

BUDDHISM AND POLITICS IN ĐẠI VIỆT AT THE BEGINNING OF THE INDEPENDENT MILLENNIUM - APPROACHING FROM AN ESSAY OF MAX WEBER

Abstract: *Through the essay “The sociological approach on religious facts” (L’approche sociologique des faits religieux) of Émile Durkheim (1858 - 1917) and Max Weber (1864 - 1920), this article clarified the context, characteristics and consequence of the relationship between Buddhism and politics in Vietnam at the beginning of the independent millennium.*

Keywords: *Religion, politics, Buddhism, three religions, Lý and Trần dynasties.*

1. Introduction

Firstly, we have to note Thích Nhất Hạnh’s (Pseudonym Nguyễn Lang) view of “Buddhism and Politics” in Lý anh Trần dynasties in his famous work: “Việt Nam Phật giáo sử luận” (A Discussion on the History of Vietnam Buddhism). He spent a section for analyzing “Buddhism and Politics” in chapter VIII, tome I. He confirmed that “There was a Zen Buddhist monk of Vô Ngôn Thông Zen Sect named Ngô Chân Lưu who had many contributions in the domain of politics. The title venerable Khuông Việt (Đại Sư) granted by king Đinh Tiên Hoàng showed the important role of this Buddhist monk. Khuông Việt means helping the nation of Việt”¹. After examining the other famous Buddhist monks’ political activities in Lý and Trần dynasties such as Pháp Thuận, Vạn Hạnh, Huệ Sinh, Viên Chiếu, Mãn Giác, Không Lộ, etc. He indicated that “at the beginning of the autonomous period, Zen Buddhist monks opened a crusade for national consciousness. They organized courses of Geomancy and oracle, established plan, drafted texts, received diplomatic corps, discussed on military issue. However, they played the role as spiritual guides and ethical advisors when the court had person who governed these affairs. Although the Zen master Vạn Hạnh engaged in

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politics he kept a monastic life and did not need any fame and fortune. His philosophical action represented the other Zen Masters' attitude"².

2. Max Weber's thesis on religion and politics

Max Weber's famous work "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" (1905) and some other works on sociological religion based on the rationalization methods to study on religion and society, religion and politics³.

Max Weber stated that religion was a special collective activity and he gave two important points:

Firstly, he divided religions in the world into two groups: religions towards salvation and deliverance with the tendency to refuse the world as Christianity and religions adapt to the world as Confucianism. Two types of religion had different impacts of the process of modernization⁴.

Secondly, the relationship between religion and socio-politics, while É. Durkheim greatly estimated the conflict between religion and socio-politics, M. Weber based on the rationalization methods and stated that many religions were not only considered as one of important roles to develop economy but they also were one of the reasons that created the Capitalism as Protestantism.

M. Weber's view on Protestantism was familiar that we don't need to mention. However, M. Weber had interested comments on the Religion of China that we can associate with the other oriental religions such as Buddhism. He indicated that Chinese cosmology was more rational than Protestantism to such an extent that it forgot the transcendence of religion. Therefore, Confucianism's morality (đạo đức thư lại) obstructed the development of the Capitalism.

M. Weber did not discuss much on Buddhism. However, he stated that the transmigrations also belong to the tendency of Lokottara (refuse the world) and it was strange to the spirit of Capitalism⁵.

Furthermore, M. Weber researched on "methods of practicing religious authority". He indicated types of religious power marked by different forms of the authority legitimization in social life. He expressed that authority can legitimize by itself-legitimization by traditional or miracle way. The rational legitimization - authority legitimization is equivalent to the administrative authority. It is impersonal authority

based on the belief of legitimacy of rules and functions (inheritance, for example). Miracle authority is similar to personal authority.

Thus, he focused on researching the role of priest, magician (sorcerer) and prophet. Priests are representative of institutional religious authority that bases on faith such as the canon of Christianity and they are administrative clergies and comply rite. Magicians have a non-institutional religious authority but they are easily accepted by traditional society. Prophets have personal religious authority and they are recognized by the expression of divine that they prophesied (according to the new tendency of the supernatural and sacredness). While M. Weber classified three types of typical religious character, he analyzed their features and ability to exercise religious authority.

M. Weber's view on classification of religious authority attracted the interest of religious sociologists⁶.

According to methods of M. Weber, Joachim Wach indicated specific forms of religious authority. There are nine forms of religious authority such as religious founder, reformers, observers, divinator (fortune-teller), priest, sorcerer, etc.

In addition, M. Weber's method of religious sociology showed that religious authority manifested through its organization. According to M. Weber's approach, church and sect are ideal forms, they are models to study and they do not exist in the pure state in reality. Ernst Troeltsch perfected M. Weber's classification by adding mysterious form that is determined by personal experience and it is different from the objective form of religious belief and a loose alliance. It priorities personal relation through the homologous spirituality⁷.

Thus, Max Weber's thesis on the relation between Religion and Society, particularly the relation between Religion and Politics, demands researchers study the relation among Religion and these domains.

Max Weber's thesis on the relation between Religion and Socio-Politics has opened an useful approach when studying a religion in a specific society. Logic between Religion and Politics helps researchers to study on the relation between Religion and Politics although there are tremendous changes in societies and religions at present to compare the period of the first half of the 20th century.

For instance, Patrick Michel analyzed the case of European countries which followed the model of the Soviet Union, religions could obstruct centralized power that attracted all social domains in Politics and refused the independence of religions.

Francois Aubin had contributions towards research on religions and politics in socialist countries in post-Soviet. Through the analysis of the shift in religious life and mentality, he declared that religion played an important role in against the extreme authority, dictatorship and its tremendous impact on social political changes⁸.

To summarize, M. Weber's thesis on the relation between Religion and Socio-Politics could help to have a full cognition the nature and changes in this relation. M. Weber also emphasized that:

- Religion do not only assemble symbols but it also is human behavior in social life.
- Religious phenomenon is not only religious activities but it also is a social, political, cultural phenomenon and it has impact according to its rule.
- Religious impact on politics through religious power and the combination of religious characters and its organization according to a specific religion.

3. Forms of incarnation of Vietnam Buddhism in the political realm at the beginning of the independent millennium

M. Weber's thesis on Politics emphasized three aspects as:

Firstly, religion is a type of specific collective activity and there are types of religious authority through its impact on social and political life which legitimize its authority in social life.

Secondly, religion's authority legitimization in social life through religious characters and its organization.

Thirdly, the relation between Religion and Politics leads to interference between religious vision and political vision, its social and political consequence according to the power of each side.

In addition, M. Weber's view that nation is a structure or a political organization that has the power to establish the legitimacy, sets up the principle for the relation with religion if it wants to enforce the power. We will mention these content through Buddhism in Vietnam at the beginning of the independent millennium.

3.1. Buddhist authority and political demand in the early millennium of autonomy

The basic political problems of Đinh and Early Lê dynasties were construction and reinforcement the feudal regime after one thousand years under the rule of China. In the 10th century, there were political challenges such as authority competition and invasion of China.

In the domain of religion, there were three religions such as Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. There were advantages of Buddhism when it engaged in the political realm as its philosophies and Dharma nature. Many researchers emphasized that despite the Buddhist dogma does not directly mention political, social purpose, but its idea opens out attitude to enter in the social political life. The Bhaisajyaguru-Buddha (Buddha of the Medicine) scriptures instruct about entering into the political realm with the phrase that “giải kiết, giải kiết oan”; “giải” means “open the tie”. It has to open the tie of enmity and adversity⁹.

Venerable Master Thích Minh Châu in the article “Buddha and social renovation” rebutted the false view that Buddhism appreciates the style of life to “escape from family and society” and does not concern in social renovation. He also confirmed that Buddhism not only focuses on spirituality and unearthly idea but Sangha (monastic order) also involves in economic, social and political issues; the centre for training monks is “a centre trains in spirituality and social, cultural, political combatants”¹⁰.

In addition, Buddhist philosophy had another advantage that although Buddhism got along with the spirit of patriotism, it did not agree with the point of view on “Divine will” (king ruled the nation in following the God’s will) and Buddhist monks did not need to have a loyalty to a specific king. Venerable Master Khuông Việt was a typical example of this point of view. When the Đinh dynasty collapsed this monk was willing to cooperate with Early Lê dynasty (King Lê Đại Hành) because he appreciated the lofty relationship between *people and nation*. The King Lê Đại Hành was protested by Confucians included the historian Ngô Sĩ Liên¹¹.

Many researchers confirmed that Buddhist monks had advantages in social and political life. For example, Mai Thọ Truyền in his famous work: “Vietnam Buddhism” commented that “in the early period to construct the State, in particular Đinh and Early Lê dynasties, when Sino

was taught in Vietnam, there were not many people learnt it, exception Buddhist monks, who were the intellectual class, deeply understood the scriptures. Thus, although there were a few elites in Buddhist monk class but they were respected and beloved by people thanks to their morality and wisdom... It was the reason why Buddhism was great respected in Đinh and Early Lê dynasties¹².

This was a historical chance for Buddhist authority in Vietnam. When the independent State Đại Cồ Việt was established in 970, Buddhist monk Ngô Chân Lư (Khuông Việt) was created the Buddhist monk Marshal (Tăng thống) by Đinh Tiên Hoàng king. This action showed the recognition of Buddhism as a spiritual discipline for politics. Then, there was an emergence of the prestigious monk such as Pháp Thuận, Vạn Hạnh, Sùng Phạm, Không Lộ, Thông Biện, Viên Chiếu, Mãn Giác, Chân Không, Giác Hải, Huệ Sinh... In the Early Lê (980 - 1009), Lý and Trần dynasties. Though they were Buddhist monks or political experts, they attempted to help the kings and the nation in the aspects of politics and religion.

It needs to be emphasized that the relationship between Religion and Politics in Europe at that time where religious authority created the confessional states in the Middle Ages. Churches did not only hold economic and social authority but it also controlled directly the political authority. The case of Buddhism was different in the State of Đại Việt. When practicing the religious authority, Buddhist monks participated in politics but they did not participate in government. They even considered pagoda as their safe station. Thích Nhất Hạnh explained this action with four reasons as:

Firstly, they were intellectuals and they had national consciousness and closed life with public. They deeply understood what people had to suffer from a repressive and exploitative policy.

Secondly, they did not want to scramble for the possession of the throne or the authority in secular life. This was the reason why they were trusted and beloved by the kings.

Thirdly, they were not persistent of the Loyalty theory as Confucians. So they could collaborate with any king who bring happiness to people.

Fourthly, the kings needed their wisdom. It was especially true in Đinh and Early Lê dynasties when the kings were not intellectuals and there were not many Confucians (moreover they were loyal to a specific dynasty)¹³.

These were the beauties of Vietnam Buddhism in history. These were suitable methods to solve the relationship between *Pravrajya* (adoption of monastic life) and *behavior* of Buddhist monks at the beginning of the independent millennium. A Zen Buddhist monk Vạn Hạnh was typical. These methods were not only suitable for Đại Việt political life but they also were suitable for Vietnam Buddhism's features (a religion has an important role in the national mentality).

There was a question if Buddhism was a national religion under the Lý- Trần dynasties when mentioning the Buddhist authority. Although there are different views on this question but some research on Vietnam Buddhism history has confirmed it. In recent years, in the article *Vietnam Buddhism in the 21th Century*, the author Minh Chi stated that "Some foreign researchers study on Buddhism suggested that Buddhism should have national status like in the Lý and Trần dynasties or in Laos, Cambodia and Thailand at present. I think it is a friendly suggestion but it is not necessary"¹⁴.

In the aspect of religious sociology, the state regime is divided into two types. First, the state religion does not recognize the model of a secular state which rules by civil law. In these countries, religion does not only govern the authority of the central government but it also governs the life of people, believers in particular, in the executive and the judiciary. Second, some secular states could base on a main religion that has a large effect on politics, society and culture (despite they keep the legal principles of a secular state). The religion in the model of state is also called dominant religion.

When researching on the merits and behavior of Buddhist monks such as Khuông Việt, we can ask a question why the Buddhist monks at the beginning of the independent millennium did not go to the end of the secular authority such as demand a model of national religion like other neighbouring countries which followed the Southern Buddhism.

The historian Lê Văn Hưu mentioned in the work "Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư" (Complete Annals of Đại Việt) that a half of people was Buddhist monks, there were pagodas everywhere". This was a historical chance of Vietnam Buddhism - the model of Three religions was in the process of establishment, Confucianism needed more time that could execute its authority, but why Buddhist monks had the attitude of the secular authority?

This text indicates some explanation. At the beginning of the independent millennium, Buddhism largely affected to the socio-politics as the establishment of a feudal political structure. However, there is a lack of data to prove that the Buddhist authority affected to village life. This is a criteria to determine its status of national religion. In addition, it may be related to Vietnamese religious mentality. As M. Weber confirmed that if we understand that the religious mentality is a tendency towards transcendence, it will not be a piousness with Chinese. L. Cadière stated that “Vietnamese was pious but their mentality towards every esprits” (Culte l’esprit).

If Vietnam Buddhism did not go to the end of the legitimacy of religious authority in politics that was the crucial reason for Vietnam Buddhism was closed to national destiny, institutions and it played an important role in national mentality and culture.

3.2. Execution of religious authority of Vietnam Buddhism from the 10th to 12th century

At that time, Vietnam Buddhism was Mahayana. There were sects of Zen such as Vinitaruce Dhyana school and Wu Yantong, then Trúc Lâm (Bamboo Grove).

As we analyzed, M. Weber emphasized religious characters and divided them into three types when practicing religious authority. We can apply his instruction in the case of Buddhist monks in Vietnam. Entering into the world of Buddhism showed by the role of monks and Upasaka (layman) from the 10th to the 12th century. Buddhist laymen had specific advantage¹⁵. The laymen’s contributions were written in the History of Buddhism. In particular, laymen came from many social classes, they were the king, mandarins or normal people from villages.

However, Buddhist monks played an important role in entering into the world. Only this class could have ability to enter into the world in the vertical domain such as thought, philosophy, political guideline, etc., and in the horizontal domain such as participation in politics as advisors for the king.

In the history of more than 2,000 years of Buddhism, it has never had a famous Buddhist monk generation who had the talent and morality to enter into the political world as they kept Buddhist views and Buddha’s teachings.

The famous Buddhist monk generation can be divided into two categorys.

The first category was political advisors such as Khuông Việt and Vạn Hạnh from the reign of Đinh, Early Lê families to Lý dynasty. Although they were promoted to “Tăng thống” (govern the monks) or “Đại sư” (Venerable), or they even did not have any reputation, but they contributed to create a political institution, the internal or diplomatic affairs of the Kingdom. In particular, some Buddhist monks participated in the royal affairs when there were issues like dethronement and riot.

The second category was the Buddhist monk-king or the kings who had the wisdom of Buddhology such as the king Trần Nhân Tông. The entering into the political world like this period which led to the view that this was the Golden Age of Vietnam Buddhism. At that time, Buddhism and society had no border because the leader of the Sangha was Zen Buddhist monks or Buddha kings (who played the role as senior rulers - Thái thượng hoàng). Many kings in Trần dynasty who gave up the throne to become Buddhist monks but they also played the important role in the royal political affairs.

However, in this Golden Age, Buddhism of Đại Việt did not reach the political status like other neighbouring countries such as Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. Mai Thọ Truyền had an exquisite comment that “on eight consecutive generations, 215 years, Buddhism was the unique religion which was worshiped by people. Nevertheless, the reason was not the protection of the kings but it was the symbol of religiosity caused by Buddhist doctrine, morality and wisdom of Zen monks”¹⁶.

Thích Đồng Bôn said that “From the beginning period, Buddhism supported the nation by its intellectuals in diplomatic affairs, then it reached to the top of integrating into society and transformed, the kings based on Buddhist spirituality to rule the country, Buddhism and Buddhist monks had a tremendous contribution in many domains at the Golden Age of the nation”¹⁷.

According to M. Weber, Vietnam Buddhism constructed the religious authority that could be legitimated in social and political life. This authority through the morality and wisdom of monks, spirituality and intellectuals of religious association, Zen sect in particular. In our country

at that time, the model of Three religions was gradually identified so that there was not the separation among three types such as priest, prophet, sorcerer in Western society. There was the association between Buddhist monks, Confucians and Taoist clergymen (magic, astrology, Feng Shui, etc.) that created the power of Buddhism in social and political life.

3.3. The causes led to the loss of Buddhism's dominance and the collapse of Trần dynasty

This text analyses the relationship between religion and society according to the views of É. Durkheim, A. Tocqueville, M. Weber, in particular Jean Paul Willame in the essay: "The sociological approach on religious phenomena" stated that "the social and political consequences of a religion have never closed to everyone, it could reverse in some specific situation"¹⁸. It means that if the similarity of religious views and political views does not exist, the political status of religion will change.

The collapse of Trần dynasty was caused by many social, political reasons, especially the invasion of the Ming dynasty (Empire of the Great Ming). However, Buddhism could not reach its ancient status when Đại Việt gained independence in 1428. Confucianism became more necessary with the Late Lê dynasty, it was especially true in ideological life, philosophy, state institution, moral norm. In addition, the expansion of Taoism created a challenge for Buddhism when it could gain a large portion in culture and religion. When the king Lê Thái Tổ ascended the throne, he as soon as organized an exam for clergymen. If someone impossibly met the demand, he would had to return the secular life. After thirty years, Buddhism encountered more difficulties when the king ordered monitoring every activity of monks and forbade to construct new Buddhist temples.

There are many explanations for this situation that during the 200 years, in particular when Trần dynasty began to have decadence, Buddhism could not lead the guidelines in culture and politics. The intellectual class towards Confucianism, the symbol of honorable man as a model of self-cultivation and national rule. The symbol of Buddhist monks faded.

According to some researchers the causes led to the degradation of Buddhism that the arising habit of relying on the kings or the lords and the decadence of clergyman class at the golden Age¹⁹.

In addition, the entering into the political domain of Buddhism was not only an art but it also was dependent on the homogeneity of religious and political view as M. Weber indicated. The behavioral attitude of Buddhist philosophy was not sufficient basis for legislation and rules of a feudal centralized nation²⁰. Furthermore, from the end of Trần dynasty, there was a significant progress of Confucians in the domain of intellectual and civil experiences in comparing with Buddhist monks.

Thus, when Buddhism did not have subjective and objective conditions, the political incarnation of Buddhism finished and led to reverse situation according to a specific situation as M. Weber analyzed.

4. Conclusion

The process of the social and political incarnation is a Golden Age of the Vietnam Buddhism history of primary centuries of the independent millennium. The most important thing about this typical phenomenon that Buddhism is considered as a religion which has the natural ability in going together with the nation as a companion according to views of researchers such as Trần Văn Giáp, Phan Khôi, Đào Duy Anh, Trần Văn Giàu.

The modes and consequences of Vietnam Buddhism's political incarnation at the beginning of the independent millennium showed many characteristic features when approaching it as a religious phenomenon and the relationship between religion and politics. There are some conclusions as:

Firstly, in the national context at the beginning of the independent millennium, with the advantages of Buddhist philosophy and potential advantages of the Zen sect, Vietnam Buddhism naturally incarnated in society and politics as a historical mission. Buddhism did not have any religious or ideological competition although there were the emergence of Confucianism and Taoism. Furthermore, a new monarchic state founded the potential of Buddhist philosophy; it was a spiritual basis and an intellectual and moral clergyman class that helped to construct the country. The tendency of Three religions was another objective advantage for Vietnam Buddhism implemented its mission.

Secondly, the legitimacy of religious authority in social and political life, Vietnam Buddhism cleverly chose the mode of exercise of religious power that was the political incarnation through clergyman class and laymen. Buddhist monks generally played the role of advisors or

consultants. They rarely hold the direct power. Furthermore, they had a harmonious behavior. This attitude to religion and politics made Buddhism had a beautiful image in national mentality. However, the political incarnation of Vietnam Buddhist could not gain a sustainable status like Thailand Buddhism, for example.

Thirdly, the golden age of Vietnam Buddhism, in particular the successful period of political incarnation (from the 10th to 12th century) brought many precious experiences in the national and Buddhist history. These experiences are confirmed in the guideline “Dharma - Nation - Socialism” of Vietnamese Buddhists and Buddhist Shanga in Vietnam from 1981 to present./.

NOTES:

- 1 Nguyễn Lang (2000), *Discussion on the History of the Vietnam Buddhism*, Vol. 1, Literatural Publishing House, Hanoi: 186.
- 2 Nguyễn Lang (2000), *Discussion on the History of the Vietnam Buddhism*, ibid: 188 - 189; Superior Monk Thích Đồng Bôn (2006), *The Political Role of the Buddhist Monks in Lý and Trần Dynasties*, Religious Publishing House, Hanoi.
- 3 Weber M. (1971), *Économie et Société*, Plon, Paris; Weber M. (1996), *Sociologie des religions*, Gallimard, Paris.
- 4 Weber M. (1955), *Économie et Société*, tome 2, Plon, Paris: 383.
- 5 Weber M. (1955), *Économie et Société*, tome 2, Plon, Paris: 392.
- 6 Wach J. (1955), *Sociologie de la religion*, Payot, Paris: 289 - 341; Weber M. (1955), *Économie et Société*, tome 2, Plon, Paris.
- 7 Troeltsch E. (1980), *Christianisme et Société*, Cerf, Paris.
- 8 Aubin F. “Chine: Islam et Christianisme au crépuscule du communisme”, in: Kepel G. (dir., 1993), *Les Polotique de Dieu*, Le Seuil, Paris: 143.
- 9 Thích Nhật Từ, “Buddhism Interbeing from Social and Political Aspects”, in Lê Mạnh Thát, Thích Nhật Từ (ed. 2008), *Buddhism Interbeing and Develop*, Religious Publishing House, Hanoi: 31.
- 10 Thích Minh Châu (1990), *Let's Light the Torch up by Yourself to Travel*, Institute for Vietnam Buddhology Studies published: 21 - 22.
- 11 *Complete Annals of Đại Việt*, Vol. 1, The Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi: 221.
- 12 Mai Thọ Truyền (2007), *Buddhism in Vietnam*, Religious Publishing House, Hanoi: 12 - 13.
- 13 Nguyễn Lang (2000), *Discussion on the History of Vietnam Buddhism*, Vol. 1, ibid: 185 - 186. This opinion was repeated by Thích Đồng Bôn in “The Political Role of the Buddhist Monks in Lý and Trần Dynasties”, ibid: 46 - 48.
- 14 *Buddhism in Our Age*, Religious Publishing House, Hanoi, 2005: 9.
- 15 In Đại Việt country, Buddhist layman played an important role in Buddhology. King Lý Thái Tông was considered as a buddhist layman. The King Lý Thánh Tông was considered as a founder of the Zen of Thảo Đường. It was same with the case of Thông Thiên and Ứng Thuận of the zen of Wu Yan Tong.

- 16 Mai Thọ Truyền (2007), *Buddhism in Vietnam*, ibid: 17.
- 17 Thích Đồng Bôn (2006), *The Political Role of Buddhist Monks in Lý and Trần Dynasties*, ibid: 78.
- 18 Husser Jean - Marie (dir., 2004), *Religions et Modernité (Religions and Modernity)*, Académie de Versailles: 88.
- 19 Nguyễn Huệ (2005), "A Historical Point of View on Vietnam Buddhism in the National Life", in: *Buddhism in Our Age*, ibid: 220 - 223.
- 20 The history of modern Indian Buddhism recorded a layman and PhD. of Philosophy and Law Studies named Bhimrao Ramji Ambekar, who was the first Minister of Justice in India since India gained their independence from British Empire. Though he was respected, he still had to relieve of office by himself because his Buddhist-political view conflicted with Mahatma Gandhi's national-political viewpoint (Hinduism). On Buddhist standpoint, Bhimrao Ramji Ambekar supported the independence, but he would like to void immediately class, sex discrimination and the caste system in every country while "the Saint of Indian Independence" - Mahatma Gandhi, focused on national matters.

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