

SOME ISSUES REGARDING BELIEF AT PRESENT

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In this article we do not intend to discuss what belief is, the content of belief and we have no intention of giving a concept of belief. We implicitly accept the concept and content of belief, at least according to clause 1, clause 2 of the Article 3 of *the Ordinance on Belief and Religion* which was promulgated by National Assembly of Socialist Republic of Vietnam on 18th June, 2004

In order to have the Ordinance on Belief and Religion (Ordinance for short) we have to spend a long stage. Now, this stage has not finished yet. Why does belief – an evident problem have a hard fate? In the period of industrialization and modernization we restore belief – an ancient spiritual culture and what benefit we have.

That is content that writer would like to deal with.

1- The concept, content of belief – the breakthrough from the Ordinance of Belief and Religion.

1.1. The process of breakthrough:

The great religions of human kind and States came into the world simultaneously² but beliefs were born before religions³.

In Vietnam, from Hung Vuong kings, beliefs have played role important roles in community unity, in worshipping of leaders or persons who deserved well of community. Vietnamese people have followed belief related to animism (all things have their souls). So we have custom

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² K, Marx “this state, society creates religion” In *On Religion*, Social Science Publishing House, Hanoi, 1993. p. 12

³ Many people think that ancient belief and wise man were born at the same time

to worship Earth Genie, God of Sea, God of River, God of Mountain and other supernatural powers such as Cloud, Rain, Thunder and Lightning (Four Dharmas). The Taoism codified the worship of Heaven into *Kinh thiên tế tổ* (it means kings worship Heaven, people worship ancestors). The Feudal State officially adopted the worship of deities and other worships. The Feudal State based on worship of deities to preserve national customs from external influences.

In the Lê dynasty, State investigated carefully identification, behavior and credits of the deities who were worshipped in people. Each deity had his own story; more or less their stories were legendized. Kings base on behavior and credits of deities to nominate them as Supreme deity, Middle deity and Inferior deity. Villagers had duty to worship them.

State gave cultivated land to villagers so they covered the cultural expresses. This cultivated land was called *Thần điền*. The Nguyễn dynasty continued to do as the Lê dynasty did. Many villages have still maintained nominations for deities of villages with Bảo Đại date, the lasted king of the Nguyễn feudal state.

The worship of deities was considered national affair, it was regulated from the central level to local level. Because the Feudal state recognized the belief value for survival and development of nation

When the Nguyễn feudal state was collapsed, people continuously worshipped deities, especially deities who deserved well of homeland. People worshipped Nguyễn Trung Trực who was hero in anti –French

resistance war, Nguyễn Công Trứ who established villages in Tiền Hải (Thái Bình), Kim Sơn (Ninh Bình)..

When French colonialists invaded our country, Nguyễn feudal state collapsed, the worship of deities seemed to vanish in institutions of state. But people in villages still worshipped the deities who deserved well of villages and homeland. People secretly upheld national culture and honored persons who had their merits for the country and people

Because of some reasons, many forms of belief were not to be practiced from the North was liberated in 1954 to country carried out the policy of renewal. When the North carried out co-operative movement and building of new villages, many places of worship were demolished because they thought that these places connected closely superstitious activities to obstruct the cause of building new life. Many temples, pagodas and communal houses were demolished in the period of scorched earth resistance (1947- 1948) and in anti- American resistance war. Many places of worship were damaged by time. So many places of worship in villages were eliminated and belief festivals were fallen into oblivion.

In 1986, Vietnam began to implement its policy of Reform and Renewal. On 16 October, 1990 the Politburo promulgated Resolution No 24-NQ/TW on “*Strengthen Religious Affairs in the New Situation*”. So the worship of deities and heroes who deserved to villages and Homeland and festivals related to belief were restored.

According to standpoint and guideline of our Party, the policies of State regarding religions gradually have been promulgated. These

policies are more and more closely to actuality. The Resolution No 24-NQ/TW began in the cause of renewal of religious affairs. In the *Political Reports of the 6th Central Committee in the 6th National Congress*⁴ and in the *Platform for National Construction during the Transitional Period towards Socialism*⁵ (the 7th Congress in 1991), our Party used comma between two words “belief” and “religion”. Before, belief was often considered as *religious faith* or belief was identified with religion so we did not distinguish between beliefs from religion. However, in two above documents belief was understood as religious faith or faith of worship of deities and supernatural force. This state still existed in the *Platform for National Construction during the Transitional Period towards Socialism (Supplemented and Developed in 2011)*⁶. But in the *Political Reports of the 10th Central Committee in the 11th National Congress of Vietnamese Communist Party*, the belief problem has new connotation according to the spirit of *Ordinance. The Political Report* affirmed “to continuously perfect policy and laws regarding belief, religion according to Party’s view”⁷. Here, belief is understood as belief activities are regulated in Ordinance.

Thus, until the 11th Congress the *problem of belief* is understood clearly

The policy of State

⁴ Vietnamese Communist Party. *Documents of Party*. National Politics Publishing House, Hanoi, 2006 Vol 51 p. 105

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ See *People Newspaper* on 19th March, 2011

⁷ See *People Newspaper* on 19th March, 2011

On 21st March, 1991 the Government issued Decree No 69/HDBT on *Religious activities*. After reading Decree, we find that Decree does not control religious activities and belief is understood as faith. The Article 1 of Decree affirmed that “*The State guarantees the right to freedom of belief and religion and the right not to have a belief and a religion, forbids any discrimination for reasons of belief or religion*”⁸. The article 1 of Decree No 26 ND-CP dated on 19 April 1999 affirmed that “*The Social Republic of Vietnam guarantees the right to freedom of belief, religion and the right not to have a belief and a religion*”⁹

We find that Decree no 26/199/ND-CP and Decree no 69/HDBT only regulated religious activities although in these Decrees two words, “belief” and “religion” are separated from each other by comma.

1.2 On religious problem in the Ordinance on Belief and Religion

On 18th June, 2004 the Standing Committee of the National Assembly of the Social Republic of Vietnam promulgated the *Ordinance on Belief and Religion*.¹⁰ Through its name we can find that its content deals with belief and religion

The first and the second clauses of article 3 written that

For the purpose of this Ordinance

1- *Belief-related activity* means an activity expressing respect for , and worship of ancestors; remembrance and glorification of persons

⁸ Nguyễn Đức Lữ, Nguyễn Thị Kim Thanh: *Some standpoints of our Party and Vietnamese State on Religion* . National Politics Publishing House, Hanoi, 2009 p. 258

⁹ idem

¹⁰ The Government Committee for Religious Affairs : *Legal Documents of Vietnam regarding Belief, Religion* .Region Publishing House, Hanoi 2015 p. 10-11

having rendered meritorious service to the country and /or communities; worship of gods, saints and traditional symbols, and other activities related to folk belief, symbolizing fine historical and cultural values and social ethics.

2- *Belief related establishment* means a place where belief – related activities of communities are carried out including communal houses , temples, shrines, hermitages, ancestral halls, ancestral worship house and similar establishments¹¹.

The first term of article 1 denotes clearly the content of belief. The Ordinance use phrase “and other activities related to folk belief” to denote belief related activity. In our country there are various activities related to folk, especially activities related to folk belief a because our country has 54 ethnic minorities, all of them have activities related to folk belief However, the Ordinance regulated that *other activities related to folk belief, symbolizing fine historical and cultural values and social ethics*. All activities related to folk belief which are contrary to habits and customs, especially activities are counter –culture are not to be recognized as activities related to folk belief. For example view on *ma lai* of some ethnic people in the Central Highlands

Because dealing with activities related to belief and religion so the Ordinance have many regulations on belief -related and religious activities.

Article 5

¹¹ Ibid p. 12

The State shall guarantee the right to belief –related and religious activities in compliance with the provisions of law; shall respect the cultural and moral values of religions; shall preserve and promote positive values in the tradition of worship of ancestors, remembrance and glorification of persons who have rendered meritorious services to the country and / or communities, with a view to helping consolidate the all-nation unity and meeting the spiritual need of people¹²

Article 9

1-A follower or believers shall be free to express his or her faith, to practice worship or pray, to participate in religious activities, religious ceremonies and rites and study dogmas of the religion that he or she follows.

2- In carrying out belief –related or religious activities, a believers or follower shall have the responsibility to respect the right to freedom of belief and religion as well as the right to freedom of non belief and non-religion of others; to exercise his/her right to freedom of belief and religion in a manner that will not obstruct the performance of civic rights and obligation and to carry out belief related and religious activities in accordance with the provision of law¹³.

Beside two above- mentioned articles there are other articles such as articles 10, 14, 15, 28, 29 etc.

¹² Ibid p. 12

¹³ Ibid p. 14

We quote verbatim article 9 because we would like to analyze two necessary ideas of this article to denote the breakthrough related to belief in the Ordinance

The first idea: because the Ordinance regulates activities related to belief so article 9 uses the word “a follower” to denote a person who follows one or some forms related to belief. In Ordinance we find the word “follower” is in front of the word “believer”. The word “believer” means to denote a person who follows one religion. It is the first time to distinguish follower from believers. In our country there are many religions and many forms related to belief so some people are believers of monotheistic religion such as Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam. These religions do not accept Vietnamese traditional belief. But some believers (for example Buddhist believers) believe in and practice some forms related to belief so they are both *followers* and *believers*.

The second idea is the word “faith”. It is understood as the faith of any person to religion or some forms related to belief.

As already stated, before Ordinance came into the world, the word “belief” was understood as faith. According to the regulations of the Ordinance, the word “belief” is replaced by the word “faith”. It is the breakthrough in awareness as well as in policy of our Party and State regarding religion, belief.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, we use the words “faith” or “belief” to denote sentiments of any person towards religion or belief that he or she believe in. For example, religious faith or faith related to belief replaces religious belief that we used in long time

2- The role of belief before and after the period of renewal.

2.1 The conception and behavior to religious beliefs before period of renewal

Before our country carried out policy of renewal, the worship of Hung kings and heroes who deserved well of country was carried out unofficially, only people carried out this worship. Many forms related to belief were forbidden. The worships of Mother Goddess, of God of the soil, of Water Nymph, of God of Forest were forbidden. In some regions the worship of tutelary god was forbidden. Before the period of Renewal the community culture in some villages were only festivals in modern time (for example the National Day, the Day of Dead and Wounded Soldiers, Day of Vietnamese People's Army...).

Many forms related to belief were forbidden because they were considered as the superstitious activities and counter –culture to obstruct the cause of building new cultural life.

The activities related belief of Kinh people happened like that. How did the activities related to belief of ethnic people? Ethnic people in the Northern mountainous provinces have followed polytheistic belief. Their deities have been called Ma (ghosts), for example Ghost of house or Ghost of door. When launching the movement of building a new cultural life, ghosts (deities) of ethnic people were identified with ghost of Kinh people so ghosts of ethnic people were eliminated from belief life of ethnic people because they were considered as superstitious activities.

After the South was liberated completely, some forms related to belief of ethnic people in Trường Sơn mountain (Long Mountain) and in the Central Highlands were behaved as forms related belief of ethnic people in the Northern mountainous provinces. So many forms related to popular belief of ethnic people fell in poverty.

The above remarks are general. In fact, many forbidden forms related to belief were preserved by villagers. When our Party and State have acknowledged the role of belief in new era, many forms related belief have been restored in villages.

2.2 Belief in the period of industrialization and modernization

In the period of industrialization and modernization, belief seems to develop. What is its role?

Religions in the process of globalization are internationalized. Some religions have actively integrated into national culture but they have not yet belonged to nation. Protestantism has existed in Vietnam for 100 years but its culture has not yet incorporated into national culture. Belief was created and brought up by each group of people so it has belonged to national culture. Both indigenous and exogenous religions base on belief. In fact, any religion which does not take root in or base on belief will have few believers and its role seems not to be important to national culture. Most activities related to belief are festivals. These festivals are heritages of national culture.

The period of industrialization and modernization, belief continuously plays an important role.

221. Through activities related to memory and respect of person who deserved well to community, belief continuously hands down glorious pages in our history

Villagers commemorate and respect heroes who deserved well to community and nation in their festivals. Because they would like to show deep gratitude to national heroes and remind their children to remember persons who laid down their lives for homeland. In new stage, villagers continuously build temples, shrines to worship persons who deserved well to nation and community. In almost communal houses there are memorial steles. The names of martyrs in anti- French and American resistance wars are written in these steles. When investigating we find that many villages worship Hồ Chí Minh as deity. Belief is not only preserved but also it continuously writes glorious pages in our history by its way. At present apart of young people pay attention to history of founding and defending our country little and they seem to forget national heroes so the forms related to belief will remind them.

2.2.2 The worship of ancestors contributes to solidarity of communities

In the broadest sense of the phrase “the worship of ancestor” is to worship of Hung kings, the founders of villages, ancestor of a line, grand parents and parents.

According to different levels, the worship has role to unite different communities. For example, the worship of Hung kings will unite all Vietnamese people regardless position, people and religion so

all Vietnamese people overlook divergences to build our country. The worship of grandparents will help relatives to love and protect each another in difficult times. A harmonious family will create social harmony.

Since our Party and State regulated that Kings Hung's death anniversary is national festival so the worship of Kings Hung is more and more paid attention. Vietnamese people more and more pride of our nation.

When Vietnam carries out open-door policy, many Vietnamese people living abroad go home to worship ancestors. When going home many of them not only worship their ancestors but also contribute to building their native land.

2.2.3 The festival related to belief plays an important role in upholding and promoting the values of national culture

The festival related to belief is cream of activities related to belief. It is the heritage of national culture. Some festivals are recognized as the cultural heritage of the world by UNESCO¹⁴. Thanks to belief environment many popular forms of composing and sings are preserved and developed. For example “*Quan họ*” (love duets are a colour form of popular song well- known in ancient Kinh Bắc), and “*Ca trù*” (an original art performance of academic character has been persevered for the past 10 centuries) or the culture of *gongs* in the Central Highlands are considered as cultural heritages. They are upheld and brought up in

¹⁴ Gióng festival was recognized the cultural heritage by UNESCO

belief environment. If this environment is vanished sooner or later cultural heritages are vanished.

When foreign songs have a great vogue in our country, many young people follow *nhac tre* (a new form of music); popular songs play important roles in preserving cultural character of nation

We have just dealt with 3 important roles of belief in the period of industrialization and modernization in our country. Belief has role in preserving traditional handicrafts in villages, defending natural environment.

At present, we should uphold and restore some forms related to belief such as the rite of opening forest of ethnic people in the Northern mountainous provinces; the worship of mountain god, water –nymph, God of the soil. Through these forms human being will recognize his role in defending environment.

The festivals related to belief are not unchanged elements. Spending time they can change their contents as well as their forms. It is an objective law. At present, festivals related to belief are influenced the object law. Although we have to innovate forms of festivals, we have to uphold creams of festivals so that festivals can keep their roles in preserving and developing the cultural identity of nation in the period of industrialization and modernization.

