

HỒ CHÍ MINH SPOKE OF RELIGION - THE CREATIVE AND ORIGINAL THOUGHT

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President Hồ Chí Minh left for us the precious heritage of thought including the thoughts regarding religion and belief. His articles, behaviour and last recommendation regarding religions in general and to Catholic followers, clergymen and the religious in particular are previous lessons.

Hồ Chí Minh's views on religion were established for 40 years and divided into two main stages. The first stage was before the August Revolution in 1945. The second stage was from 1945 to 1969. In his letters, speeches, he dealt with religious matter on different aspects. His views were consistently developed and perfected. They were more and more attached to the revolutionary cause of nation.

Hồ Chí Minh's thought on religion was established and developed in historical context that the relation of "Catholicism and Communism" was not good. It can say that in 40 years (from 1920s to 1960s) Catholic dignitaries and the communists made many mistakes in treating each other. Hồ Chí Minh was one of few communist leaders to overcome the limitation of history to have right views and behavior to religion.

1. The historical background of the establishment of Hồ Chí Minh's thought on religion

In the first half of the 20th century, Catholic Church based on social message to defend and protect the system of private property. He considered the right of private property to be the right of Creator that no government can abolish. The message *Divini Redemptoris* (1937) which was promulgated by Pope Pius XI, rejected atheism and slandered socialism that "socialism causes class conflict and abolish the right of private property. It tries its best to win the victory in

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all struggles. Every thing it can do, Nothing it respects. When it holds power, it is very savage and inhuman”⁽¹⁾.

The attitude of Vatican explained why after 1945 Russian Communist Party and other Communist Parties had leftist attitude towards religion.

We have to recognize that the religious policy of Russia after the October Revolution was progressive and it achieved many good results.

At that time there were leftist tendencies on religion. In the 8th National Congress of Party, Russian Communist Party introduced following contents into political programme “Party hopes to abolish completely the all relations with exploitative class and organizes to propagate religion to escape the mass from preconception of religion. Party organizes the scientific propagational affair to eliminate superstition and to resist religion”⁽²⁾. If USSR Constitution in 1918 affirmed the right to propagate atheism but Constitution in 1936 affirmed clearly the right to propagate anti-religion. Article 124 wrote “citizen are ensured to have the right to freedom of belief. In USSR, Church is separated from State and school is separated from Church. State recognizes the right to follow any religion and the right to propagate anti-religion”⁽³⁾. So many localities in USSR made many mistakes and they hoped to abolish religion in socialism. The leftist tendency towards religion on theological and practical aspects not only happed in USSR but also in the whole socialist system.

In 1927 (when Nguyễn Ái Quốc lived in China) Mao Tse Tung pointed out the Chinese Communist Party’s view on religion in *the Report on investigation of peasant movement in Hunan province*. “Buddha was established by peasants, in certain time peasants will throw away Buddha. They do not need anybody to throw away Buddha”⁽⁴⁾.

In Vietnam, the French colonialist tried their best to take advantage of religion, especially Catholic Church to undermine our revolution. The combination of the French colonialists and Catholic Church caused great damage to Vietnamese revolution. That was why officers, especially Party members had prejudiced attitude towards Catholicism.

¹ Pope Cleo XIII, Pope John Paul II. *Social Message*, Reference documents.

² See Đỗ Quang Hưng. *The Religious Issue in Vietnamese Revolution*, National Political Publisher, Hanoi, 2005, p. 39.

³ Ibid, p. 32.

⁴ Dới Khang Sinh. *Socialism in China*. Translation in Institute for Religious Studies.

In this condition, Hồ Chí Minh was consistently respectful of religion. He proposed the right view on religious affairs. He overcame the ideal limitation at that time to recognize religious problem with scientific and human views.

2- The original views of Hồ Chí Minh on religion

Hồ Chí Minh applied creatively the principles of Marxism and Leninism into Vietnam. Religion was the aspect to be applied most creatively into Vietnam by Hồ Chí Minh. This was shown in following points:

The first Hồ Chí Minh affirmed that Vietnamese religion was different from religions in Europe.

Hồ Chí Minh was truth student of Karl Marx and Lenin, but he applied creatively the Marxist-Leninist principles into Vietnam. In his report named “*the Report of North, Centre and South in Vietnam*” written in French in Moscow in 1924 and latter that was appreciated by theorists, he wrote that “Karl Marx developed his theory basing on a certain philosophy of history, but on which history was based. Perhaps it was European history. What is Europe? Europe is not the whole of humankind”. He saw that “Nevertheless, also it could not prohibit additional “historical basis” of Marxism by adding the material that Marx could not have been... We should consider the historical base of Marxism and consolidate it by method of Oriental ethnography. Soviet leaders should undertake this duty”⁽⁵⁾.

On religious matters, Hồ Chí Minh argued that “Vietnamese have not priest and religions according to European's thought. The worship of ancestor is a social phenomenon. We have not any priest. We do not know what prestige of priests or sorcerer is?”⁽⁶⁾.

On the worship of ancestor, he wrote that “the old of family or of village will carry out recollective rites”⁽⁷⁾. He always reminded us to engrave forever on our heart the merits of our ancestors. He always advised us that we should have responsibility to preserve what our ancestors left for us: “The Hùng kings had the merit of founding our nation. We must defend our country”.

The second, Hồ Chí Minh was always interested in the similarity of religious ideal and socialist ideal.

⁵ *Hồ Chí Minh's Collected Works*, The National Political Publisher, Hanoi, 1995, p. 465.

⁶ Ibid. p. 479.

⁷ Ibid. p. 479.

Different from the founders of Marxist-Leninist doctrine, Hồ Chí Minh did not struggle directly against the theological view and religious doctrines; he only stressed on the similarity of the aspiration of work-people and the ideal of the founders of religions. Although religious doctrine is different from the Marxist doctrine, even contrary with each other, they have similarities. Two doctrines pursue happiness for humankind and seek welfare for society. In recent years, many people usually quote and think highly the well-known sentence of Hồ Chí Minh: “Confucius theory had its good point. That is to cultivate individual morals. Christianity’s advantage is supreme kindness. Marxism’s strong point is dialectic method. The principle of Sun Yat-sen had its good point. Its policy corresponds to the condition of our country. Might Confucius, Jesus, Karl Marx, and Sun Yat-sen have the common points. They wanted to pursue happiness for humanity and seek welfare for society. If they still live in the world and live in the same place I think that they would coexist peacefully. I tries my best to become their student”⁽⁸⁾. His acknowledge was original and unusual at that time.

He remarked that “the lofty purpose of Sakyamuni and Jesus was the same. Sakyamuni and Jesus wanted all people to have enough food and clothing, equality, liberty and world harmony.”⁽⁹⁾ and communist strived for this purpose. In fact “Both Catholicism and Socialism promoted the release of people from slavery and poverty”⁽¹⁰⁾. He found that religious ideal and socialist ideal had many similarities, then he affirmed that “if Jesus lives in our time and he stands our sufferings he is sure to be the socialist to save people from misfortune and danger”⁽¹¹⁾.

While Confucianism in general and Confucius in particular were condemned and criticized in China, and it was thought that Confucianism and Confucius were the last strongholds of corruptive feudal system⁽¹²⁾ but Hồ Chí Minh did not assent to this opinion and he thought that “ Because of abolishment of the recollective ceremony for Confucius, Chinese Government has lost the old system and contrasted with democratic spirit”⁽¹³⁾. Although Hồ Chí Minh

⁸ Trần Dân Tiên. *The Stories of President Hồ Chí Minh*, the Truth Publisher, Hanoi, 1970.

⁹ See: *Nhan Dan* newspaper, volume 38, on 27 December, 1951.

¹⁰ See: *Religious Studies Review*, No. 2/ 2001.

¹¹ Trần Tam Tĩnh. *Cross and Sword*, Young Publisher, Hồ Chí Minh city, 1988, p. 79.

¹² See: *Lỗ Tấn 's Complete Works*, Educational Publisher, Hanoi, 1974.

¹³ *Ibid*, volume 2, p. 454.

criticized the negative elements of Confucianism, he appreciated the humane values in the works of Confucius.

Hồ Chí Minh criticized the limitations of the doctrine of Confucius. He wrote “Kings who venerated Confucius exploited Confucianism as the imperialists exploited Christianity”⁽¹⁴⁾, and “the doctrine of Confucius can not reconcile with the trend of modern ideology as a round cap can not cover tightly the square box”⁽¹⁵⁾. However, Hồ Chí Minh venerated Confucius when he wrote that “his (Confucius) morals and learning make people in his time and posterity to admire”⁽¹⁶⁾. He praised that “His morals are perfect” and he forecasted Confucius’s ability that “also likely that this superman (Confucius) be adapted to the situation and quickly became a loyal successor of Lenin”⁽¹⁷⁾

Basing on the good values as well as the limitation of Confucianism, Hồ Chí Minh drew the lesson “Vietnamese should be self-improvement by reading the works of Confucius on mental and the works of Lenin on revolution”⁽¹⁸⁾.

In fact we hardly find any extraordinary comparison regarding the founders of religion and the communist leaders like Hồ Chí Minh’s comparison.

The third, Hồ Chí Minh always respected the founders of some religions.

When Paradise or Nirvana have not yet established in the world, although the fantastic social modern of religious founder is “an illusional happiness of people”, people still dream of ideal society. All those who build this dream are respected. Hồ Chí Minh thought that Shakyamuni Buddha, Jesus and Confucius were *saints* and *philosophers*. They devoted their life for happiness of people and they fought against the oppression and injustice.

Shakyamuni Buddha was the great compassion: “he devoted his life to fight against evil spirit”⁽¹⁹⁾. For Jesus, “In the whole life he only worried to save the world and sacrificed for liberty and equality.”⁽²⁰⁾. In the letter sending to Vietnamese Catholics on the occasion of Christmas in 1945, Hồ Chí Minh wrote that “1945 years ago Jesus was born. In the whole life, Jesus only strove for freedom and democracy”.

¹⁴ *Hồ Chí Minh's complete works*, National Political Publisher, 1995. p. 453

¹⁵ Ibid p.453

¹⁶ Ibid p. 452- 452

¹⁷ Ibid p. 453- 454

¹⁸ Ibid p. 454

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 197

²⁰ Ibid, p. 490

From the date of his birth to now nearly 2000 years, His compassionate spirit did not fade but are spread out over, penetrates deep²¹.

In the letter sending to Buddhist monks and believers on Buddha's Birthday in 1947, he wrote that "I respectfully pray Buddha to help and support our people and country... Our country is independence; Buddhism will develop. Our people should unite, sacrifice bone and blood and struggle in order to defeat French colonialists for saving our people from poverty and holding national unification and independence. Therefore, we do something according to mercifulness of Buddha. Our resistance helps our people to escape from slavery²².

For Confucius, Hồ Chí Minh wrote that "Confucius was a man who took the initiative in the world harmony and propagated the equality of property. He often said that the world would be peaceful when the world would be harmony. They were not afraid of privation but they were afraid of inequality. Equality would abolish poverty²³.

In history, many men turned against the past and denied history. On the contrary, President Hồ Chí Minh always respected the values of morals, and culture of humankind, although these values were covered by religious color.

The fourth, Hồ Chí Minh accepted and selected the religious values.

Hồ Chí Minh practised Buddhist life. He was on short commons, studied Buddhist doctrine and knew pagoda Buddhist architecture well. According to Siphanom Vishivarason's opinion, a member of parliament of Thailand, "Uncle Ho was great man. In 1927 he built Buddhist pagoda in Udon province - Northeastern Thailand."²⁴.

In his writings, Hồ Chí Minh used the concepts of Buddhism and dealt with that we were ready to save our people from misfortune and danger. He also said about tolerant thought, not to take vengeance on anyone. He advised us to use tolerant policy for anyone who went astray.

²¹ Ibid, p. 121.

²² Ibid, p.197.

²³ Ibid, p.35.

²⁴ Phùng Hữu Phú. *Hồ Chí Minh with Buddhism in Vietnam*, National Political Publisher, Hanoi, 1997, p. 16.

On Confucianism, Hồ Chí Minh was influenced by Confucianism. His writings and speeches showed that he knew Confucianism, Confucius well. He applied Confucianism learning into the revolutionary struggle and daily life.

Many concepts of Confucianism as industry and thrift, integrity, benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge, and sincerity... were applied by Hồ Chí Minh. He did not accept dogmatically these above concepts but he enhanced these concepts and applied them into the life of new age. The feudalists also proposed industry, thrift, benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge, and sincerity but they did not carry out. According to Hồ Chí Minh the officers had to carry out industry and thrift, integrity, benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge, and sincerity for benefit of people and of country.

The concepts of loyalty and filial piety that were proposed by Hồ Chí Minh were different from the concepts of loyalty and filial piety of Confucianism.

He explained that “as in old time, the loyalty meant we was loyal to king. The filial piety meant we were thankful to our parents.

Nowadays, our country has been democratic republic country, we should be loyal to Homeland and we should be thankful to our parents. We not only love our parents but also love parents of others”⁽²⁵⁾.

Hồ Chí Minh knew Taoism well. He accepted and applied some philosophical thought of Taoism in order to build lifestyle of revolutionaries.

The fifth, Hồ Chí Minh had new concepts on the relation of religion and other levels of social life.

Vietnamese is a nation of multi-peoples and multi-religion. Hồ Chí Minh was interested in the relation between religion and peoples. Although he did not make light of religious matter, he paid attention to matter of ethnic. According to him “no independent country is not religious freedom, so we should make our country independent”⁽²⁶⁾ and “when the country is independent, Buddhism can develop”⁽²⁷⁾.

On the relation of the spiritual and the temporal. Hồ Chí Minh always paid attention to two needs of people. According to him, the material need should

²⁵ Ibid p.640

²⁶ *Cứu Quốc* Newspaper on 14th January, 1946.

²⁷ Ibid, p.197.

need to be concerned firstly. He always advised religious believers to live for better secular and religious life. He mentioned the executive committees of Party to take care of the life of religious people.

Hồ Chí Minh thought that religion was not only a part of culture but also cultural heritage of humankind. He said that “the meaning of culture: because of existence and the purposes of life, humankind created and invented language, writing system, the law, science, religion, literature, art and instruments. All these inventions and creations have been culture. Culture has been synthesis of modes of living that were generated by humankind to meet the need of living”⁽²⁸⁾. He instructed localities, officers to preserve the cultural heritages of religion. He paid attention to exploit the good values in culture to rich the national culture.

On religious morals: Hồ Chí Minh generalized the good values of religions as follows:

“Christ Jesus teaches Morality means compassion

Shakyamuni Buddha teaches Morality means mercy

Confucius teaches means humanity”⁽²⁹⁾.

He was also interested in such mankind standards of morality as virtue, energy, capacity, way of life... which are main elements to value the morality of religious man.

Being a political activist, Hồ Chí Minh was interested in the political characteristic of religion. He firmly struggled against anyone who took advantage of religion and he mobilized religious people to unite with the whole people in revolutionary cause.

The religious people often worry about the relation between religion and socialism. Because reactionaries usually distort that the communists pursue “three not”: no family, no homeland and no religion. Religion will be wiped out by the communists. Understanding the worry of religious people Hồ Chí Minh affirmed that “in socialist countries, people have full freedom of religion. It is the same in Vietnam”⁽³⁰⁾. He added that the communists carried out the struggle for national independence and building of socialism; “the communists do not

²⁸ Ibid, p. 431.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 225.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 176.

wipe religion but they defend religion. The Communist Party only abolishes exploitation of man by man³¹. Hồ Chí Minh distinguished that “Vietnamese Catholics who follow French colonialists and puppets damage our people are not only traitors but also religious traitors. Catholics who take part in our resistance are truth believers of God because they are very truthful believers to serve God and to serve our country”³².

He explained clearly that “Socialism helps people to have enough food and clothing; all people can go to school; the patients have medicine; the old can rest from labor; the bad customs are abolished. In short, society is more advance, the material and spiritual life is increasing, that is socialism”³³.

Many believers wanted to take part in the organizations of party, but they worried about between materialism and idealism, atheism and theism. Hồ Chí Minh helped them to clear away their worries. “There are some person to ask whether Catholics can take part in the Labor Party? Yes; Any Catholic could take part in the Labor Party on the condition that he is faithful person; he ardently does his duty and adhere properly to principle of Party. In our country, economy is backward; technology is weak; religion is idealistic; communism is materialistic, but in this condition, religious people could still become the members of Party”³⁴.

The sixth, Hồ Chí Minh had deep understanding of religious psychology and applied it into religious affairs.

Religious people have religious faith. They believe in unreal faith, but their faith is very deep and sustained. They believe in supernatural forces and the next world. For Catholics, God is the Almighty, “the next world” is permanence with “fair rewards and punishments”. Three commandments of ten commandments of God which were carved on the stone stele were designed for God: the first commandment: the glory to God is the highest; the second commandment: not to take the name of the Lord your God in vain; the third commandment: to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy; the fourth commandment: to honor your father and your mother. Through these commandments we can find how Christian believers respect God.

³¹ *Nhân Dân* Newspaper on 27th January, 1955.

³² *Ibid*, p. 443.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 591.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 115.

Understanding the religious psychology, Hồ Chí Minh had applied revolutionary tasks into the ideal of religious founders. It is his original method regarding religious affairs. He mobilized religious believers and dignitaries to take part in the revolutionary struggle.

He advised religious believers: “In the whole country, Catholics and non Catholics take part in the struggle for national salvation. The sacrificial spirit is to follow the noble spirit of Jesus Christ”⁽³⁵⁾.

He thought that the struggle for national salvation was correspondent to God’s will: “we carry out the struggle for national salvation and emulation in production. We practise economy and land reform so peasants have land and religious liberty. These actions of our Government and people are correspondent to gospel spirit. I wish Catholics to fulfill Government’s policy, so Catholics fulfill the spirit of God.

Our resistance is long and hardship, but our resistance will certainly be successful and we will enjoy real happiness as promise of God”⁽³⁶⁾.

On the occasion of Christmas in 1953, Hồ Chí Minh wrote a letter to Catholics. He wrote that “Our people, non-Catholics and Catholics unite in resistance, support the policy of land reform and carry out the policy that peasants have land that is we carry out the teachings of Jesus Christ, that is we truthfully respect Jesus Christ”⁽³⁷⁾. When our resistance moved into violent stage, Hồ Chí Minh wrote a letter and mobilize Catholics: “non-Catholics as well as Catholics unite in resistance, support the policy of reform land that is we implement exactly the teachings of Jesus Christ, that is we truthfully respect Jesus Christ”⁽³⁸⁾.

On the occasions of Christmas, Hồ Chí Minh usually wrote letters to Catholic followers and dignitaries. In these letters he placed God above Homeland and people “to serve God and to serve our country” and “God and fatherland long live”. Thus, Hồ Chí Minh knew religious psychology well.

On the occasion of homeless souls day in 1949, Hồ Chí Minh wrote letter to Buddhist monks and nuns and believers. In this letter he wrote that “I respectfully pray Buddha to help and support our people and country.... Our

³⁵ Ibid, p. 121.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 197.

³⁷ *Nhân dân* Newspaper on 21st - 25th December, 1953.

³⁸ *Nhân dân* Newspaper on 21st - 25th December, 1953.

country is independence, Buddhism will develop. Our people should unite, sacrifice bone and blood and struggle in order to defeat French colonialists for saving our people from poverty and holding national unification and independence. So we do something according to mercifulness of Buddha. Our resistance helps our people to escape from slavery³⁹.

Hồ Chí Minh was an outstanding revolutionary fighter, national hero and famous man of culture. He was personification of cultural combination of Asia and Europe. He had good characteristics. He had the mercy of Buddha, the compassion of Jesus Christ, the humanity of Confucius, the dialectic method of Karl Marx and revolutionary spirit of Lenin.

Hồ Chí Minh applied creatively Marxist views on religion into concrete condition in Vietnam. His views on religion attracted many religious believers and non-believers to take part in revolutionary cause of our nation. His views on religion are consistently studied and applied into building of religious policy in new period. /.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 197.