

RETURNING TO THE RELATION BETWEEN RELIGION, CULTURE AND POLITICS

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Introduction:

In general, the relation between religion/ culture and politics is the relation of the three vertices of a triangle having social entities. But this relation changes over space and time because it depends on political institution and historical cultural tradition and the need of the state governance

In fact, contradiction and harmony between three social entities is one of the most social phenomena to generalize hardly in present day when our knowledge is increasing and many happenings are contrary to each other. Less stability can be drawn governing permanent rules. We know that wherever there is conflict of religion and politics, especially at present era of globalization, then immediately religions and culture are not considered as different entities. Because the conflict of religion and politics is also the conflict of religion and culture. This manifestation is expressed obviously after Gulf War and the event of September 11th, 2001 on the conflict of politics and religion in America and European countries as well as Islamic countries. When considering relations of this social triangle we find that there is difference between the East countries and the Western countries.

When studying the difference of two blocks of these countries, the researchers should draw the most common points that control the relation religion/culture and politics in the world, if they do not eliminate specifics of each country. That is reason why the article is written on basing explaining the relations of three vertices of a triangle:

The conflict of culture is the conflict of religion.

The conflict of religion and culture leads to the conflict of politics

The conflict of politics impacts on culture and religion .

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This explanation will make readers who do not specialize in religion to wonder why we only speak of the conflict without referring the harmony of culture/religion and politics ? In fact the religious harmony is short way to lead political harmony. This problem is great question in the period of post modern². This way has met many problems in multi-political, cultural and religious world.

The relation of three social entities is significant in Vietnam because great religions as well as native religions are difference on origin and history and we have not state religion. Some religious changes have influenced directly our domestic and foreign politics. International integration creates the premise that culture and ethnic groups are subject to change disappointedly, if not that culture and ethnic groups are worn significantly. Culture that is forced in the era of globalization is not only cultural story but also political story. There are many evidences for this problem³. It is base for us to consider the relations of three entities on society, culture and politics to be dealt with in this article.

In any matter we must admit that religion, culture and politics not always conflict each other. We do not think that the same culture and religion can be reconciled society or ethnic minorities. For example, in 2010 -2011 some the changes have occurred in border Thailand and Kampuchea at temple Preah Vhear when two countries consider Theravada Buddhism as State religion and political regimes of both countries are multi-party. So that we find that it is unlike to settle the domestic and foreign politics satisfactorily in the same religion or political regime. On the other words politics and culture/ religion not always have causal relation. At present society, the relation of countries fall into bad condition , phenomenon “ you go your way , I go my way” appears markedly

The different groups of countries on religion/ culture

We can not divide countries into groups that have similar patterns of religious /cultural and political relationships. How can we divide? First of all looking at

² The Western countries are aware of post –modern but it is new to Vietnam especially in literature and art . For understanding post modern you should see <http://www.vanhoahien.com.vn/van-hoa-va-doi-song/khach-moi-cua-tap-chi/1811-cau-chuyen-ve-mot-kieu-cach-nghia-xa-hoi.html>

³ Great religions are also called universal religions . These religions have the great number of believers. They are in many different regions and countries. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism are the great religions in the world

religious statistics of Western countries. It is noted that this is statistics of USA and we will comment below. Please see website *Aherents.com*.

Table 1;

Christianity: 2,1 billion

Islam: 1,5 billion

Secular/ nonreligious/Agnostic/ Atheist: 1,1 billion

Hinduism: 900 million

Chinese traditional religion : 394 million

Buddhism :376 million

Primal indigenous: 300 million

African traditional and Diasporic : 100 million

Sikhism : 23million

Juche in the North Korea: 19 million⁴

Spiritism: 15 million

Judaism: 14 million

Bahai'i: 7 million

Jainism: 4,2 million

Shinto: 4 million

Caodaism: 4 million

Zoroastrianism: 2,6 million

Tenrikyo in Japan from 19th century: 2million

Neo-paganism: 1 million

Scientology: 500 thousand⁵

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⁴ It is noted that Juche is described as a secular, ethical philosophy not a religion

⁵ This term is used to distinguish from polytheism and magic tradition in some regions in Europe, South America and Africa

While more than 20 religions are enumerated above, 12 ancient religions also dealt with in this website.

Table 2:

Bahai'i

Buddhism

Christianity (consists of three great religions as Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Eastern Church, Protestantism)

Confucianism

Hinduism

Islamism

Jainism

Judaism

Shinto

Sikhism

Taoism

Zoroastrianism

The division and enumeration of religions reflect Western view to religious reality. In fact there are different concepts on *religion* among countries in the world. For example, when we ask an Indian that which religions he or she follows? he/she does not know how to answer. But we ask who you worship? We shall have his answer⁷. Although Japanese people translate “religion” into *ton giao* (within the meaning of Buddhism) they wonder whether religion is influenced deeply by the Western view of Catholicism or not? because for a long time Japanese people did not consider Shinto as religion. When speaking of Vietnam many foreign authors think that in the past Vietnam had not something called religion but Vietnam had only cult. So that religion and freedom of worship are similar in large meaning but different from each other on narrow meaning.

⁶ See [http://www.adherents.com/Religion by Adherents.html#African](http://www.adherents.com/Religion%20by%20Adherents.html#African)

⁷ See Renou Louis. *L'Hindouisme*. Paris, PUF (que sais-jeno475), 1951 p. 127

Through two tables we can have following remarks

First, this division is not consistent because it consists new phenomena such as scientology or Juche of Northern Korea after 1950 or Neo –Paganism) which was founded by Christians and Spiritism, is different from religion by nature. The diversity of religion is reality in the world. One religion can attract many countries but it can attract only a country. For example Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism⁸ only develop in India. On the other words, the definition what religion does not seem to be noticeable as before. So we see that post modern outlook influences on this division. The overlap of social regime, national origin, cultural identity and the existence of religion seems to be ignored.

After Cultural Revolution, 1966 China seems to have not Confucianism but Taoism, Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism and traditional worship are existing. In fact, this country declares to have two regimes. Taoism develops in Taiwan and Hong Kong while it does not develop in Mainland China. State keep its role in balance of religions, even State funds construction of religious facilities, printing books and participates in training monks regardless indigenous or exogenous religions. All State's assistances only help religions not to be influenced by outside forces, although China declares that its State is secular and atheistic state. So the governable regime of absolute monarchy in ancient and medieval times in China still promotes its value. At present, China is considered as powerful country in the world but its religious, cultural heritages are closed to outside world. Politics decides this problem.

On the other word the division of religions in table 1 only manifests pure religion, but we need to know the complication of Western countries, Eastern one, developed ones and developing ones.

The second: in table 1, theistic religions intermix atheistic religions as Buddhism. Today Buddhism has been significantly increased, but the misunderstanding of it has increased equally. First of all Buddhism was arranged like that because it has had head of religion, doctrine, canon law and church (all are

⁸ Different from other religions, Hinduism has not founder. Hinduism has many bibles. Hinduism was founded in the second millennium BC when the Indians settled in Northern Indian continent

Christian terms). It has had three great schools as Theravada, Mahayana, and Lama. All schools have oriented the founder- Sakyamuni.

In fact, only Theravada Buddhism is relatively uniform (it is only in East Asia, Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. But ,Mahayana Buddhism is rather complicated. It is identified with the Chinese Buddhism (including the ancient Northern India, Central Asia and South Asia) but in China includes

Tibet, the Central Asian nations, Mongolians were assimilated by Chinese people . So Lama and Mahayana have mixed each other.

Then countries which were influenced by Chinese civilization once again received Chinese Buddhism especially from the Tang dynasty. The difference was therefore increased as Japanese people founded Nichiren School, stressed on T'ien –T'ai School, and developed Pure land School. Vietnamese people were considered to be heavily influenced by Chinese Buddhism but 10 schools of Chinese Buddhism did not exist in Vietnam. Vietnamese people paid attend to esoteric method, Sukhavati, Dhyam and Vinaya but Vietnamese people has had Truc Lam Zen sect which was founded by Tran Thai Tong. Tran Nhan Tong did not distinguish “Buddhist scriptures” (three Buddhist canon baskets/tripitakas) from “non-Buddhist scriptures” (Taoism, Confucianism and knowledge of science, medicine, industry...). Even Chinese Buddhism is not united entity because Chinese Buddhism in different regions is also different from each other

The diversified explanations of commandment were manifested in Mahayma. Because of worship of deities, divination, Buddhism was considered as theistic religion It was great misunderstanding. Nobody rejects this misunderstanding. This misunderstanding has existed in Mahayana so Buddhism can not be arranged in theistic religions.

For Confucianism, there are many discussions on whether Confucianism is religion or not⁹. According to writer, when introducing in Vietnam, Confucianism had religious elements. In the Ly dynasty, Confucius was worshipped in Temple of Literature. So Confucianism had religious element We put religion in brackets it means that this word is understood in Western terms. In fact, kings of the Han

⁹ See article of Trần Đình Hượu in *The Religious Problems At Present*, Social Science Publishing House, Hanoi, 1996

dynasty worshipped in Confucius's grave. Kings' actions not only directed to sacredness but also manifested religious elements. However, people pay attention to more ethical – political theory of Confucianism

The third, the division which takes interested in atheistic, secular and agnostic people is unlogical division. For example, a Christian also follow secularism and agnosticism. Or Buddhists is considered as atheistic, secular people. One believer of Juche in Northern Korea also worships his ancestor.

The religious concepts of this group are not coequal.

The size and state of Confucianism and Taoism are not longer like the old day, but recently the Chinese are trying to reconstruct the image of Confucius to become cultural representative of China. With the help of Government, Chinese are trying their best to propagandize Confucius in foreign countries. For Taoism, a religious movement was established in 2nd-3rd centuries in China. Taoism is a religion in form but it consists of many complicated origins and doctrines. But Taoism still exists in mainland China, Taiwan and in the regions where Chinese people are living. In Vietnam there is no tyranny of a religion in the three religions. The three theories and practices always go together. Depending on king, which one or two of the three religions are more important.

For Christianity, We know that table 2 lists three groups of great. They are Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodox Church and Protestantism. But table 1 uses 'Christianity' to denote these three religious groups¹⁰. In fact the names of three religions have special features in Vietnamese language, especially terms as *Kito giao*, *Co doc giao* and *Thien chua giao*. We use the word Christianity for three religious group as Institute for Religious Studies does.

The number of Christians is 2.1 billion in the world. This religion has the most followers. However the differences of three great groups of religion and their variants have become large barrier. This barrier can not be leveled in religious activities especially when politics interferes in these groups of religion. As we know, in Russia, Orthodox Church often contradicts Roma Catholicism and Protestantism. We speak of Catholicism of Latin America with liberation theology¹¹ but it does not

¹⁰ To refer the term Christianity" on Wikipedia

¹¹ See Bình Hòa Liberation Theology <http://www.daminhvn.net/thanhoc/1131-thanhoc-giai-phong>

mean that we make a break with the old theology. Christianity is one of typical representations for tripartite relation: religion, culture and politics.

However, when considering the tripartite relation: religion, culture and politics we find that only Christian has many differences so we wonder whether Roma Catholicism, Orthodox Church and Protestantism have the same origin or not? What is the war of Catholics and Protestants in United Kingdom? Russian and Serbian people of Orthodox church always run into the West and countries in the West. The clash is not only in consciousness that is mostly about religion. The Catholic believers in Southern America always resist the influence of Northern America because there are many Protestant believers living in Northern America. Furthermore Western democracies, especially the United States often encourage civil religions so that many new religious movements and extreme denominations have appeared.

Do the countries have divisions on culture and religion but still share a political model? We can divide countries into two main kinds:

The group of countries with democratic political parliamentarism

The group of countries with diversified political regimes

Basically, the first group coincides with developed countries in Europe and America, Japan and some other modern countries such as South Korea, Brazil, India. Countries of this group obey the rule that State separates from religion and religious affairs do not depend on State, vice versa. The most noticeable countries in this group are Japan and India. In two these countries there are religious and cultural characteristics related to multi-party political system. Now India has become the largest economy¹² with democratic political parliamentarism but it has preserved its religious and cultural identity. But India has faced terrorism of extreme Islamic groups. Japan has preserved its identity in the modern time. But Japan also has faced new sects as Aum Shinrikiyo which was founded in 1984. This sect was dissolved by Japanese Government in 1995 and it changed into Aleph sects in 2000. The countries in this group have not defined clearly the relation of culture, religion and politics as we think

¹² See: List of countries by GDP in link http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP%28PPP%29. India is ranked in the fourth position in the largest economy

The second group of countries is more complicated. Countries of this group are can be divided as follows:

1-Clear divisible system: State separates from Religion (for example China, Vietnam, North Korea...)

2-Tacit divisible system: State and religion have tacit agreement on division of influence in society, politics, economy and culture.

3-United system: State and religion are unified on force or state declares a religion to be national religion.

Because of real situation , three systems are not always showed definitely. Some countries locate between the first system 1 and the second system. Depending on the political situation, the domestic economy and foreign affairs, religion/culture and politics have mixed each other. Sometimes this mixture is flexible but sometimes this mixture is hard. In general, basing on religion countries affirm their national identity and they try their best to avoid dispute over politics and religion. If dispute over politics and religion happens, politics will seek to suppress and conciliate this dispute.

Politics and Religion/ Culture in the second group (The group of countries with diversified political regimes)

In this part we mainly discussed the non-western countries.

Just to say that, the first group of countries mainly follows Christianity or theistic religion. Freedom of religion is considered a top priority. These countries often impose Christian will on remaining countries. They always take the human rights and religious freedom to pressure and force other countries to follow their model in spite of cultural tradition and historical condition of countries. In fact they want to Christianize other countries.

From social investigations we find that social changes and economic crises hindered the development of some secular countries

In the last two decades of 20th century, society of non Western countries have changed. Some countries have restored religions which created their cultural identity in political relation. On the other words, the return of religion is result of diversified developments including the changes not to create fully satisfactory results. The

weakness of nationalism over politics, the issue of legality and legitimacy of the state, political repression and disruption of national identity, inequality of economy, society; the erosion of moral values and traditions are the bad consequences of the transition that we are aware. At the same time they create diversified background of cultural/ religious relation and political aims.

It is also found in some countries, religion is increasingly involved in political activities. For example, Buddhism has an important political position in Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia. The Christian democracy and liberation theology have great political significance in Latin America. Pair of religion and politics have great important role in Iran and Afghanistan. But State never accepts the politics of religion. On the other words, State never shares its power with religion. State only wants to reduce religious influence in political activities.

These countries are influenced by secular ideology of Western countries. Although these countries are independence but their governments behave like Western countries. The process of secularization makes a united model like institution of Western countries. Laws and procedures aim undermining and ultimately replacing traditional systems. It means that traditional culture is shaken. Because modern people think that, their countries are "backward" on society, politics and economy. They think that they build their country following secular model of Western countries so that their countries catch up with the West countries. The process of modernization is carried out disorderly. It does not prove new force but shows that the "religious practice" increasingly permeates into society. The changes over society, policy and economy, emigration, the change of residence and production become more complexly and change the relation of individual and community to establish a compromise between modern with traditional institutions in which there is religion. Because system of the traditional values is weakened, the chances are often uneven so modernization makes ordinary people to have a sense of self-contradiction. So they find religious reasons to make their life purposeful and meaningful. The collective sense was rooted in traditional religion. Devotion creates deep foundation for harmony and social stabilities. So we see the return of religion. State takes advantage of religion to achieve social, political and economic goals, but the relation of religion/ culture and politics is not identified in these

countries. Almost countries of the second group try their best to obstruct or not to accept politics of religion.

Many countries of the second group have a common situation that most people seem to be followers of a certain religion. In pursuit of modernization, political leaders have tried to impact on the religious tradition. However, the political role of religion continues to be important in many countries, although with different degrees of success

Conclusion

In the short article, writer can not discuss deeply and generally the complicated relation of religion/ culture and politics in the world. This subject will be continued in the future because the problem of religion/ culture in the political relation is big problem. We should regularly consider and analyze it.