

ON MISSIONARY METHOD AND DEVELOPMENT OF FOLLOWERS OF RELIGIONS IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

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Because social, economic conditions of ethnic groups are different from each other so religions in the Central Highlands have private characters regarding missionary methods and development of followers. We have some following remarks

- *On missionary method*

Because the Central highlands has some special features on geographical condition, language, customs, economic development so monotheistic belief met many difficulties to come there. Missionaries have used the special missionary methods. At last their religions can exist in the Central Highlands. Among them there are Catholicism and Protestantism.

Catholic missionaries overcame 4 difficulties.

Firstly, Catholic missionaries overcame pressure of community. The sense of community and collective spirit are salient features in traditional social relation of ethnic people in the Central Highlands. Ethnic people think that the most terrible punishment is to be expelled from their village. The traditional belief of them is to worship many deities. The system of deities in the Central Highlands is various. The deities are called same name as “*Giàng*”. The fate of human being or community depends on the relation of human being or community to deities. So anyone who leaves Giang to follow polytheistic religion will be killed or expelled from village. In order to overcome this obstacle, Catholic priest set up new villages for new Catholic followers to live. All those who lived in new villages wouldn’t conflict with people of old villages and they would help priests many things. People who live in new villages

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would be supplied agricultural instruments and buffaloes to cultivate. The life of people in new villages attracted people who lived in traditional villages so many ethnic people followed Catholicism. Three Catholic villages were established in Kon Tum. They were Kon Hơ Xâm, Kon Trang, Plây Chũ. From these villages, Catholic priests developed their religion in other villages.

Secondly, Catholic priests overcame the barrier of language. When they were present in the Central Highlands they compiled dogmas and biblical books in Ba Na and Xơ Đăng languages. Priest Dourisbour compiled *Dictionanarie Bahnar - Francais*, it was printed in 1889 in Hong Kong; Guilleminet and Albettry compiled *Lexque Francais – Bahnar- Francais*, it was printed in 1940 in Hanoi; Albettry and J. Piehardie compiled *Hbabartobo Nor Bahnar – Yon Phalang*; Priets J Kemlin compiled *Ebauche de dictionnaire de la langue Jorai*²

Thirdly, Catholic priests overcame the barrier of spiritual life. They quickly integrated with native culture and beliefs. They explained and identified the deities of ethnic people with Triune God and Catholic deities. They explained that *Oi Kodei* deity of Ba Na, Xơ Đăng and Gia Rai people was triune God. Among them, Yang Ba was Father, Yang Con was Son and Yang Ai was Holy spirit. Catholic priests identified the *Bok Xogor* story with the story of Eve and Adam in Bible. They changed communal house into chapel. They used folk songs of ethnic people in the Mass. They used native words to denote Catholic terms, for example, they used the word *Boh Xoi* (it means sorcerer) to denote Priest or the word *Bok Xoi Til* (it means the great sorcerer) to denote bishop³.

² See Nguyễn Hồng Dương. *The missionary works of Catholicism in ethnic people in Kon Tum- some special expressions*. Religious Studies Reviews, Vol 5, 2006 p. 52

³ *ibid*

Catholic priests applied forms of community activities of ethnic people into Catholic rites. They built churches, architecture of these churches were similar to the architecture of communal house.

Fourthly, Catholic priests overcame the territorial obstacle. Ethnic people often lived in closed villages. These villages were far apart but the number of priests was very few so they met many difficulties in management of followers. In order to overcome this obstacle, the Society of Foreign Mission of Paris had policy to build schools for ethnic people's children. These children were taught culture and dogma. When they grew up they came back their villages to teach dogmas by their native languages. They would care and manage followers in villages on behalf of priests. This policy was started in 1865 in Kon Tum diocese. It achieved many results for missionary work in the Central Highlands in later years.

Priests of Catholicism and Protestantism only overcame the above obstacles but also took advantage of the traditional customs of ethnic people to develop their religions. Firstly, Catholic priests tried their best to overcome obstacles of community, lately they took advantage of community obstacles to force ethnic people to follow their religions. Through believers, priests and pastors drew remaining villagers into their religions. Anyone who did not follow their religions would be isolated. In recent time two religions have used radio, to carry out missionary work. Both religions have achieved success in choosing key persons to preach. They have often impressed village patriarchs who have prestige in the village. Thanks to village patriarchs they could draw other villagers to follow their religion. Protestantism has impressed women in the Central Highlands because the power of women has been higher than their husbands' power. Protestantism has given prominence to advanced principles of living such as “ No drinking, no smoking, no laziness and no

polygamy”. These principles have been supported by women. Because they think that if their husbands follow Protestantism their families will be happy. After wives follow Protestantism, they impact all members of their families.

Catholicism and Protestantism have combined missionary work with social activities. They have built classrooms of compassion, kindergartens, health centers... They have given presents to believers and non-believers who have difficult conditions. In recent years, Bishop’s palace in Kon Tum province has carried out policy “on social and charitable work” to help the poor.

Priests have taught the poor how to overcome difficulties

Priests have taught the poor how to read and speak Vietnamese language.

Priests have taught the poor how to use money sensibly

Priests have helped the poor to sell their production at highest price.

Priest have helped the poor to buy necessary production at lowest price

Priests have helped the poor to use well their property and means of production.

Priests have helped the poor to prevent diseases.

When the poor get a disease, priest have helped them to cure⁴

Catholic priests and Protestant pastors went to distant regions to carry out missionary work. They tried their best to explore psychological elements. Customs of native people to make special features in missionary work. They opened many missionary campaigns in remote areas. Because commandments of Buddhism and Caodaism are relatively severe. Their dogmas seem not to be appropriate for awareness and conception of ethnic people. Buddhism and Caodaism have not any

⁴ According to the document of Social and Charitable Committee in Kon Tum diocese

missionary campaign so two religions only developed in Kinh people. In recent years, these religions have had efforts to develop in ethnic people.

-On development of believers

Catholicism was introduced in the Central Highland earliest. In 1839 and in 1842 *Đàng trong* diocese (in the South) appointed priests to carry out missionary work in the Central Highlands. But its appointment was in vain. In 1850 two priests of the Society of Foreign Mission of Paris lived in village of Ba Na people in Kon Tum. On January 1st, 1852, the first ethnic people were christened. First three missionary centers were established in Kon Tum. They were Konkoxâm, Kontrang and Breng. From these centers, missionary work was gradually enlarged. After 1884, missionary work developed in the Central Highlands because Huế Court ended the Christian forbidden policy and French created good condition for developing Catholic believers. In 1954, the number of Catholic believers developed. 10000 Ba Na people, 8000 Xê Đăng and about 15% population of Gia Rai followed Catholicism. Under Ngô Đình Diệm regime, Catholicism had good condition to develop. According to the “emigrant policy”, Catholics in the North and in the central coastal provinces moved to live in the Central Highlands so the number of Catholic believers in the Central Highlands developed. In war years this number continued to develop. In 1967 Catholic believers in the Central Highlands had the highest rate in the South. In 1975 the number of Catholic believers in the Central Highlands increased about 130.000 believers. After 30 years (2005) this number increased over 300.000 believers. In 2009 the number of Catholic believers in the Central Highlands was about 800.693 believers, among them there were about 165.000 ethnic people.

In 1911 Protestantism was brought to Đà Nẵng but the missionary work of Protestantism met many difficulties in plain. Because many

plainsmen followed Buddhism or they did not refuse ancestral worship to follow Catholicism or Protestantism. In plain, Protestantism was encroached by Catholicism. Because of these difficulties, Protestantism decided to develop missionary work in the Central Highlands where people had low cultural standard and Catholicism had not yet developed. In 1929, Protestantism was present in the Central Highlands. missionary work was carrying out firstly by Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA), then by Vietnamese Protestant Church and Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region). Koho people were the first ethnic people to follow Protestantism. At the end of 1930 the missionary work in the Central Highlands was developed on a large scale with the contributions of two organizations: Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) and Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region). After 19th Congress of Vietnamese Protestant Church, the missionary work developed in ethnic people. During 1954- 1975 the missionary work in ethnic people happened effervescently because it was helped by American government and international Protestant organizations. In 1975, the Central Highlands had about 70.000 Protestant believers. After 1975 missionary work seemed to be leveled off. Because of many reasons, Protestantism has developed unusually in the Central Highlands. At the end of 2004, in the Central Highlands there were 400.000 Protestant believers. During 10 years (1975- 2004) the number of Protestantism believers increased about 330.000 believers. Comparing to 1975, the number of believers in the whole of the Central Highlands increased tenfold. The number of believers in Thuận An (Đăk Min district, Đăk Nông province) or in IaDer commune (IaGrai district, Gia Rai province) increased thirty fold. In Đăk Lăk province there were 508 villages to follow Protestantism. Many Protestant believers who had lived in other places immigrate to the Central Highlands. Beside three churches such as

Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region),the Adventist Church, the Christian and Missionary Alliance there were many other Protestant churches. In April, 2003, in the Central Highlands there were 12 Protestant churches to carry out missionary work.

When explaining unusually development of Protestantism in 1975 - 2004, Oscar Salemink (assistance professor of Amsterdam University, Holland) thought that ethnic people in the Central Highlands accepted Protestantism because they did not want to be regarded as backward people, “ they accept the modern life because it helps them to become a part of modern society”. When comparing to Buddhism, Oscar Salemink thought that ethnic people did not follow Buddhism because they wanted to be different from Kinh people, “If ethnic people in the Central Highlands became Buddhist believers they would dilute their difference on language, culture and religion. They had nothing to pride of their people. So they accepted a religion which made them different from Kinh people”⁵.

According to us, Protestantism can develop by many reasons. One of these reasons was the help of America. In war-years, America created good condition for Protestantism to develop in the Central Highlands. The other reasons were the helps of international Protestant organizations and their suitable missionary methods. Beside these above reasons, we also find following reasons: First, the material and spiritual life of ethnic people in distant regions meet many difficulties. In 2005 the rate of poor people was 30%, the rate of illiterate children was 70-80%. Second, the impact of market economy has wasted native culture. Women – heads of their families are saddled with cost unsound customs. In this condition Protestantism impacts on women then they will affect other members in her family. Third, the policies and laws of our

⁵ Oscar Salemik The Cultural problems and livelihood in the Central Highlands

State regarding religion, especially Protestantism is carried out slowly and discretely. Some officers knew wrong actions of Protestantism but they did not take comprehensive measures to treat these actions. During five years, the number of Protestant churches has increased but the number of Protestant believers did not. According to the datum of Department of Internal Affairs, in 2009 in 5 provinces of the Central Highlands there were 30 Protestant churches with 337.000 believers, among them there were 315.000 ethnic believers. Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region) had 291.000 believers. 1260 Protestant groups have operated in 1732 villages of ethnic people. Although Catholic believers are more than Protestant believers, the number of ethnic people following Protestantism doubled. We can find that during 35 years these two religions have had great influence in ethnic communities in the Central Highlands.

Buddhism was present in the Central Highlands in 1930. Buddhism entered early Lâm Đồng and Kon Tum provinces. In 1931 the first pagoda of Cổ truyền Cổ Sơn Môn sect was established in Võ Lâm village (Kon Tum). Many Buddhist sects entered Kon Tum and other provinces in the Central Highlands to develop their sects. The development of Buddhism connected closely migration of Kinh people. Most of Buddhist believers in the Central Highlands are Kinh people. Presently, in the Central Highlands there are three Buddhist sects. They are *Thống nhất* sect, *Cổ truyền sơn môn* sect and *Tăng già Khất sĩ* sect (mendicant Monks sect).

Lâm Đồng has the most Buddhist believers, they live in Đà Lạt city and Bảo Lộc town essentially. At the end of 2009 in the whole of the Central Highlands there were 570274 Buddhist believers (Lâm Đồng had 315.000 believers; Đắk Lắk had 117.952 believers; Gia Lai had 86.891

believers; Kon Tum had 27.913 believers; Đắk Nông had 22.518 believers).

It is noted that, Buddhism begins to develop in ethnic people. At present the Central Highland has about 3.900 Buddhist believers. Among them there are 3000 believers living in Đắk Lắk and 900 believers living in Kon Tum. The population of Ia Chim commune is 8.233 people but 495 people follow Buddhism.

Cao Đài was present in the Central Highlands in 1930s. In Lâm Đồng there are 4 sects: Cao Đài church of Tây Ninh province, Cao Đài missionary church, Cao Đài Correct path church and Cao Đài at three door temple gate church. In Kon Tum there were 4 sects: Cao Đài at three door temple gate church, Cao Đài church of Tây Ninh province, Cao Đài missionary church and the Bright- Verity Way church.

Almost of Cao Đài believers in the Central Highlands are Kinh people. Some Cao Đài believers in Đắk Lắk are ethnic people (they only make up 1% population of the whole province).

Baha'i has just appeared in Gia Lai and Lâm Đồng provinces. The number of believers is very few. Phật Đường Nam Tông Minh Sư church has just appeared in Lâm Đồng with 220 believers.

At present there are 6 religions in the Central Highlands with 1.770.053 believers. They are Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Cao Đài church, Baha'i, Phật Đường Nam Tông Minh Sư church. 460.000 ethnic people follow religions⁶. As we know, the rate of religious believers in the whole of our country makes up 20% population but the rate of religious believers in the Central Highlands makes up 36% population of province. In 2005 in the Central Highlands there were 1582.617 believers but in the beginning of 2010, more 187.436 people

⁶ Lê Quang Toàn. Some problems regarding religious affairs in the Central Highlands are set up. The Communist Review, Vol 38 p. 19

followed religions. These figures prove that the religious life in the Central Highlands is diversified and lively. Many ethnic people believe in Catholicism and Protestantism. When analyzing the missionary method we can find some noticeable features and draw some lessons for manageable affairs regarding religions in the Central Highlands