

HỒ CHÍ MINH'S THOUGHT ON BELIEF, RELIGIONS AND APPLYING HIS THOUGHT IN RESOLVING RELIGIOUS BELIEF ISSUES IN VIETNAM TODAY

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***Abstract:** After studying Hồ Chí Minh's thought on religious belief, the author writes main following contexts: Hồ Chí Minh's thought on religious unification; Hồ Chí Minh's thought on religious liberty and ensuring the right of religious liberty of Vietnamese; Hồ Chí Minh's thought on the relation between religion and nation, between patriotism and religious faith. For applying Hồ Chí Minh's thought in resolving religious matters in Vietnam today, the author raises following solutions: should enhance awareness of executive committee of the party hierarchy, civil service, political - social organizations on religious works in new situation; should bring into play united tradition and mobilize believers taking part in building and safeguarding Vietnamese country; should respect the right of religious liberty, develop active human values of religion and struggle against enemy's making use of religions; should develop economy and society and raise life believers of religions step by step.*

President Hồ Chí Minh was not only a hero of national liberation and great man of culture but also a great thinker in Vietnamese history. He left us the system of all-round, profound views and thoughts on main problems of Vietnamese revolution. At present this system still has value in which there was Hồ Chí Minh's thought on belief and religion. His speeches, writings as well as his treatment to religions in general and to dignitaries, monks and religious believers of every religion in particular are precious lessons. Applying his teachings creatively helps us solve effectively the religious problems and problems related religion in our country at present.

After studying the whole of Hồ Chí Minh's ideal heritage on belief and religion we can generalize some main contents as follows.

Firstly, Hồ Chí Minh's idea on religious solidarity

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Now, in our country there are many different beliefs and religions. Studying the activities of beliefs and religions we find that in our country there are primitive beliefs and religions, modern religions, exogenous religions and native religions. Religions in Vietnam are not only existed in lowland but also in remote regions, frontier areas and islands. Not only Kinh people follow religions but also ethnic minority people follow religions... The number of religious believers is numerous. In other words, Vietnam is multi-ethnic and multi religion nation so the unity of religious and non-religious people is fundamental element to make national power in the cause of construction and defense of Vietnamese socialist country.

Therefore, Hồ Chí Minh found clearly the role of religious people of different religions in the revolutionary cause; he carried out the policy of uniting religious people in the United Front. Because national history and revolutionary reality helped Hồ Chí Minh to draw an experience that “when our people has united as everyone to a man, our country has been independence and freedom. On the contrary, when our people did not unite it was invaded by enemies”⁽¹⁾. In the first meeting of Government Council on September 3rd 1954, Hồ Chí Minh raised 6 urgent tasks of the Provisional Government, he declared that “French colonialists and feudal carry out policy of dividing non Catholics and Catholics so they rule our people easily. I propose our Government should declare that freedom of belief and unity of non Catholics and Catholics”.

Hồ Chí Minh called upon religions to abolish all hates and unite with the whole of people for defense of revolutionary results. When meeting the religious delegates in Hà Nội capital, He said “when the country is independent can there be freedom of religion. At that time there is only the country regardless religions, all of us are Vietnamese citizens so we have a duty to fight for national independence”⁽²⁾. Helping religious people to understand this problem correctly, Hồ Chí Minh explained clearly that “Catholics or non Catholics, Buddhists or non- Buddhists try to fight for the independence of our country. Our task is to keep national independence securely. Catholicism has a sentence “Trinity in Unity” and Buddhism has a sentence

¹. Hồ Chí Minh, Complete Works, National Politics Publishing House, Hanoi, 2000, volume 3, p. 217.

². Hồ Chí Minh, Complete Works, *ibid*, volume 4, p. 4.

“complete unity of minds” so we should sacrifice ourselves to humankind and living beings”⁽³⁾.

Studying heritage of Hồ Chí Minh's thought on belief and religions; we find that under any circumstances Hồ Chí Minh also raised high the spirit of religious and national union. When American imperialists carried out sabotage war in the North, Hồ Chí Minh called upon “Compatriots of various ethnic origins and of religions unite closely to struggle against American imperialists and save our country”⁽⁴⁾. When receiving overseas Vietnamese, among them there were Catholics; Hồ Chí Minh said that “delegation and I arrive here with a present. It is not money or cake and fruits but a slogan- Solidarity is above all. Homeland is above all”⁽⁵⁾. Thanks to raising high of the spirit of national harmony and the unity of religions, Hồ Chí Minh gathered many dignitaries, followers of different religions and people to take part in the wars of resistance against the French colonialists and American imperialists for defense of national independence and building socialism. On this basis, Hồ Chí Minh gradually crossed out fixed ideas and inferiority complex about religion which are existing in a part of officers, party members and people. This is unique creation of Hồ Chí Minh in applying Marx-Lenin doctrine about the role of masses in revolution to Vietnamese condition.

Secondly, Hồ Chí Minh's thought on the right to freedom of belief and religion and guarantee of the right to freedom of belief and religion of people. The right to freedom of belief and religion or the right not to have a belief or religion is the right of everybody. It is one of important contents in Hồ Chí Minh's thought on religion. His thought manifests not only in his words but also in his activities and his respect for belief of religious believers. Hồ Chí Minh also showed that although the world view of religion is different from the world view of Marxism, we should not distrust and ostracize religion but we should respect the faith of religious believers. On this problem, he stressed that “Buddhist believers believe in Buddha, Catholics in believe God as we believe in Confucius. They are venerators, we should believe them.”⁽⁶⁾ In any position, Hồ Chí Minh has been a paragon of respect for freedom of belief and religion of people.

³. Hồ Chí Minh, *Chronicle*, National Politics Publishing House, Hanoi, 2006, volume 3, p. 10.

⁴. According to Hoàng Quốc Bảo, *Social Management on Religion*, Political Theory Publishing House, Hanoi, 2009, p. 41.

⁵. Hồ Chí Minh, *Complete Works*, *ibid*, volume 11, p. 471.

⁶. According to National Salvation (Cứu Quốc) newspaper dated September 27th, 1946.

In the first meeting of the Provisional Government, Hồ Chí Minh proposed Government to declare that “freedom of belief and the unity of Catholics and non Catholics”. 10th article of our first constitution in 1946 and 7th article of Political Program of Lien Viet Front which were compiled under the leadership of Hồ Chí Minh denoted that “Vietnamese citizens have a right to freedom of belief” and “Government respects the right to freedom of belief and freedom of worship of its citizens”. Before the distortional arguments of enemies, Hồ Chí Minh affirmed the loyal standpoint of our party in the ceremony of presence of Vietnamese Labor Party in 1951, he said that “We need to say something more... say clearly to avoid misunderstanding: first on religion: Vietnamese Labor Party respects completely the right to freedom of belief of everybody”⁽⁷⁾. In 1955 Hồ Chí Minh signed Decree N°. 234/SL on religious problems, among which defined concretely the right to freedom of belief and religion of people and he affirmed that: “the Constitution of our country defines clearly freedom of belief. Anyone who violates the Constitution will be punished”⁽⁸⁾.

Hồ Chí Minh always behaved kindly toward religions. When Lê Hữu Từ was ordained Bishop, Hồ Chí Minh visited and congratulated him. Hồ Chí Minh declared Lê Hữu Từ to be an adviser of Government. Hồ Chí Minh attended Hanh Nguyen festival and took a fasting meal in Quán Sứ pagoda. Hồ Chí Minh attended the anniversary of 8 Lý kings. Every year, Hồ Chí Minh wrote a letter to wish Catholics well on the occasion of Christmas. In New Year's Eve, Hồ Chí Minh visited Ngọc Sơn and Quán Thánh temples, and then he visited some Catholic families and non-Catholic families in Hà Nội.

Hồ Chí Minh was born in Confucian family. Although he grew up in the country which had many different religions, he always expressed his view of Marxist materialism. During his life, he never ostracized, distrusted or discriminated any religion. Even the French high - ranking official also recognized that “I never find that Hồ Chí Minh criticized, doubted and ridiculed any religion”⁽⁹⁾.

Hồ Chí Minh respected the freedom of belief and religion but he determined to abolish superstition and depraved customs. According to him superstition gave damages so we should criticize and abolish it. He said “Revolution was done by

⁷. Hồ Chí Minh, Complete Works., ibid, volume 4, p. 148.

⁸. Hồ Chí Minh, Complete Works, ibid, volume 6, p. 184.

⁹. Hồ Chí Minh, Complete Works, ibid, volume 5, p. 44.

human or Heaven? The resistance was done by human or Heaven? Heaven makes drought we must combat the drought but is not to pray to heaven for raining. If we only prayed to Heaven we would have not the Democratic Republic of Vietnam”⁽¹⁰⁾. According to Hồ Chí Minh the superstition and depraved customs were abolished by following ways. We should increase cultural standards of people, build new cultural life and defend fine customs of the nation. The fight against superstition had to carry out delicately, lightly and mannerly.

Although Hồ Chí Minh very respected the belief and religion of people, he objected violently to all those who took advantage of belief and religion to destroy the revolutionary cause. Hồ Chí Minh emphasized that: “we defend freedom of belief but we will punish resolutely all those who are under the cloak of religion to betray God and our country”⁽¹¹⁾. This view was expressed clearly in 7th article of Decree N^o. 234/SL on religion which was signed by Hồ Chí Minh: Law will punish any one who uses the cover of religion in order to undermine peace, unity, independence and democracy; advocates war or destruction of national unity; prevents believers from fulfilling their duties as citizens; encroaches upon the freedom of belief and the freedom of thought of other people; or carries out illegal activities. However, Hồ Chí Minh had the tolerant attitude towards anyone who had gone astray but returned to just cause and to people. He said that “Government welcomes anyone who returns to the right path. I usually said: except few traitors, our compatriots love country. Although some of our compatriots had gone astray, they gradually grow alive and return to nation”⁽¹²⁾. At the same time, Hồ Chí Minh reminded us to treat anyone who had gone astray with tolerance. Hồ Chí Minh said “we must not avenge. We should apply tolerant policy towards anyone who had gone astray”⁽¹³⁾. From the above analysis we find that Hồ Chí Minh dealt with religions and the problems relating to religions and belief correctly, creatively and definitely to carry out the noble aim of revolution of national liberation; gain independence and freedom to our country and build socialism.

Thirdly, Hồ Chí Minh's thought on the relation between religion and nation, between patriotism and religious faith. Our country has been a multi-religion nation. The process of establishment and developing of religions has been different from

¹⁰. Trần Tam Tinh, *The Cross and the Sword*, Youth Publishing House Hồ Chí Minh city, 1998, p. 79.

¹¹. Hồ Chí Minh, *Complete Works*, ibid, volume 9, p. 12.

¹². According to *People* newspaper dated October 16th, 1953.

¹³. Hồ Chí Minh, *Complete Works*, ibid, volume 5, p. 422.

each other. The characteristic and the number of believers and dignitaries of religions have been different from each other. Although religions have had different roles in national history, they have existed in Vietnamese nation. So the benefit of religions is tied with the benefit of national community, the duty of believers towards religion is very closely connected with consciousness and duty of citizens towards country...

From this reality, Hồ Chí Minh affirmed that “when the nation is independent, can there be freedom of religion”⁽¹⁴⁾ or “when the nation is independent, then Buddhism is developing”⁽¹⁵⁾. Here, Hồ Chí Minh wanted to affirm with religious believers that when the country is independent, people have actual freedom of belief. When the country is not independent, can not there be freedom of religion; therefore, all of us make the country independent. He said “All of our compatriots regardless Catholics or non Catholics, unite closely to take part in the resistance for defending the country as well as the right to freedom of religion”⁽¹⁶⁾. According to Hồ Chí Minh's views, when the country is independent, religious believers really master their religion. Thus, patriotic believers should be brave to place other problems in general interests of the cause of the fight for national liberation.

Above analysis shows that the greatest importance for all religious believers as well as for the whole of Vietnamese people is that the country is independent; our national liberation should follow the way of proletarian revolution; national independence connects closely socialism. According to Hồ Chí Minh, before becoming religious believers they had been Vietnamese citizens, so they have to realize the responsibility of citizen and religious duty. Although religions originated from different sources, they have existed and developed within the heart of a nation; they have fitted in usages and customs, belief of Vietnamese people. They have been selected carefully by patriotism. In Vietnam, the relation between religions and nation has been related to patriotism, religious faith and hatred for enemy. When writing a letter to Catholics on the occasion of Christmas, Hồ Chí Minh wrote that “Gospel preaches that Christ was an example for creatures; he devoted his life to his people and country.

We carried out the war of resistance for national salvation and production emulation competition, land reform and freedom of belief. Vietnam Government and

¹⁴ Hồ Chí Minh, Complete Works, *ibid*, volume 6, p. 342.

¹⁵ Hồ Chí Minh, Complete Works, *ibid*, volume 5, p. 197.

¹⁶ Hồ Chí Minh, Complete Works, *ibid*, volume 4, p. 490.

people have done all things in accordance with the spirit of Gospel, so I wish Catholics to carry out all Government's policies as you carry out fully the spirit of Christ⁽¹⁷⁾.

According to Hồ Chí Minh, a religious person's beliefs and love of his country are not in conflict. A Vietnamese citizen can simultaneously be both a patriot and genuine believer in his/her religion. Anyone who betrays his fatherland will betray God. Hồ Chí Minh said that the respect of God is closely connected to the love of country; worshipping God is closely associated with serving country; if a country has honor, then religions will thrive; long live God and fatherland. Hồ Chí Minh also required Catholics that good Catholics have to be good citizens; worship of God and love of nation are responsibility of citizens and obligation of believers.

Hồ Chí Minh's thought on the relation between religion and nation, between religious faith and patriotism still has value and it shows clearly in charters of religions. Charters of religions have affirmed their orientations. The Buddhist orientation is "Dharma-Nation-Socialism"; the Catholic orientation is "Living the Gospel within the nation for the happiness of fellow Vietnamese"; the Protestant orientation is "Living the Gospel, worshipping God and serving the Homeland and the nation"; Caodaism orientation is "the Nation is glorious, the Way enlightens"; the orientation of Hòa Hảo Buddhism is "for Dharma, for the Nation".

It is said that religions can exist long in the heart of the nation. If religions would like to affirm themselves they must drive out evil and usher in good; develop cultural values and human characteristic of religions. Following Hồ Chí Minh's thought, Vietnam Party and Government proposed policies to solve sensibly the need of freedom of belief of followers of various religions; to create good condition for followers of various religions building country more and more prosperous. When Vietnam accedes to WTO, Department of State declares that Vietnam is not in list of "specialist cared country on religion". In the period of integration, religious situation in Vietnam may have changes. For applying Hồ Chí Minh's thought and solving religious problems in new context we please put forward some following solutions:

Firstly, we continuously enhance the awareness of Executive Committees of the Party hierarchy, civil services and socio-political organizations at levels on religious affairs in new context.

¹⁷. Hồ Chí Minh, Complete Works, ibid, volume 7, p. 197.

First of all, the Executive Committees of Party hierarchy, civil services and socio-political organizations at levels should aware clearly religious affair and observe following lines: Party is leadership of Party, State is management and the responsibility socio-political organizations are mobilization. It means that religious affairs are responsibilities of the entire political system under the leadership of Vietnamese Communist Party. Therefore, the political system should grasp and get to know clearly policies and guidelines of the Party regarding religious affairs at present. “The Party will consistently implement its policy of respecting the right to enjoy freedom of belief, to follow or not to follow a religion and the right to take part in normal religious activities according to the law”⁽¹⁸⁾. This view was continuously affirmed in the document of the 10th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam. “The Party consistently implements its policy of respect and guarantee the right to freedom of belief, the right to follow or not to follow a religion, the right to take part in normal religious activities according to the law. The Party promotes unity of followers from different religions and the unity of followers of religion with non followers. It encourages development of cultural values and strong ethics of religions and encourages religious followers and religious dignitaries to live “For better secular and religion life”⁽¹⁹⁾. In fact, the awareness and implementation of Party’s policies regarding religion affairs of many levels, branches and regions are different and not united. Thus, the entire political system has to take the initiative and activity in taking part in religious affairs In other words, religious activities in our country are various, complicated and relating to Party’s policies and State’ laws regarding economy, culture, society, national security, diplomacy.... So the Party should guide directly religious affairs; State strengthens more power and ability of managerial business for religious affairs according to the laws. Vietnamese Fatherland Front and social organizations should mobilize and attract religious believers to take part in the movement of patriotic emulation, to build cultural life in local levels; to consolidate and develop their organizations, especially in the regions there are many followers.

¹⁸. Vietnamese Communist Party, *The Document of the 7th Congress of the Central Committee*. National Politics Publishing House, Hanoi, 2003, p. 84.

¹⁹. Vietnamese Communist Party, *The Document of the 10th National Congress (2006)*, National Politics Publishing House, Hanoi, pp. 122-123.

Secondly, we continuously develop the tradition of national solidarity and mobilize religious followers to take part in the cause of building and defense of Vietnamese socialism.

The unity of followers from different religions and unity of followers of religion and non followers are loyal views of Vietnamese Communist Party and State. If we would like to enhance the effect of religious affairs in new context, we should continuously develop the spirit of national and religious solidarity in the United Front to build and defend Vietnamese socialism. It is just as President Hồ Chí Minh's teachings "Catholics and non-Catholics unite, whole of people unite, all the country is whole hearted, our people surely achieve great victories in the cause of the struggle for peace and national unification and building of an independent, peaceful, united, democratic and prosperous Vietnamese country."⁽²⁰⁾. Thanks to the spirit of national harmony, religious unity and respect of the right to freedom of belief and religion of believers, Vietnamese Communist Party has propagated and mobilized the masses, religious believers, dignitaries to take part in the cause of social revolution in Vietnam. In order to unite all Vietnamese people, including religious believers, the tasks should be done as following:

- Should propagandize deeply and widely the views and policies of Party and State regarding to religion to people, especially religious followers; respect the right to freedom of belief and religion of followers; overcome the inferiority complex and fixed ideas; struggle against the scheme of enemy that divides the great national unity.
- Should define clearly the true belief needs of religious followers and settle sensibly needs of freedom of religion and belief of followers from different religions; determinedly struggle against the scheme of reactionaries and anyone who takes advantage of religion to engage in superstitious activities and to seek self interests.
- Should inherit human values of religion and guide religious organizations to develop cultural and strong ethics of religions.

Thirdly, respecting of the right to freedom of belief and religion; developing active human values of religions and determinedly struggle against enemy to take advantage of religion.

²⁰. Hồ Chí Minh, Complete Works, National Politics Publishing House, Hanoi, 2000, volume 11, p. 314.

The right to freedom of belief and religion is basic right of Vietnamese citizen. It was affirmed by Hồ Chí Minh since Democratic Republic of Vietnam was established. The lesson regarding to religious affairs in Vietnam for many years has showed that if the Party and Vietnam State have no respect or make lightly of the right to freedom of belief and religion of religious followers, the religious affairs will have not achieved good results. At present we should not say generally on the right to freedom of belief and religion but we should settle sensibly need of freedom of religion and belief of followers; create good condition and guide religious organizations to register religious activities and gradually recognize the legal person status of religions; establish and consolidate religious organizations to serve religious aims; publish and print scripture and books... according to the Ordinance of Belief and Religion and the laws of State.

Moreover, in dogmas, laws and rites of religions there are human elements. They are similar to the revolutionary ideals of working class and working people. Basing on these elements, Hồ Chí Minh believed that the followers of different religions who had patriotic spirit and national consciousness. The religious affairs will the better results, if we know how to respect, preserve and develop the human and active characteristics of religions.

Now, hostile forces have not given up the expedient that take advantage of religion to destroy the Party and State. More than ever, it is necessary to settle actively religious problems to stop activities that take advantage of religions; not let reactionary forces interior country and abroad accuse falsely and distort religious condition and policy; mobilizing actively religious dignitaries, monks to struggle against all those who divide religions and the great national unity and against the orientations of religions; settling opportunely and strictly all activities which influence social security. When treating all those who take advantaged of religion, it should make active opinions to meet with approval of people. This treatment must carry out according to the laws.

Fourthly, continuously developing socio-economy and raising living standard of religious followers step by step.

The policy on socio-economic developing and living rising of people including religious followers is important task of the Party and State. When carrying out this

task, governments at levels particularly care for the regions in which many religious followers live.

In Fact, the economic life of religious followers meets many difficulties, and wherever the life of religious believers is difficult, religious affair does not achieve good results. So it had better plan to develop society and economy in accordance with each religious region; propagate and guide religious followers to use new technological scientific achievements; change their old working and the structure of crop plant; concentrate funds in developing economy and society to raise productional effects and improve gradually the life of religious followers.

All solutions mentioned above are in order to enhance the effect of religious affairs and solve religious issues in Vietnam according to Hồ Chí Minh's thought. Each solution has own role, function and position, but all solutions have interacted and help each other. When realizing religion affairs and resolving religious issues, the above solutions should be applied. Because of different conditions and circumstances, it ought to define what solution is essential and what solution is secondary to mobilize religious believers to live "for better secular and religious life". Religious followers should be encouraged to take part in emulation movement of our people to develop economy, culture and society so that Vietnam can become stronger and more prosperous. /.