behaviors. Because of the dark side of market mechanism all efforts of religious organizations meet many difficulties. Trade in spirit; superstition and taking advantage of religion have taken place. We can say that the combination of worthless things and unrealities of religions causes some silent points for religious picture.

Religious condition of our country is complex. In general, religions are reviving and developing. At present, orientation of Vietnam religions is going with the nation but there is some phenomenal work against the interest and tradition of the nation. Religions cause negative and active impacts on social morality.

In general, all religions have moral values such as “respect for old people, “love for children” “honest living”□ When new social morality is being established, many moral standards have just established, the moral values of religions are added to social morality. Moreover, many moral values of religions have become precious cultural heritage of our nation. So we can say that religions have supplemented some good moral values to social morality, especially, charity. Buddhism contributes values of Loving kindness, of Compassion, of Joy and of Equanimity to social morality. Catholic dogmas also highlight standards of morality. According to the commandments of God, believers have to respect God and love people. For Protestantism, Protestant believers do charity not because they want to carry out the duty to God but they want to show liberated spirit and happiness of human beings. Caodaism forbids its believers to kill, to drink, to lust□.. Caodaism advises people to respect and concession to other people. Hòa Hảo Buddhism thinks that if we do not

cultivate virtue and morals, our religious life does not make any sense. When generalizing values of religious morality we can find some of them correspond with cause of building a new society. They have an active contribution to values of national morality in renovation period.

Religious morality becomes plentiful and lively when it actualizes good values of traditional morality. Religious dogmas contribute to consolidate dutifulness of Vietnamese. When studying religious morality, we find standards in family relation which are deeply imbued with traditional identity such as: husband and wife must respect each other; brothers must love each other. In community relation, traditional morality of the Vietnam dignifies harmony, solidarity, benevolence and toleration. Religions have accepted and consolidated these good traditional values. Vietnamese religions actualize the patriotic spirit of the Vietnamese nation. Patriotic spirit also soaks into sentiment of all believers and becomes their moral standard.

The good traditional morality of our nation is preserved intangible cultural heritage such as temple, pagoda, church, rites of worship and religious festivals. The image of a Buddhist pagoda connects village. Buddha and Bodhisattva Gaunyn and all those who have done a great service to the village are worshipped in pagodas.

In renovation period, religions in Vietnam promote their activities in accordance with orientation "religions go together with nation". So that traditional moral values that are preserved in religions are promoted vigorously. With motto "Dharma, Nation and Socialism", Vietnam Buddhist Sangha promotes activities towards the source of nation. To respond the campaign "All people unite to build the cultural life in residential areas" Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha has promoted movement "build good pagodas". In order to integrate with Vietnamese culture, the Catholic Church allows its believers to worship their ancestors and burn incense in the foot of God statue. Catholic believers can offer incense in the solemnities. The aim of the Catholic Church is to consolidate belief of its believers. By accident, many activities of Catholic Church dignified good moral tradition of our nation.

Religions contribute to promote good moral tradition of our nation and they encourage their believers and dignitaries to take part in charitable activities. Religions contribute to preserve traditional moral values.

Especially, religious morality not only manifests in behavior but also in sense of believers. According to Buddhism, a man who is considered as moral man when his behavior originates from his kind heart and good intentions. According to Catholic and Protestant views, anyone who has bad idea is considered as sinful man. He will be punished. It is noted that believers believe that Supreme Beings have unlimited force. They not only know bad behaviors of believers but also penetrate sinful ideas of believers. Religious believers always think that God, Buddha, the Deities are keeping watch on their ideas and behaviors so they try their best to do good things. When carrying out an investigation, we find that order and security in areas where religious believers live is relative stable. We can recognize that humanitarian spirit in religious dogmas and in moral standards has impacts on sense of believers. It makes believers to preserve their family tradition and beliefs.

In fact, religious morality not only influences the spiritual life of believers but also social life. For instance, many people who do not recognize themselves as Buddhist believers but they are knowledgeable about Buddhist dogmas and they practise Buddhist morality. Because religious symbol becomes a noble value of their spiritual life and urge them to pay attention to the values of the true, the good and the beautiful. Because religious morality pervades widely in social life so it maintains moral life and humanizes social relations. Religion not only makes social morality more plentiful but also preserves good traditional moral values of the nation.

Besides active aspects, religion has made negative impacts on the development of social morality. In religious prayer-books there are some moral standards which are not in conformity with our social morality at present. For example, Buddhist morality asks monks and nuns not to make up, to see performance, not to use perfume□ These requests become backward in modern society. Christian morality dignifies humanity, selflessness but its commandments advises believers “*Not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also*”, “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” <sup>(2)</sup>. These advices are not corresponding with the struggle for right and good in society. Caodaism and Hòa Hảo Buddhism advise people to resign themselves to their fates. Nowadays, resignation is not corresponding with social advancement. So the model of personality and

---

<sup>2</sup> The Vietnam General Protestant Church (Northern region), *New Testament and Old Testament*, New Translation, Religion Publishing House, Hanoi, 2005.

lifestyle which are proposed by religion influence the process of building new morality passively. On the other hand, in certain condition, religion may erode social morality. All religions criticize superstition. In fact, many superstitious phenomena infiltrate into religious activities. The negative influence of religion on morality manifests clearly in strange religious phenomena. To study all sides of strange religions, we can say that strange religions have "morality" but their beliefs are opposite to the nature of human society. They are strange to our good tradition and the present social standards. It is dangerous for believers who follow the strange religions. Because these religions can deform values of morality, they can paralyze the human spirit and the creation of community. Besides strange religious phenomena, illegal propagation of Protestantism in mountainous regions influences national morality passively. It upsets moral foundation of the community and erodes solidarity of ethnic people.

From the above analysis, we can affirm that the relation between religion and morality in our country is very complex. Morality impacts on religion and makes religion to have active changes. The advanced values of morality impact on religion and impulse the process "religions go together with their nation", but musty moral values influence religions and make negative elements of religions to revive. Religions also influence present social morality. The impact of religions on social morality is complex. Besides active impacts, religions have obstacles in building advanced morality deeply imbued with national identity. If we would like to resolve the relation between religions and morality, we should promote the influence of advanced moral values on religions. We should bring into play good values of religions to serve the task of building socialist morality. /.