

## **THE THEOLOGIC VIEW OF THE CHRISTIAN AND MISSIONARY ALLIANCE AND THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH OF VIETNAM ON MISSIONARY MATTER AND NATIONAL CULTURE THROUGH SURVEY OF MISSIONARY HISTORY**

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In *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr introduces five forms. Thanks to these forms the faith of Christians can relate culture. The author considers these forms as the relational forms between Christ and Culture. In order to understand these forms we need to study two concepts: Christ and Culture. This article does not go into details of five forms; it only puts forth these forms to help readers to understand theological view of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) and The Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) on national culture in missionary history. The following are 5 relational forms between the faith of Christians and culture in Niebuhr's work

- 1- Christ against Culture
- 2- Christ of Culture
- 3- Christ above Culture
- 4- Christ and Culture in paradox
- 5- Christ the transformer of Culture

This article will study the view of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) and The ECVN on the relation between gospel and culture through their missionary history. This article speaks summarily the foundations of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) and The ECVN to help readers understand clearly what will be stated.

The Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) was born in 1897<sup>(1)</sup>. Its mission was to propagate the salvation of a Savior in remote regions. The founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) was Dr. Albert Benjamin Simpson;

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This was the writers' paper in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Roundtable on Protestantism and Vietnam Culture organized in Hanoi on 28<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2012 by co-organizers Institute for Religious Studies, the Vietnam - USA Society and Institute for Global Engagement.

<sup>1</sup> It was founded by Rev A. B. Simpson in 1887. Its two former organizations were the Christian Alliance and the Evangelical Missionary Alliance

he was pastor of the Presbyterian Church in America. The missionaries of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) officially arrived and started their missionary work in Vietnam in 1911<sup>(2)</sup>. The ECVN was officially established in 1927. In 1954 the ECVN was divided into two parts.

Pastor A. B Simpson believed that he was asked to take the gospel to the poor. He called all people who had the same aim to take part in missionary work. In "The Mission of the Alliance" Simpson wrote:

*Let us never forget the special calling of our Alliance work. It is not to form a new religious denomination. It is not to duplicate work already done. It is not to advocate any special system of theology. It is not to glorify any man or men. It is first to hold up Jesus in His fullness, □ the same yesterday, today, and forever. □ Next, to lead God's hungry children to know their full inheritance of privilege and blessing for spirit, soul, and body. Next, to witness to the imminent coming of the Lord Jesus Christ as our millennial King. And finally, to encourage and incite the people of God to do the neglected work of our age and time among the unchurched classes at home and the perishing heathen abroad*<sup>(3)</sup>

This appeal convinced and encouraged the missionary spirit of Christians. In reply to this appeal, hundreds of young people were ready to go to remote regions to propagate the gospel. Some of them arrived to Vietnam

Although Pastor Simpson appeals not to advocate any special system of theology, he and the first missionaries of CMA took themselves with a theological view. This view was shown in the missionary history of the CMA. In this article we only the theological view in relation to national culture.

*The culture of human beings is similar to the nature of human beings: it is polluted and sinful.*

Pastor A. B. Simpson and other missionaries of CMA believed that human beings were created perfect by God, they obeyed and worshipped God. However, human beings sinned because their nature was polluted and sinful. This sinful

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<sup>2</sup> On 10<sup>th</sup> February, 1889 some missionaries of CMA arrived Vietnam but they were a failure in missionary work.

<sup>3</sup> A. B. Simpson, "the Mission of the Alliance", the Christian and Missionary Alliance 4 (Nov. 1899): 365.

nature influenced deeply on all what relate to human material life as well as a human spirit. It influenced by culture and did harm human beings.

For Simpson and missionaries of CMA, culture belonged to human beings and their life. Culture might be belonged to the world and considered as the supernatural force against God. So that all cultural expressions of a nation, concretely, Vietnamese culture, including habit, thought, faith custom social organization, language may have natures against God. These natures hold back human beings both in mind and body. Although Simpson did not negate all effort of human beings in building healthy life, he believed that sinful nature made all effort betterment and perfection doomed to failure from the start. He gave following illustration to demonstrate that flaw:

*It is said that a costly building once fell and the committee was engaged amid the wreck in trying to explain the cause. The architect produced his plans, and they were perfect. Arches were all right, and the supporting pillar and buttresses were in their places. Why did the building collapse? But just then a common worker passing by picking up a brick from among the ruins and crumbed it to dust between his fingers, laughed and said: "all the plans in the world could not make that building safe. The material is worthless. The brick is unburned and crumbles at a touch into a heap of sand".*

*This is the answer to all your theories of social reform, the material is useless. The brick is unburned. The essential element of human nature is wrong and hopeless. Human need more than reformation; he needs a new creation and a divide nature<sup>(4)</sup>.*

In the first days in Vietnam, some clergymen recorded backward cultural customs of Vietnamese people. Clergyman Evelyn N. Holiday retold a case in Koho community when a family had a baby, this family isolated from other families for a week or longer because he was afraid of that the devils followed other people to enter his house to do harm baby. Parents longing for the safety of their children give them ugly names. The Tring tribe, perhaps the most backward and underprivileged of all the Koho groups, may be found scattered among the mountains in isolated houses. Bound by fear of the evil spirits, they cannot live in villages; for if two households used the same water source, the

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<sup>4</sup> A. B. Simpson, *Is Life Worth Living* (South Nyack NY: Christian Alliance Publishing Co. 1899) pp. 23 - 24.

spirits of the families would fight. Their dead are buried with the feet exposed so that the spirit of the deceased will not be angered and return to haunt the people<sup>(5)</sup>. The backward customs were not only in mountainous regions but also in plain.

Pastor Simpson and clergymen of CMA believed that fiendish force - Santa rules human beings and their life so that cultural manifestations of human beings are influenced by Satan and human beings cannot do anything "Lord said thing would be worse and worse as the end drew near. You are not going to see an ideal world"<sup>(6)</sup>. The view of Simpson on society was the Pre-Premillennialist view, Douglas K. Matthews described "Social condition can only be improved in the sense of not getting worse"<sup>(7)</sup>

Dr. John Drange Olsen compiled Theological works with over 1000 pages in Vietnamese. This work is used as a theological textbook by the ECVN. This work resonates with Simpson. To Olsen human beings and the world are fallen and corrupted with sin:

*"Human beings, used to be supreme spiritual, have now been under the power of natural and spiritual deaths; their spiritual nature lost the original ethics; their mind was captured in unintelligent; native good judgment was trapped in lust and desire. The situation of the nature also shows the reality of sin, and even the sounds of all things implicitly confirm that disaster: there the wind blows, hissing sound, leaves of trees rustle when they strike with one another, birds peep, water's murmur. All of these are sad and melancholy sounds, and they all certify that this earth has sunk in the sea of sorrow and moaning cause by sin"*<sup>(8)</sup>

This view is passed to the ECVN. *Bản Tin Mục Vụ* magazine (Ministry News - Bulletin) was allowed to publish after the ECVN was recognized legal status by the Vietnamese government in 2002 and it was written that:

*"People have been against God in their lawlessness. More than even before, today it expresses itself in a profligate and crime, etc. That lawless nature is*

<sup>5</sup> Evelyn N., *Holiday "Superstition" in Jungle Frontiers*, Editor: W. Eugene Evans N°. 7, March 1958: 3

<sup>6</sup> A. B. Simpson, "Living Under the Power of the World", *The Alliance Witness*, 21<sup>st</sup> February, 1914: 324.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas K. Matthews, "Approximating the Millennium: Toward a Coherent premillennial Theology of Social Transformation" (Ph D. Diss, Baylor University, 1992), 65.

<sup>8</sup> J. D. Olsen, *Theological Works*.

*made known in its extreme chaos, disorder, and also in different forms of powers and religions and concepts of freedom and democracy of the end □ time. We will see more evils. The world quickly sees Armageddon, □ the war on the great day of the Almighty God*” (Rev 16: 14)<sup>(9)</sup>.

It is not illogical for CMA and ECVN to preserve this view. Many cultural customs hold back human liberty in Vietnamese society at present. These customs do not make human life better, but contrary they make human beings miserable. Now we see many superstitious cultural practices. For example, the culture of worship of ancestors is abused.

*The way of resolving: accepting of Jesus Christ and separating from the world.*

Simpson believed that when humans accept God’s salvation in Jesus Christ, humans are free from the power of Satan really and they can enjoy a noble life, *“Salvation delivers us from Satan’s power and kingdom. God has □ delivered us from the power of darkness and led us into the kingdom of His dear Son□. We are saved from the ills and the serpent and bonds of sin, and the devil is a conquered foe*<sup>(10)</sup>. Christian life that was described by Simpson is one of involvement in the evangelization of the world by preaching Christ to people throughout the world. If any one who evangelizes maintains an inward holiness, he may separate from all evils in the world, so that he can help others in accepting Christ and living a holy life. *“Human nature is helpless and very essence of the Gospel is that it gives the power to choose and do right. It has the power to cleanse, purify and uplift human nature*<sup>(11)</sup>. As a religion deemed people, Christians have to live up to the standard of God that is they have not to take part in the sinfulness of the world. Christians can do this by separating from the world and having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. According to Simpson, personal salvation and the change of heart can alter the way people relate to others.

Aiden Wilson Tozer, one of the famous theologians of CM wrote *“when the contrite sinner consecrates his life to the Savior, the situation of ethics is restored*<sup>(12)</sup>. Christians must live in right relationship with God; it means they

<sup>9</sup> “He Coming King”, BTMV 5 (August 2005), p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> A. B. Simpson, *The Fourfold Gospel* (Cam Hill, PA Christian Publications 1984), p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> A. B. Simpson, *Christian and Message* (New York: Christian Alliance Publishing Co. 1925), pp. 54- 56

<sup>12</sup> A. W Tozer, “*The Knowledge of the Holy*” in A Treasury of A.W. Tozer: A Collection of Tozer Favorites.

must separate themselves from the evils of the world. Simpson thought that when humans acknowledge it “*it will take away the charm of the world and separate us from it*”<sup>(13)</sup>. Living a holy life and separating from superstitious practices as well as bad habits of the world were explained in Theological Works by Dr. Olsen. Olsen said that “*Christian must separate from all people and all things which are not worthy of Christ so that they can hope God to accept them as his grown children and to bestow on them the Holy Spirit and the holiness which is preserved in Christ*”.

The ECVN applied the view of separation between Christians and the world including human culture in their social context. Because the world was evil so the ECVN accepted the CMA teaching that Christianity must be separate themselves from the world thereby pleasing God. In view of CMA and of the ECVN, separation means cutting themselves not only from the sins of the world but also from the world itself and all things, and this could be done with the power of the Holy Spirit, “*The Spirit not only separates us from sin, unbelief and idolatry, but also must separate us from thousands things related to the life of the self that often hindered us from God’s best will*”<sup>(14)</sup>.

In the first days, Vietnamese believers were encouraged by the missionaries of CMA to leave cultural practices which were considered as superstition. Missionaries advised Vietnamese Protestants to put away ancestral altar because clergymen thought that ancestor died so they could not take part in worship. Because of this view, missionaries of CMA and the Protestant Church Vietnam’s leaders regulated very simply the ancestral worship of Vietnamese people in a Charter that “*believers must put away their idols and give up ancestral worship*”<sup>(15)</sup>. In this article we do not discuss on the right or the wrong of this regulation. But it showed that missionaries of CMA and the leaders of the ECVN believed that this renouncement made the life of believers changeable. The change was manifested in a new life style of believers.

The way of missionaries of CMA and ECVN related to native culture created the contradiction between believers with other people in the Vietnamese community. Many traditional Vietnamese people consider God’s followers as ungrateful men. That is the reason why Protestant faith contradicts the

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<sup>13</sup> Simpson, *The Fourfold Gospel*, p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> “God so loves that He is jealous”, BTMV, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Lê Hoàng Phu, *A Short History of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam, 1911-1965*.

national culture. In fact, missionaries of CMA and ECVN estimated this problem. Tozer wrote that “*The Christian who has dedicated his life to God and has shouldered his cross need not be surprised at the conflict in which he at once finds himself engaged*”<sup>(16)</sup>. Conflict was considered not to be avoided so ECVN taught “*there will be gifts and those sacrificed all to follow God would sit in the thrones with God and receive a hundredfold of earthly houses, lands, fames and glory. However, it will not be the main cause of their happiness. If God is not there, these gifts are nothing*”<sup>(17)</sup>. God’s blessing can also be seen in the heavenly banquet. “*Let us reject the temptation to eat the bread of the world and be friend with them, then some day we will be attending God’s banquet*”<sup>(18)</sup>.

#### **Some remarks and conclusion**

Because of Pre-Premillennialist view, CMA and ECVN considered the manifestation of human life including cultural forms to be polluted by the sinful nature of human beings so human culture became bad. This view was consolidated by what missionaries of CMA and leaders of the ECVN witnessed and observed. Really, we cannot deny that many cultural customs of Vietnamese people having deteriorating characters must be rejected. Protestantism helps believers, families and social community leave foggyish customs. Not only people in the mountainous regions leave bad practices but also people in plain do that. We cannot deny that missionaries of CMA and ECVN have achieved good results in building lives of followers for a century.

Missionaries of CMA and leaders of ECVN, however, did not understand clearly many cultural customs of Vietnamese people so their treatment caused contradictions with Vietnamese who preserved traditional culture. Missionaries did not understand clearly belief, thought, and philosophy of Vietnamese people. They judged these aspects of dualistic philosophy of the West leading clear division between white and black, light and dark, right and wrong, good and bad, spiritual and temporal, etc. They could not find the space. Therefore, they considered that if anyone who would like to follow God must leave what belong to the world.

There was an inadequate problem with culture in view of CMA and ECVN was that they opposed culture but they use culture. When propagating God’s

<sup>16</sup> A. W Tozer, *Of God and Men* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publication, Inc, 1960).

<sup>17</sup> The King who reigns the millennium Psalm, 72

<sup>18</sup> New from the Holy Sprit for the Church.

teaching, they had to use Vietnamese language. But Vietnamese language is one of the manifestations of Vietnamese culture. The language of the nation is a system that shows philosophy, belief and social view of this nation. When explaining the sentence in the Bible "*Honor your father and your mother*" missionaries had to use the concept of Vietnamese culture, everybody knows that the concept of missionaries of CMA on honor to parents is different from the concept of Vietnamese people.

On positive aspect, CMA and ECVN have significant contributions to the cultural identity of Vietnam. Protestant churches, biblical books and images of Protestant followers make Vietnamese culture more plentifully. Undergoing many social, economic and social changes, Protestant followers still express bravery, indomitable will of the Vietnamese nation. In future we can hope that there is a harmonious combination in the relation between faith in God and national culture of Vietnamese Protestant believers. /.