

# ON ORGANIZATIONS AND DENOMINATIONS OF PROTESTANTISM IN VIETNAM AT PRESENT

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## Introduction

At present, Protestantism is a great religion in the world. Its organizations and denominations are very diversified and its missionary work is dynamic.

Protestantism has existed in Vietnam for 100 years, the number of its denominations and believers is increasing more and more. During recent 20 years, the number of “family churches” has grown very rapidly. “Family church” is a notable socio- religious phenomenon in Protestant community.

This article would like to deal with theoretical and practical aspects related to the above subject. It will deal with following contents

- The related terminologies, concepts
- The initial studies and analyses of history of Protestant establishment and actual state of Protestant denominations in Vietnam today

However, this article is the first study and this scientific subject is complicated. So this article can not deal with all aspects of problem.

## 1- On concepts and terminologies

The name *Protestantism* was born when Protestantism was introduced to Vietnam and Bible was translated into Vietnamese for the sake of preaching Protestantism. The term *Tin lành* (Protestant) in Vietnamese language is equivalent to Protestantism with two meanings 1- doctrine, 2- appellation. On appellation, the term Protestant is defined by objective European – American researchers (those do not follow Protestantism) as *Protestantism is one of the three major groupings within Christianity. It*

*was born from Movement for Religious Reform. It separated from Catholic Church in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Protestantism is used as a common name of religion with various independent denominations such as pre-Reform communities (Waldenses, Albigenses), churches were established during Reform movement (Lutheranism, Calvinism, Anglicanism), post-Reform denominations were born after Reform movement and M. Luther, J. Calvin's ideologies as Baptism, Methodism, Adventism<sup>1</sup>.*

Unlike many other religions, the pluralism and diversity of Protestantism attached to its first days.

What is a Church and what is a denomination? What criteria can we base on to classify them? This is difficult problem. Many researchers who are studying religious history and religious sociology have debated with each other about this problem. They have not any common conclusion because of their different approaches, different studying viewpoints and different appreciations.

In Vietnam, there was cultural difference and the Protestant terms were new so it was difficult to find Protestant terms in Vietnamese. The use of Protestant terms was inconsistent so definition of Protestant names and concepts met many difficulties.

Concretely, Vietnamese Protestant dignitaries not only used *giao phai* (denomination) but also *he phai* (sect, branch) in their documents to refer Protestant denominations. Might Vietnamese pastors use popular Sino – Vietnam terms in Buddhism to translate Protestant terms ? (documents of all levels of government use the word *Protestant sect*)

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<sup>1</sup> See Nguyễn Xuân Hùng On the origin and the appearance of the name “Protestantism” in Vietnam. Religious Studies Review, no 3, 2011 p. 55

This problem become more complex when we find that only scholars and some relevant authorities are interested in the distinction between Church and Denomination (in order to promulgate appropriate policies of management) whereas Protestant dignitaries consider denomination as Church (on system of organization). Another name was invented by Protestant dignitaries has been *Hoi thanh* (means holy society) in order to give prominence to their religious community and distinguish their community from other secular communities. Holy society is also used in various contexts to refer churches or denominations such as National Holy society, Local Holy Society or Invisible Holy Society in Heaven.

When reading Protestant documents we should pay attention their origins. In Vietnam, some Christian historians have used the word *môn phái* (means sect) to refer Protestant sects. According to them, Anglican sects have not belonged to Protestantism because many their rites have been similar to rites of Christianity<sup>2</sup>

Because of above reasons, the studying of Protestantism in Vietnam has met many difficulties.

On churches, denominations, sect movements of Protestantism, most of researchers have common judgment.

Religions, particularly Protestantism, normally exist in two forms such as churches and denominations

Common terms: *Giáo hội* was translated from Church (in English) Eglise (in French)

*Giáo phái* was translated from Sect, Denomination (in English) Secte (in French)

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<sup>2</sup> Many scholars have different opinions on Protestant terms or the distinction between Protestant sects and denominations (Nguyễn Xuân Hùng)

In general, church is defined as: *a religious organization bases on the same belief, worshipping rites, rules including believers and dignitaries in accordance with ranks*<sup>3</sup>.

Although the word *giáo hội* (church) does not cause many arguments about its definition, the word *giáo phái* (denomination) is complicated subject of many discussions, specially the viewpoints of two schools: School of history and origin and school of religious sociology.

According to the school of history and origin: denomination is an organization gathering religious believers who secede or separate from the church which they used to belonged. The typical pattern of this religion is separated group – denomination- church. As you know, Christianity originally was sect to separate from Judaism. Buddhism was a sect to derive from Brahmanism.

This definition is not wrong but it lacks typical features for distinction

The school of religious sociology was represented by M. Weber proposed a more detailed definition and comparison of church and denomination<sup>4</sup>

Church	Denomination
Defines the values of believers and church that creates salvation	Established by a group who has common agreement
Conservative, control by rules	Coordinated by absolute theory
Hereditary	Self- sacrifice
Depends on ranks; ruled by law	The leader is mysterious man and

<sup>3</sup> Encyclopedia Vol. 2 Encyclopedia publisher, H. 2002, p. 127

<sup>4</sup> See Đỗ Quang Hưng *State and Church* , Religious Studies Review no. 5 2002, p. 6

Clear ideology	was selected by God No ideological absoluteness
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M. Weber's definition may be right in the comparison between Christian Church ( as a typical model) and some extreme denominations but in fact the frame work of Protestantism is more diversified.

In fact, only scholars and researchers are interested in above definitions and classifications but Protestant dignitaries think that their religion is diversified, pluralistic and individual as people in European-American capitalist societies.

## **2- The brief history of birth and development of Protestant churches and denominations**

Protestantism was born in the Reform movement but it had not homogeneity in nature, goals and degree of reform because the difference of economy, society and culture influenced the reformers – the leaders of Reform movement.

The divergence and difference among the leaders of Reform Movement left stamp in new religious community which they set up. M. Luther initiated reform but the church that was established by him was semi-reformed church because its hierarchy and rites were similar to Catholicism

Anglicanism was only reformed at the top (it separated from Vatican) while its hierarchy and rites did not change.

J. Calvin was a reformer. He proposed absolute theory to reject the organization and hierarchy of Catholicism.

Lutheran communities developed in Germany and Nordic countries.

Anglican Church has similar model and king is the head of Church

Because of historical reasons, Anglicanism and Lutheranism were often regarded as Churches

But Calvinism has some differences. Calvinism is considered as theory and reflected in Protestant churches at different levels. In France, Calvinism is called Reformed Church. Presbyterian denomination is represented Calvinism in Scotland and England.

-On religion, the rules and principles of reformed Protestant ideologies (especially Calvin theory) are theoretic arguments for the birth and development of Protestant denominations, namely:

-Bible is a sole origin of faith (denomination was born from each sentence of Bible)

-Salvation: thanks to the faith, human beings have direct communion with God without clergyman (it meets desire of individual freedom of people in bourgeois society)

- On rites and worship: Protestant believers only worship God. The key of rites is to read and understand God's words with praying and singing Hymn

-On principles of organization. Protestant organization is simple. It respects autonomy, independence and self governing of local churches. It carries out democratic principles (election, candidacy, legislation and executive power). There is not a clear line between clergymen and faithful. Clergymen have not holy authority. They only carry out their tasks.

After the Reform movement, many Protestant denominations were born in Anglican Church. But many Protestant denominations seceded from Anglican Church because they did not compromise with semi-reform of Anglican Church and they were influenced deeply Calvin idea. They became

new denominations such as Quaker (1647), Methodism (1729), Congregationalist churches ...

These denominations were oppressed in England and in old Continent so they had to emigrate to North America with other denominations as: Baptism, Mennonite, Presbyterianism. In new land these denominations developed vigorously. North America became the second home of Protestantism, since then Protestantism was introduced into Europe and all over the world.

Since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a movement of new Protestant denomination emerged in America. Protestant theologians called this movement “the Great Awakening movement” . The aim of this movement was to awake faith. In fact the births of new denominations sprang from social reasons in concrete historical situation of America at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Because of being exploited and oppressed poor people in America were in straitened condition so they sought new faith. Many European emigrants in America also followed new faith because they found the hollow, flightiness and helplessness of their churches. It was the reason why many new Protestant denominations emphasized and developed theory on Judgment Day, Christ’s rebirth and bright Kingdom in Heaven.

These new Protestant denominations were the Seventh Day Adventism (1843), the Jehovah’s Witness ( 1872), Mormon (1830) Catholic Science (1979). The Pentecostalism was born in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it stressed to speak in unfamiliar languages and cure patients by prayers. This point showed that the crisis in the doctrine and theological orientation of this religion when facing with social problems.

At present, besides recognized denominations and churches, during decades in Europe and America there are new small denominations. Some times these denominations are separated sometimes they are unified. Sometimes they have thousands of believers.

Despite internal problems and different trends, at present Protestantism is powerful religion. Its missionary work is very active.

The organizations of Protestant church and denominations are very diversified and complex. Some special organizations help missionary work in certain field while others are agencies of missionary work.

### **3.1 Brief history of entering and establishing of Protestant organizations and Protestant Church in Vietnam from the beginning to 1975.**

#### ***3.1 The first days of missionary work ( 1911- 1954)***

In this period, in Vietnam there were only 4 protestant denominations such as:

*French Reformed Protestantism.* This organization had three churches in Sai Gon, Hanoi, Hai Phong with French pastors. This organization only served foreign people and it did not carry out missionary work to Vietnamese people.

*Christian and Missionary Alliance:* (CMA) started its missionary work to Vietnamese people in 1911. This organization established Vietnam Protestant Church in both South and North.

*The Seventh Day Adventism* began to send clergymen to Vietnam in 1915. The first church was built in Châu Đốc in 1929. This denomination was considered as heresy by CMA because it tried to attract believers and dignitaries of Vietnam Protestant Church. It became well-known with the

name “Sabbath Association” with doctrine on the second coming of Lord and worship of God on Saturdays

*British and Foreign Bible Society* specialized in translating and printing Bible to help missionary work. It cooperated and provided Bible and books to CMA and Vietnam Protestant Church.

### ***3.2- The period 1954- 1975***

In this time almost European- American Protestant denominations had believers in the South but only 10 Protestant denominations carried out the missionary work to Vietnamese people

*Vietnam Protestant Church* (in Southern region) was helped by 50 Protestant organizations, sects in America and the world. Most notably, World Vision International provided financial aids to VPC. Summer Institute of Linguistics established writing system for ethnic minorities.

In 1956, priest G. H Smith separated from CMA to establish *Catholic Mission*. This denomination operated mainly in many regions in the North of Central Highlands and Central Coast. In 1975 the this denomination had about 13.000 believers, among them there were 15000 believers to be baptized.

*Baptism* was introduced in the South in 1959. It belonged to baptism of South America. This denomination operated in cities with 10 churches and 1500 believers.

*Pentecostals* was introduced into the South in 1967. This denomination established some charitable organizations with about 500 believers.

*The Seventh Day Adventism* was present in Vietnam with 5000 believers. Besides above denominations there were other denominations in

Vietnam such as Jehovah's Witness, Mennonite, Church of Christ. These denominations carried out missionary work but their believers were few.

In general, the period from 1954 to 1975 was the golden time of Protestant missionary work in the South. The presence of international Protestant organizations, sects influenced the development of Protestantism in Vietnam.

#### **4-The situation of Protestant organizations and sects in Vietnam at present.**

##### ***4.1 Data for reference***

According to data in Yearbook of Managing pastors and Vietnam Protestant Church 2010- 2011, in Vietnam there are 82 protestant denominations not including some organizations and denominations which have not registered in Yearbook for different reasons<sup>5</sup>.

##### ***4.2 Organizations and denominations are recognized legal status***

The following Protestant organizations and denominations are allowed to register their religious activities and recognized legal person status.

##### ***The Vietnam General Protestant Church ( in Northern region)***

This church was recognized legal person status in 1958. In 2005 this church had more 24.000 believers with 199 chapters. Among its believers there were 18.000 Hmongs. According to Instruction No 01/2005/CT-TTg dated February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2005 of Prime Minister, all groups of this church are granted licenses for their activities.

##### ***The Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (in Southern region)***

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<sup>5</sup> Yearbook of Managing pastors and Vietnam Protestant Church 2010-1011 . Vietnamese World Christian Fellowship 14200 Golden west St. Westminster, CA 92683 USA

Originally, the Vietnam Federal Protestant church was Vietnam Protestant Church. In 2001 it was recognized legal person status by State. At present, this church is the largest Protestant church in our country with more 700.000 believers and 500 pastors. It carries out missionary work in 34 cities and provinces in South and Central regions.

### ***Christian and Missionary Alliance of Vietnam (CMA)***

On September 1<sup>st</sup> , 2006 CMA was granted license No 146/2006/GCN-TGCP for its activities by the Government Committee for Religious Affairs. One year later CMA held the First General Congress (the 14<sup>th</sup> in historical church) on September 17<sup>th</sup>- 18<sup>th</sup> , 2007 in Đà Nẵng city. On 22<sup>nd</sup> October, 2007 Primer Minister delegated the Government Committee for Religious Affairs to issue Decision no 175/ QD- TGCP to recognize the legal person status of Christian and Missionary Alliance of Vietnam.

### ***The Seventh Day Adventism of Vietnam***

According to Decision no 236/ 2008/ QD- TGCP this organization was recognized legal person status by the Government Committee for Religious Affairs on December 4<sup>th</sup> , 2008. At present, this organization has 13.397 believers ( who were baptized). They practice their faith in 7 churches, 114 groups in 25 provinces and cities. The management aboard of this organization consists of 11 members and pastor Trần Công Tấn is president.

### ***Baptist General Association of Vietnam (Southern Grace)***

On May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008 Primer Minister delegated the Government Committee for Religious Affairs to issue Decision on recognizing Baptist General Association of Vietnam. The Committee of this organization consists of 15 members and pastor Lê Quốc Chánh is elected to be

president. The office of this organization is in Church of Grace (161 Nguyễn Văn Trỗi street, Hồ Chí Minh city)

***Vietnamese Baptist Church ( in the South)***

This organization reports that it has 18.467 believers including 14.558 baptized and 5.378 ethnic minority people. This organization has 409 groups, 92 pastors and 409 heads of groups. It operates in 42 cities and provinces.

On October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008 Primer Minister delegated the Government Committee for Religious Affairs to issue Decision no 199/2008/QĐ-TGCP on recognizing Vietnamese Baptist Church.

***Presbyterian Church of Vietnam***

This church reports that it has about 6000 believers practicing their faith in 46 groups, in 14 cities and provinces such as Hồ Chí Minh, Đắk Lắk, Đắk Nông, Lâm Đồng, Đồng Nai, Kon Tum, Bình Phước, Bình Dương, Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi, Hà Giang, Lai Châu, Lào Cai.

On December, 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008 Primer Minister delegated the Government Committee for Religious Affairs to issue Decision No 234/2008/ QĐ- TGCP on recognizing Presbyterian Church of Vietnam.

***Vietnam Evangelical Mennonite Church***

This church has 5376 believers in 80 groups in 24 cities and provinces. So many believers live in Giai Lai, Bình Phước, Quảng Ngãi. This church has 137 dignitaries and heads of groups. The permanent address is 67/107 Bùi Đình Túy, street, Ward 12, Bình Thạnh district, Hồ Chí Minh city.

On February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009 Primer Minister delegated the Government Committee for Religious Affairs to issue Decision No 12/2009/ QĐ- TGCP on recognizing this church

### ***Vietnamese Christian Fellowship Church***

According to initial reports, this church had about 35.000 believers. On October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2007 Primer Minister delegated the Government Committee for Religious Affairs to issue Decision No 844/GCN- TGCP on recognizing activities of this church. After period of operating, this church is recognized legal person status by State.

### ***Pentecostalism in Vietnam***

At present this organization has 12 chapters, 329 groups with 25.000 believers in 38 cities and provinces

On September 24<sup>th</sup> , 2009 the Government Committee for Religious Affairs granted license No 968/GCN-TGCP for this organization's religious activities.

### ***4.3 On Protestant Family Churches and operation of related Protestant denominations and groups***

During 20 years, Protestantism in Vietnam has developed quickly in the number of believers and denominations. Many independent Protestant groups under the name of “ family churches” have appeared. According to data there are 60 groups, organizations and sects of family churches.

Almost family churches in Vietnam are influenced by Pentecostal theology, Pentecostal trend or “Charismatic movement”<sup>6</sup>. Believers of these churches believe in practice Holy Grace at different levels.

Although this denomination was established in America in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has attracted so many people because its doctrine encourages the seek for worship and access to God. This denomination advocates diet prayer and speaking in unfamiliar language, speaking prophecies like the

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<sup>6</sup> For Pentecostalism and Pentecostal movement see Nguyễn Xuân Hùng Pentecostalism speaks unfamiliar language, Hanoi, 1993. Archives in the Institute for Religious Studies

Time of Apostles. Charismatic movement has attracted various protestant churches and denominations in the world and it has become a powerful religious movement.

Because of such influences, Protestant family churches pay attention to speaking unfamiliar language and curing people of diseases by Grace of God in different levels.

### **Cause**

Apart from dogma and looking for Grace in the worship, the family churches have following social causes.

From 1988- 1989 our country entered the period of renewal. The opened –door policy and democratic life were carried out. Many international Protestant organizations and denominations have helped Protestant domestic organizations and denominations.

At that time the Vietnam Federal Protestant Church (Southern region) - the largest church was in the slow condition. Although its disciple and cannon law were severe, its management was ineffective for its believers and dignitaries.

A part of believers and dignitaries dissatisfied with their positions and interests and churches became overloaded but new churches were not allowed to be born, nomination, reshuffle and supplement of staff got stuck.

This is one of many reason to lead separation and division in the Vietnam Federal Protestant Church.

In recent years, the condition of Vietnam Protestantism surely connects with condition of Protestantism in the world so the number of non-religious communities , free Protestant groups with small scale is increasing more and more.

### **Conclusion**

After one century of missionary work , Protestantism in Vietnam has become developed religious community with diversified organizations and denominations. This church has had many contributions in preserving and developing social moral values. It has taken part in charitable activities and social- cultural works.

We find that some individuals as well as denominations and sects are extreme in awareness and practice of their faiths especially in missionary work. Some denominations, sects as well as individuals cause contradictions in believers and social and cultural problems.

Nowadays we recognize that almost local churches, denomination and missionary organizations of Protestantism in Vietnam have the common orientation: “*Living the Gospel, worshipping God and serving the Homeland and the nation*”. This way aims to respect God in Vietnam

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